Moonlight and Shadows

by Kayasurin

Summary

For three hundred years, Jack has been alone and ignored. The manor house has fallen to ruins around his ears, and the family that owns the estate has slowly died out.

And then E. Aster Bunnymund arrives. And it turns out, he can see Jack.

More importantly, he can touch Jack. And that is just where it starts...
Jack hunched over, trying desperately to conserve what little warmth he had. His cloak was more hole than cloth, and the thin linen shirt wasn't any better. Actually, the shirt just might be worse. It was so threadbare it was transparent in places. He was lucky he'd been allowed to keep even that much, or so the constable had told him. His father's debts had been incredible, higher than Jack had ever imagined. They'd taken the house, their scant belongings... The sheep had been confiscated, and even Jack's boots belonged to someone else now. He had his cloak, his shirt, his pants, and his staff. And then he'd been turned out.

The winter storm had hit- hours ago, it felt like. It couldn't have been that long, he was still walking, but oh! The cold was horrible!

Only the thought of his uncle, his mother's brother, over in the Burgess settlement kept him going. Uncle Thaddeus hadn't approved of his little sister marrying one of the Overland boys- the Overlands and the Burgesses hadn't gotten along to say the least- but he wouldn't turn away his nephew, would he?

Jack had to hope he wouldn't. Because if Uncle Thad didn't take him in...

He sobbed, and fell to his knees in the cold. The snow was already up past his ankles. It wasn't supposed to be like this. Da wasn't supposed to be dead. Ma wasn't supposed to be dead. Little Sophia wasn't supposed to be dead. Jack- Jack was going to apprentice to the blacksmith and Da was going to get over that cough and Ma's heart would stop giving her trouble and Little Sophia was too smart to go skating down on the pond on her own.

Only that wasn't how things had worked out, was it?

Jack crawled over to the side of the track, and huddled against a tree trunk. It was no kind of shelter, but he needed the support. Oh, God, his family...! Dear God, let them be safe in Heaven.

Ma's heart had given out shortly after little Sophia, Jack's only surviving sibling, had drowned in the pond. He'd told Sophia that the ice was too thin, but she hadn't listened, and Jack had been too busy to keep an eye on her. He'd been too busy talking with David and Thom about the trap lines they'd set up to take care of his sister.

With both Sophia and Ma dead... Da just hadn't had the heart to live. One morning he hadn't been able to get out of bed, and the next, he'd been dead.

And that was when Jack had found out about the speculations. And the failed bank. And the mining company that'd failed too. Da had been so much in debt that the confiscation of all their belongings hadn't been a drop in the empty well. Jack didn't know how he'd escaped a workhouse, or why, but- he had.

And now he just had to get to the settlement Uncle Thad had started. Once he did everything would work out.

Wouldn't it?

He staggered to his feet, and wiped one numb hand against his equally numb cheek. Then, one hand
tucked into his armpit and shoulders hunched, he began slogging through the snow again.

By now it was only possible to see where the track was by the spaces between the trees. The snow was high enough that the autumn-yellow scrub was buried under the cold, white powder. Normally Jack liked winter, loved the snow...

But not now. Not since his sister...

He shook his head, and stumbled on. He tripped over every rock and branch in his path, or he thought that was why he stumbled. It felt like his legs ended halfway down his calves. If he didn't lose toes from this trip, he'd be astonished.

And it was getting so hard to think. Jack knew he had to keep moving. He knew he had to put one foot in front of the other. But it was so tempting to just lie down in the snow and rest.

He was so tired.

And they were all gone! What was left for him now?

He stumbled again, and collapsed sideways against a tree trunk. After a moment, though, he realized it wasn't a tree. It was a pillar, square and made out of rough brick.

Jack gasped for breath. A pillar? What was a pillar doing out here in the woods?

Unless... had he reached Uncle Thad's house?

No, no he couldn't have, Uncle Thad's house was across the river. He hadn't gone over any bridges yet. This was something else. Wasn't- wasn't there something about- he couldn't remember. But there was a pillar. Which meant buildings.

Which meant shelter. Even if the building was falling apart, he could wait in the ruins for the storm to stop.

Jack pushed himself upright, and stumbled over to the next pillar. Between the two pillars was a brick wall, too high for him to climb over. Well. On a good day he could, but good days were in summer.

The wall continued to the next pillar, and the next. Jack could barely walk, but between the wall and his staff, he managed to stay upright.

"Find," he puffed, "find a- a get. Gate. Get in the gate. Gotta be- a gate."

There was. It was even open. Jack leaned his shoulder against the metal bars, and when he pulled away, the cold iron stuck to his skin, even through his thin shirt. Jack began to fall the other way, tearing free, and tearing his sleeve.

He cringed, and leaned heavily on his staff. The old shepherd's crook bore up his weight well enough. Even if his hands hadn't been utterly numb, he was fairly certain he wouldn't have noticed how the staff felt. He'd memorized the grain of the wood by the time it was twelve. By now, the staff was like an extension of his arms.

And good thing too. Mostly numb as he was, well... If not for the staff, he was certain he'd never have made it this far.

Even if he couldn't figure out why he was bothering.
He staggered forwards, squinting against the blowing snow. It was so thick, he couldn't see more than the length of his arm in front of his face, in any direction. Including *down*.

It was very lonely.

"Please," he whispered, not entirely aware he was talking. "Please."

He stumbled again, and fell. His staff skittered away under the loose snow, and he felt the loss as though someone had torn off one of his arms. There'd be no finding it until spring thaw.

His father had given him that staff.

He sobbed, and tried to get back up on his feet, but couldn't. Without the staff, without the feeling in his hands and feet, he couldn't. Instead, Jack crawled forward, the snow almost as high as his elbows, his clothes cold and wet.

He crawled, and crawled, and then his hand bumped into something. At first he thought it was a rock, but it wasn't.

It was a stair.

Jack looked up, and his mouth dropped open. It *was* a stair, the first of three, leading up to a massive double-door.

Shelter.

Surely... surely...

He crawled up the stairs, and managed to stand up with the doors to brace against. And then he pounded on the door, pounded until even his numb fist began to regain feeling, pounded until he noticed the bell pull to one side and yanked on the ice-covered cord.

After several minutes, several minutes *at least*, the door Jack wasn't leaning against cracked open, easing inwards.

He blinked, and rubbed his arm across his eyes, trying to get the ice off his lashes. It didn't work. All he could see was a man-shaped blur against the lamplight inside the door, the warm, golden light. He swayed forwards, and held out one hand.

"Please," he said, slurring from the cold and exhaustion. "Please, I... shelter?"

The man-shape was tall and thin, and Jack had the impression he was being looked over critically. He shook, dimly afraid he'd be turned away.

And then the man-shape spoke. "Of course. Come in. Let me help you."

Jack sighed with relief, and stumbled forwards. Hands caught his shoulders, big hands with long, thin fingers that reminded him, abruptly, of spiders.

The door closed behind him.

Chapter End Notes
This story has little if any to do with Kink Meme prompts (for once... wait, that means this is all my fault! Good? Bad? Oro...) Plans are to update every Tuesday.
"And you're sure about this?"

E. Aster Bunnymund, one of the world's youngest multi-billionaires, raised gray-speckled eyebrows. "Ya know," he said, his Australian drawl nothing like the realtor's Texan one, "you'd think, considering your commission, you wouldn't be fussing, mate. Papers are all drawn up, everything's signed. Even if I wanted to back out I couldn't now, and for the record, no, I'm not changing my mind."

His realtor, one James Thompson, sighed heavily and nodded his head. "It's true, it's true... I don't know, Mr. Bunnymund, I just have a bad feeling about it. The house has a bad reputation."

"Told you already to call me Aster." Not going to happen; James Thompson was old school, the kind of guy who called everyone by their last names unless they were family or very close friends. And Aster was a client, which meant he was neither. "Bad reputations don't worry me. If I've told you once I've told you dozens of times- the house looks a beaut."

Thompson shook his head, this time. "You've said. You've said. I just don't feel right letting you go into this without a warning. You haven't even seen the property yet!"

"Seen pictures," Aster pointed out. Immigration being what it was, he'd been forced to shop for a place while still in Australia, which had made things... interesting. Not that he didn't love his home, he did, he adored every speck of red sand and dangerous snake and spider that belonged to Oz. It was just... the United States, Burgess, Pennsylvania specifically, called to him. And as a mage, he had to answer.

His parents understood; it'd been back in Georgian times- he couldn't remember which George off the top of his head- when one of his great-something-grandparents had felt the call to Oz, and took the perilous sea journey to get himself a farmstead of his own and, eventually, a pretty Aborigine wife. The Bunnymund clan had thrived, and done what they could to protect the local Aborigines, when the British government insisted on classifying the natives as animals instead of human. They hadn't even done that to the Indian natives, or the Africans, or the Native Americans when it'd come to that. At least, Aster didn't think they had, but he'd be the first to admit he hadn't paid enough attention during History class.

At any rate, the Bunnymund clan was full of mages, mage-sensitives, or just those who knew about mages. His mother was sensitive, and the magic had skipped his father, but his sibs were all mages, just like he was. So when he'd explained he'd been called halfway around the world by the Earth herself- as his great-something-grandfather had been called to Oz by the Earth herself- they'd known he had to go.

All that passed through Aster's mind in a split second, tinged as always with a faint grief and a steadily growing homesickness.

"You told me the- the gatehouse, you called it?"

"Gatehouse, yes," Thompson said. "Three bedrooms, two and a half baths, three stories, no basement, fully renovated kitchen, not nearly as many odd occurrences as the manor proper. Not that
"So you said." Aster smiled to take any possible sting out of his words. "Got any more stories about that ghost?"

Thompson smiled back. "I thought you didn't believe in ghosts?"

"I don't." Aster didn't believe in the sun, either, or air, or gravity, or the fact that water was wet. He knew. Ghosts were real. It was just very hard for a non-mage to see one, or notice the effect a ghost could have on the world, and for that matter, 'ghosts' were usually... memories, replaying over and over again. Emotionally charged moments that had left their mark on the world that faded slowly over time. Mages could banish those memories, but why bother? Unless you had a bunch of screaming toddlers running through your living room or an old man taking a leak in your bedroom, what was the point?

As for the ghosts that weren't memories, well... They had a purpose, a mission, generally one easily seen through. And mages could send those ones on to... whatever came after death. Aster had never done it himself, but supposedly it was easy to do. He had one uncle who'd done that as a kind of living, when he wasn't a traveling vet.

"Well," Thompson said, and sighed. "I cannot dissuade you, the paperwork is completed... All that remains is for you to take the keys to the property, and it's yours."

Thompson slid a small box, almost like an oversized ring box, across the desk. Aster opened it. Three keys. One for the manor proper, one for the gatehouse he'd be living in, and one massive one for the gates.

"There's electronic security," Thompson said, "the codes are on the paper there."

Well, that was good. "And the security company's paid up through the end of the month?"

"Correct. Here." Thompson handed over a thin folder, one stamped with the security company's name. "Their contact information, an overview of their services... I understand they're willing to simply continue the contract, under your name, or tailor their services to suit what you prefer."

"Right, I'll have to talk to them... It's Friday, isn't it?" He wasn't jetlagged, he'd spent the last two nights sleeping on North's couch and adjusting to being awake during the 'night' and asleep during the 'day', but he also hadn't had access to a calendar.

"It is," Thompson said. "You'll have to call on Monday, I believe their offices close in an hour, and it will take us at least that long to get to your new property."

Aster nodded, and accepted the rest of the paperwork. His copy of the deed to the property, the two houses and one barn, the transfer papers, and several other pages he didn't recognize immediately but thought he'd signed at some point. It all went in his briefcase, which was still shiny new and creaked a little while he fiddled with getting everything put away just so.

"There isn't much else," Thompson said, and waited for Aster to stand up before he did as well. "Have you any additional questions for me?"

"Probably not until we get there," Aster said, and picked up his briefcase. "Lead the way, my GPS still thinks I'm down under."

Thompson chuckled, and did so. They left his tastefully expensive and understated office, traveled down the hall with its lush carpet, papered walls, and generic artwork, and all the way out to the
parking lot, filled with BMWs and Mercedes. Thompson had a Rolls Royce, a Wraith if Aster was any judge.

Compared with all the fancy cars, his sport bike he'd had shipped over from Australia looked out of place and almost dangerous. The Kawasaki Ninja was completely black, even the bits normally chrome steel darkened at his request. When a man was willing to pay two thousand over the asking price just for that, well, the dealer bent over backwards.

Aster pulled on his riding jacket and helmet, secured his briefcase behind the seat, and got on. Thompson looked oddly at him from behind the wheel of his Rolls, but then turned the car on and pulled out of the lot. Aster started his bike and followed.

The drive was a nice one, down a road that might as well have been a country lane or something, for all the people he saw. This was where the people with Serious Money lived, where Serious Money had its law offices and realtors, where Serious Money didn't have to worry about rubbing shoulders with the Unwashed Masses. Huge, old oak trees- at least, Aster thought they were oaks, he was driving so wasn't paying attention to the leaves or anything- arched their branches over the road, shading it from the late afternoon sun. Hedges, thick and as tall as a man, lined the road to either side, hiding the buildings from view. If there was birdsong, Aster couldn't hear it over his bike's motor, but he suspected there was.

The road meandered back and forth, and the discrete road signs said the speed limit was thirty miles an hour. It took him a moment to remember what that was in kilometers, since he'd yet to take his bike in to the nearest dealer and get the odometer changed.

It'd be expensive, but what the heck, he had the money.

No one, apart from Thompson, was on the road at this time, so his brief fumbling didn't cause any upset or delays behind him. His bike wasn't too fond of the slow pace, but held steady.

The shaded road merged onto a larger, less wealthy road, and from there they took an access ramp onto the highway, or expressway, or whatever it was the Yanks called the damn bloody thing. It cut through town, making it possible to go from the north-west end with the Serious Money, to the south-east side where Serious Money was paired with Serious Property.

As far as he knew, Aster had bought the only actual manor house in Burgess, an old Georgian hulk that'd been gutted in a fire back a century. However, other people had snapped up large tracts of land, typically buying from the Huxtable family, who'd owned the manor and most of the land that side of the river, and built what were termed these days as mansions. Between the Victorian manor houses and the- he thought the period after that was Edwardian, but he couldn't be sure, Edward might've been before the various Georges- were McMansions, the cookie-cutter houses for the rich and famous.

He'd snapped up the manor- now his manor- from the Huxtable estate, when the last Huxtable had passed away without any close heirs. No one in the surviving family had wanted the place, apparently the ghost stories had scared them away, and Aster hadn't been able to pass up the chance to get it. The fire a century ago had apparently damaged only some of the interior, not all of it, and none of the exterior. It was a beautiful old barn of a building, though the grounds were overgrown and the roof needed a lot of repairs, and some of the mortar had clearly crumbled away...

Well, it was a fixer upper for sure, but again, he had the money. What else was he going to spend it on? He didn't like parties, he couldn't care less about what he wore, the bike had been something he'd been lusting after ever since he'd been twelve or so and saw his first motorcycle. Sure, art supplies could get pricy, especially if you were talking certain kinds of paint or whatever, but not that
expensive. He didn't gamble, he didn't even take Advil for a headache never mind do any other kinds of drugs, he didn't drink, and his tastes ran towards his own gender, not women. And with the distaste for parties came an equal dislike with the sorts of people who gathered there; he certainly wasn't interested in a high maintenance boyfriend.

That, and the moment he'd seen the pictures on the realtor's website, he'd... felt something inside him click. He was being called most strongly there, and the feeling only grew the closer they got to the property.

Thompson's Rolls signaled for the exit, and Aster turned to follow. They slowed again, and this time the rich road was bracketed by walls with gates to either side. The owners' personality, or wealth and affluence, showed through in the gates and the walls. Some were simplistic to the point where only someone really rich could have afforded such things, others were gaudy show pieces. And up ahead...

Oh. That had to be his gate.

The walls were huge things of brick and mortar, eight feet high, with the pillars another half a foot higher than that. The gates were huge, decorative works of black iron, all graceful swirls and straight lines. The property's neglect showed; there were cobwebs dotted around the gates, with the occasional leaf caught in a web.

Thompson pulled his car up to the gate, and put it in park. Aster drew up beside him, and flipped his helmet's visor up so he could talk.

"Wow," he said, and pulled out the box of keys. He got out the gate key and the security code, and used both. The gates had been automated at some point. With the security code entered, they swung open wide enough for Thompson to drive through, Aster following.

The first building was set several meters back from the gates, with its own little driveway, because damned if the actual driveway wasn't more of a lane instead. Aster looked at the first building, but Thompson hadn't stopped his car, so he continued on. He could come back later, if that wasn't the gatehouse.

The lane was shaded by the occasional tree, although these... he didn't know. One looked like it might be an apple tree, but if it was, it was the biggest one he'd ever seen. Off in one front corner of the property was a cluster of pines. Further on, he thought he caught sight of a pond, but the ground dipped in that direction and he was driving past too quickly to get a good look.

Up ahead was the manor. It was definitely the manor. It was huge, somehow sprawling without having a plethora of wings. It looked like it was three stories high, with a widow's walk up top- so an attic too, he supposed- although it looked like only part of the building was the full three stories. Off to one side, it looked like it was only one, while the other looked like two stories.

It looked abandoned. He wondered how anyone in the old family had been able to live in the gatehouse while the manor itself began to crumble. The roof tiles were missing in places; in spots it looked like the bricks in the wall needed re-tucked or mortared again. The garden was overgrown, and several windows looked like they'd been broken. Even the brick's honey-gold color looked a bit dingy, stained from the weathering he supposed, and the whitewashed wood either needed repainted or replaced, he hadn't decided yet.

The lane turned into a circle key up near the front of the house, with a driveway curving off towards another building- he supposed the barn, maybe, because it looked like one, although maybe these days it was the garage- and Thompson pulled up to the head of the key and got out of his car.
Aster turned off his bike, and sauntered over to join the realtor.

"Well," Thompson said, "here we are. A full list of the belongings that came with the property is in the papers I gave you, but you should find old drawings of the manor layout in the gatehouse, kitchen or sitting room, I imagine. I wouldn't go into the manor until you've had someone check the floors for stability. Who knows what the fire weakened, and what the fire didn't get, dry or wet rot probably did."

Aster nodded. That was just common sense. "Well, thanks, Thompson, you've been real helpful. I take it that's the barn," he pointed over at the presumed barn-slash-garage, "and we passed the gatehouse coming in?"

"That's right." Thompson held out his hand for a shake, and Aster accepted. "It was a pleasure dealing with you, Mr. Bunnymund, a real pleasure. I hope..." he paused, and nearly grimaced. "Well, I hope you enjoy living here."

"I imagine I will," Aster said. "I'll follow you back out to the gate, let you out."

"That'd be right kind of you," Thompson said, and got back in his car.

Once the realtor was on his way, Aster headed back to the gatehouse. There was a little garage to the side of the building, as promised, just the right size for a single car if it was small, or his bike. Aster left his helmet hanging on one handlebar, and shed his jacket as he walked back around to the front of the gatehouse.

The gatehouse looked like a smaller- much smaller- version of the manor itself; it'd been built with the same kind of brick, but it'd been kept in better repair. Nothing needed to be re-tucked, there was no missing mortar, and the roof had been done recently according to the papers. The landscaping closest to the gatehouse was in better shape than anywhere else on the property, it looked like, although in the months since the last Huxtable had passed the gardening had clearly been neglected. The white wood looked fresh and new, and all in all, if this had been the only building on the property, he'd still have been pleased.

That it wasn't, well, that part didn't matter so much. He was one man. Sure, he'd be having friends come over to visit, probably quite frequently considering the friends, but he wouldn't mind not having the manor fixed back up to livable condition for a while. Everything in its time and all that.

After several minutes of study, Aster cautiously dropped his shields and probed outwards with his mage senses. He didn't pick up anything inimical, and nothing that felt like a ghost either. But he didn't have much range, as such things went, so he was only picking up the gatehouse. Things might feel different up at the manor itself.

But they might not. Aster wouldn't know until he walked up there and checked. He nodded to himself, and tossed his jacket towards the front door. He could pick it up on the way inside, after.

He'd even go inside the manor, potentially dangerous floors or no. His mage senses would tell him where it was safe to walk, and he wouldn't go too far inside. Just enough to get a feel for the place.

The walk up to the manor was nice. The shading trees were apple, he noticed, although so old the fruit was probably as hard as wood, and sour. The- he couldn't decide if it was field or pasture, because lawn was too tame a word- to either side of the lane was covered in long grass and flowers of all shapes and sizes. He recognized goldenrod, and was fairly certain some of the flowers were daisies and- he smiled- asters, but most of them were unknown to him. He made a mental note to pick up a book on the local flowers, as well as find a good landscaping company that'd keep things
Although he was rather fond of the wild look. Maybe not a good landscaping company, then, a good one would tame everything down. A great landscaping company, however, would keep things neat and wild.

Once in front of the manor again, Aster looked it over closely. He'd been wrong thinking it didn't have wings; it did, or at least, stubby branches to either side. The main body, currently defined as the part three stories tall, made up the bulk of the building. To his current right was a kind of 'bump' off the main building, one two stories tall, but with huge windows. He thought the two story part was actually one giant room, perhaps a former ballroom or something.

Did Georgian manors use to have ballrooms? Maybe a library or... he didn't know, but it looked like the two story building hadn't been split up into two stories, so to speak.

To Aster's current left was the single story bump, probably a kitchen or something, so the heat from the baking wouldn't infect the rest of the house in summer. The baking would also keep such a room warm during the winter, so it wouldn't matter so much if it was open on three sides. Besides all that, there was a short chimney on that side, which meant there was a fireplace in that single story room.

He approached the front door. There was a bit of a porch, but not a veranda like more modern homes. Although wasn't that a style more to the west of the country?

Ah, whatever, it wasn't like he cared. The front steps were made out of some kind of pale stone, maybe granite, probably not marble, and were very, very solid. They felt... odd, somehow, and he crouched down briefly and brushed the tips of his fingers over the surface.

The odd feeling didn't go away, but it didn't strengthen any either. He stood back up, and moved to the door itself.

It was huge, a double-door affair. The wood was showing its age, which was a shame, because they were carved in a manner much like the front gates; straight lines and graceful curves. Maybe he'd be able to restore them with his magic.

The doors were unlocked. Aster frowned. They weren't supposed to be unlocked. Teenagers, maybe? He imagined a great old barn like this, old and run down, was extremely appealing to the local hooligans. Of course, where he'd been living in Australia, it'd been an old tin shack a good kilometer and a half into the Outback, where one of his neighbors had used to brew moonshine. Him and his mates had gone out there for campouts and ghost stories. The manor probably served the same purpose.

Well, not any more. Aster lived here now, and while he certainly didn't disapprove, if the floors really were dangerous... no. And there was a question of privacy, and culpability too. What if someone got hurt on his property?

No. He'd have to make it clear to the teenagers that they weren't to come around anymore. Maybe he'd suggest they make themselves a clubhouse or something in the woods near the lake.

Aster eased one half of the double doors open, and stepped in.

There were no lights, not that he'd expected any. The windows were grimy, with old cobwebs, dust, and dirt making it all but impossible for light to get through. The sun was beginning to set, and the manor doors didn't face west. They didn't face east, either, not that that would've helped any.

What little he could see wasn't promising. The floor was so covered in dust and dirt he couldn't make
out the actual floorboards, and his mage senses were quivering faintly. So, not likely to break under his weight- yet- but probably not that safe to walk on.

The entry way was a grand hall of the old order, looking two stories tall, with what might have been an old, candle chandelier hanging up there. There were doors set in both side walls, and probably back to either side of the staircase, but Aster didn't pay them any mind.

Because poor lighting or no, the boy at the foot of the stairs was very, very obvious.

And he looked angry.

Chapter End Notes

So I said I had a schedule. I might have lied. A little bit. (Okay, this is, I swear, the only unscheduled post for this entire fic unless something amazing comes up. I reserve the right to post out of schedule for things like birthdays, friends having uber-crappy bad days, and publishing houses calling me up to say they want my novel).

That and I felt bad that I posted a prologue and no actual, you know, CHAPTER. Leaving you all going "Jack no!"

So here, enjoy, it's Aster and... Here. Inspiration for Aster. Sexy, sexy man, right?

And yes, Aster knows how to use a bow. Not sure if he displays said talent yet or not. If he does... -stares at pictures- Well, he'll wear a shirt.
Chapter Two

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Aster knew the boy wasn't physical, but he couldn't have stopped the words if his life depended on it. "What the- who the bloody hell are you? And what're you doing in my house?"

The boy's eyes widened, and he glided forward two, three steps. He didn't leave any marks in the dust, Aster noticed. "You... You can see me?"

"Yeah," Aster said, his own eyes wide. Not a memory-ghost, repeating over and over. This one was, well, interacting with him. The ghost fell silent, apparently content to just stare in confusion and who knew what all else, so Aster took the opportunity to stare back.

The boy looked like a ghost, although Aster couldn't have placed his finger on exactly what made him think that. The glow? He wasn't transparent, although Aster had the feeling that if he weren't as powerful a mage as he was, the boy might've been a touch see through at the edges. He wore old styled clothes, old enough Aster couldn't place an actual time- he couldn't tell if the cloak was made out of leather or woven wool, and same for the pants. The white shirt was probably linen, although this was America. Didn't America have cotton early on? Plantations, right?

The boy had white hair, and light blue eyes, and very, very pale skin. Maybe he'd been an albino in life? And the longer Aster looked, the less the boy looked like, well, a boy. It was hard to tell, but he had only the last bits of gangly awkwardness that went with puberty. Hands and feet looked a little big for the rest of him, and he looked scrawny, all narrow shoulders and narrower hips and arms and legs that looked like sticks. His cheekbones were probably sharp enough to cut butter with, and his chin could probably handle soft cheese.

Aster blinked several times, but no, the boy was still there, glowing faintly. Not enough to read by, but rather like he was standing in strong moonlight.

"You can see me," the boy said again, face twisting up. "I... This is real, right? You're not some... some dream?"

"Yeah, this is real," Aster said.

"... You'd say that if you were a dream."

Old fashioned clothes, current way of speaking. Maybe Aster was the one hallucinating. "What's your name?"

The boy blinked, and tilted his head to the side. "My name? My... name... Uh. It's, um, I think it's Jack?"

"Well, Jack, I'm Aster. E. Aster Bunnymund. I own this place now."

Jack folded his arms. "Do you? Why's that?" He paused, and added, "and how long's it been, anyways? I've only seen kids around since the fire."

"I own the place because I bought it, the family died out. And it's been a century since the fire."

"A... century?" This time, the boy, Jack, looked away and hunched his shoulders. "A century."
"Yeah." Aster stepped forward, the floorboards creaking under his heavy motorcycle boots... and under his heavy self, too. Dust puffed up in clouds that got no higher than mid-calf. He sneezed anyways. "Jack, you... How long've you been here?"

Jack stared at Aster's feet, or the dust swirling around them, and then stomped his own bare foot. No dust swirled up from the contact. "I don't know," he said. He sounded forlorn. "I don't remember."

"Do you want to leave?"

The boy froze- literally. A thin layer of frost radiated out across the floor from his feet, and turned his brown cloak and pants silver. "Leave?" he asked, voice echoing. His voice hadn't echoed before. "Why would I leave?"

Aster paused, and spread his hands. He spared half a thought to regret his magic was more in line with earth and green, growing things, instead of, say, fire.

It would've been very comforting to be able to throw fireballs without hours of preparation, is all.

"You've been here a long time," he said. "At least a century. Don't you want to, I don't know, go outside?"

The ghost didn't ease up on the ice, but he didn't make it worse, either. "I can go outside."

"But you're stopped at a certain point, aren't you?"

Jack's expression went blank. "I can't climb over the wall," he said, voice no longer echoing. "I've tried."

Because he was tied to the place of his death, Aster supposed, although he was fairly certain that wasn't how it worked... was it?

"If I could let you past the walls, would you go?"

Jack eyed him, clearly suspicious. "Why would I want to?"

He took a risk. "Your family isn't here, are they?"

"My..." Jack went blank again, and the ice began to spread. "My family. My... family. My family!"

The ice suddenly exploded into motion. Aster scrambled backwards, completely unwilling to turn his back on the ghost, on the ice tearing its way across the floor after him. He stumbled over the threshold, and nearly fell down the stairs, but the ice stopped at the doorway.

"Do you not speak of my family!" Jack shrieked. "They are dead, do you hear me? Dead! Bastard! You..."

Aster didn't know what was worse, the shrieking or the sudden silence.

Or the chill right behind him.

Aster turned slowly, and almost gasped. Almost. The boy stood there, in the middle of the lane, in full sunlight.

Wasn't that supposed to be impossible?

"I will have your guts," Jack hissed, "for garters. Leave you this place, E. Aster Bunnymund, ere I
shall see you crippled and mad. Be you gone, or to a sodomite I shall give you, to Hell you shall be condemned, your life a misery I shall make. This I do pledge. Now go!

There was a sudden wind, fierce and cold. Aster shielded his face with both hands. When the wind died down, he looked, but Jack was gone.

Great. Just bloody wonderful. A ghost, an angry ghost, who wanted to turn his internal organs into sex-wear.

And give him to a sodomite.

Aster sighed, and raked his hands back through his hair. He was pretty sure he wouldn't mind that, so long as said sodomite didn't mind bottoming, and was a looker, and had a good personality. That'd actually be kind of nice.

The rest of it was somewhat worrying, though.

So. That was the manor. Time, Aster thought, to look at the gatehouse. Hopefully there wouldn't be any ghosts there, because one was more than enough.

"Aster!" Mia, known affectionately to her friends as Tooth, beamed at him. "This is beautiful!"

"Thanks, lovie." Aster waved his friends into the gatehouse, and shut the door behind him. Not that it'd keep the ghost out. No one had ever come up with wards that did that. Still, hopefully the ghost would hold off on his torments until the guests were gone.

Tooth, North, and Sandy looked around the small entryway with no small amount of admiration. Aster's purchase hadn't included the furniture, and good thing too- the last Huxtable had apparently enjoyed cats. Not the actual, living creatures, but cat clocks and fluffy cats in bonnets painted on plates, and cat-patterned blankets, and... Well, between the cats and the overstuffed, fussy furniture, Aster was just as glad not to have gotten that.

Instead, he was going to be sleeping on the camp cot North had brought over, and eating takeout until he bought himself dishes, but the architecture of the gatehouse made up for it some.

The small entryway had two windows, one to either side of the door, with a more gothic design than otherwise found either in this building or the manor proper. The small panes of glass had been leaded together to form smaller and smaller arches, the curves and lines mimicking the gates and the carvings on the manor front doors. Probably why the difference in window design, now that he thought about it. The rest of the windows were either squared off, or had curving tops in some odd style Aster knew nothing about. Bit like a circle cut in half, the top curve stuck onto a long rectangle, or something.

Whatever, he drew this stuff, he didn't name it. Or know the proper names.

There was an archway in one doorway, a staircase along the other wall leading to the second floor, and storage under the staircase. Probably for a vacuum or something, when Aster got around to buying one. That'd take a while. He hated vacuuming and dusting. Only reason he ever did dishes was because insects and food poisoning wasn't fun.

The rest of the home was quite nice. He'd done a bit of looking around while his friends drove over. The kitchen was on the other side of the wall where the stairs were, so that the noise of people coming in wouldn't disturb anyone relaxing in the sitting room or anything. The archway led onto the sitting room, which would make a very nice study once Aster had bookshelves and books, and the
sitting room let off onto the dining room, with a discreet door for the half bath.

Upstairs there was a short hallway, which led to the two smaller bedrooms, one of which would turn into a guest bedroom, and the other which would make a fine art studio. The two bedrooms shared a full bath between them. On the other side of the hallway was the master bedroom, and the master bath.

There wasn't much by way of closets, but the rooms were big enough Aster figured he'd use wardrobes instead. Remove the doors on the shallow closets, fit in a good sized wardrobe, and it wasn't like he cared to have that many clothes anyways.

There was attic access too, but the attic was small, barely big enough for a few boxes. Sometime during the... fifties or sixties, he thought he remembered, the Huxtables had paid to get the attic filled with blown insulation, so it wasn't even good for storage anymore. No loss, really.

"This is lovely," North said, and Aster promptly gave them all a tour. It gave North a chance to drop the camp cot, and the small bag of clothing for Aster, off in the master bedroom.

"Thanks for this, mate," Aster said, once the tour was over and they were settled in the kitchen. Not that he had anything by way of drinks to offer, but it was the only place with seating. The counters were a bit awkward, especially for Sandy, but it was better than the floor.

At least on the first floor. First floor was all hardwood and stone tile. Second floor had nice, plush carpets in the bedrooms.

"Is not at all problem, not at all," North said. He ignored Tooth and Sandy both rolling their eyes at him. North's grandparents, both sides, had hailed from Russia, but he had grown up in New York. When he wasn't putting on a really bad Russian accent, he sounded like stereotypical Brooklyn.

"We're your friends," Tooth said, and smiled. "Just let us know when and we'll help you with the shopping."

Aster grinned with relief. His friends wouldn't drag him to the expensive places, no, he'd be taken to Leon's and Bad Boy and Sleep Country, places where he'd get furniture a man could relax on. And maybe a bit of making out with a boyfriend, too, if Aster could find a good place to meet potential significant others. Or not-so-significant others, although he drew the line at one night stands.

The thing was, for whatever reason his relationships kept... tanking. Or crash-and-burning. It had gotten bad a couple times. Granted, he was only thirty-two, but between his junior year boyfriend who outed him to the school, the town, and his parents when they hadn't known... and his most recent relationship with that surfer who tried to drug him and video tape his being fucked by half a dozen strangers...

Well, all he could really do was hope that the blokes here in America were better than that.

"Probably tomorrow, if you can swing it," he said. "One night on that cot and my back'll be full of more knots than a stored garden hose."

Sandy looked confused, but North, who had a garden he loved, and Tooth, who had worked part time at a plant nursery, cracked up laughing.

Aster leaned back on his countertop perch, and regarded his friends. This was the second time he'd seen them in person, and it was still rather jarring. He'd been looking at internet pictures only, and everyone knew the camera made you look like a dork.
There was North, who had described himself once as "looking like bear shaved bald and shoved into clothes" which wasn't at all accurate. Yes, North was closer to seven feet than six, and yes, he was very broad across the shoulders, but there all resemblance to an actual bear ended. North wasn't much older than Aster, but he'd gone white at thirty and gone with it. His hair was shoulder length, and he had been blessed with a long, straight beard. With the bit of paunch that came from working behind a desk, he looked rather like a version of Santa Claus. Albeit one that looked like he could bench press a small car, and he had tattoos spelling out 'naughty' on one arm and 'nice' on the other, but that wasn't so odd for the inner city kids.

There was Sandy, North's business partner and roommate, as much unlike North as it was possible for one to be, yet still be human and the same gender. Sandy was a dwarf, three feet tall if he was an inch, but he didn't look child-like. He had some kind of condition, Aster understood; Sandy looked like a grown man who'd been compacted down to half his size, so he was rather pudgy, although it was fat over hard muscle. Apparently he and North had met while exercising at the gym. Sandy was blond, with pale brown eyes that looked yellow, and a mass of freckles. He was also mute, and the main reason Aster had learnt the basics of American Sign Language before moving.

Tooth was the friend he knew the best; he'd been chatting with her over the internet, first on message boards and instant messenger, then later on with Skype, though neither of them had cared for the video part of it. Aster's reasoning involved artwork, a tendency to wander around in nothing but his underwear until six at night, and his slovenly cleaning habits. Tooth's reasons were her own.

Either way, he'd seen more photos of North and Sandy than he ever had of Tooth, though he didn't know why. Tooth was a quasi-famous psychologist, although if pressed he'd admit to not knowing more than that. She was two parts Asian, two parts Native American- the kind of person you followed home just to see if they were real, she was so pretty- and one part punk, with her hair cut and dyed in an interesting fashion. The top layers of her hair had been cut short, and dyed a brilliant emerald green, while the lower layers had been grown out long so they brushed her shoulders, and been dyed blue. It made her look a little like she was wearing a short wig over her hair. One thick section of hair in the front had been bleached and dyed bright yellow-gold.

With her hair done like that, the rest of her seemed rather like a letdown. Even for visiting her friend, it seemed, she wore clothes suitable for a casual office, although her shirt was a bit unusual in that it was covered in feather patterns. Her earrings looked more Native American in design, at least in Aster's opinion; they were a few feathers strung on a short silver chain, so they dangled, tips brushing her shoulders.

While he studied them, they studied him right back. Aster didn't mind; after all, they hadn't seen much more of him than the few pictures he'd put up online.

There'd been one photo of him in the stupid gym uniform his high school had insisted on, receiving a fistful of medals and a small trophy for winning most of the track and field contests the school held every year. The photo had been out of focus, and the uniform had been enough- pastel blue and pink, of all things- to distract people from looking at his blurry face.

Then there was the photo of him taken... probably his cousin's wedding, considering the tux. He'd been hungover. As part of the bachelor party, he'd gotten a bit drunk. He'd managed alright through the ceremony, but by the time photos were happening he'd ended up looking rumpled and cranky. Homicidal, his mother had said, although in his personal opinion he hadn't been that bad.

Reality was a bit different than photos. Aster knew what they saw; a tangled mop of dark, graying hair pulled back in a rough tail, clothes that'd been splattered with paint enough that the cuffs of his shirt sleeves were stiff with it, in a six-foot-tall, scruffy looking package. He still had his tan from the
beach, making him several shades darker than he normally was, although not that much darker. His family had a lot of Aborigine in it, so even after several weeks of painting and avoiding the sun, he looked like he spent his days surfing the ocean waves.

Not that he would, or could. He hated flying the most, but being out on the water was almost as bad.

"So," North said, and clapped his hands. "Have you food at all, Aster?"

"Nope." Aster folded his arms. "Figured I'd ask where the best places for takeout are until I can go shopping."

"Bah, no, no, that will never do," North said, and Sandy nodded. He signed, slowly enough Aster could keep up and mentally translate.

We will take you out for dinner, and grocery shop afterwards.

Aster hesitated, and then shrugged. "You can certainly afford a dinner out," he said. "But..." Right. Some conversations weren't good to hold in public. "Something I need to talk to you about. Something, ah, magic."

Tooth leaned forward. "What is it?"

"I've got a ghost."

He almost expected the ghost to show up in the middle of the room, following the pronouncement, but nothing. At least these three were mages, and not about to question him.

He quickly ran through the short encounter. There wasn't that much to tell, although he got a laugh when he mentioned the threat of sodomy.

"I just bet you'd enjoy that," Tooth said, grinning wickedly. "Didn't you say once that it was your fondest wish to be someone's birthday present?"

"Oy." Aster grinned back. "If I remember right, that was 'cause I had a boyfriend at the time. We were all but de facto, 'till he up and cheated on me. An' anyways, Daryl made me feel like the girl."

Plenty difficult when talking about someone six-foot-one, with a few kickboxing trophies on the shelf. But Daryl had managed.

"Fine, fine... then the sodomer- is that the right word?- would be given to you. All tied up and with a pretty bow on his-"

"Tooth!" North was laughing hard enough he was in danger of falling off the counter. Sandy tipped over at that moment, hitting the tiled floor with a loud smack. Aster wasn't too worried; he knew a break-fall when he saw one, and Sandy was convulsing with silent laughter, tears rolling down his cheeks.

"Now that," Aster said, and dropped down off the counter. "Would be a lovely birthday prezzie. But I'm starved, how 'bout you?"

"I could eat," Tooth said, and Sandy- in between silent giggle fits- nodded. North got off the counter and pulled out his car keys.

"Then let us go. I'm thinking lobster."

Aster frowned at him.

Well, if it was a staple of family dining...

"Crying children and cranky waiters, here we come," he said, and grabbed his jacket on the way out.

Chapter End Notes

Poor Aster, he's stuck with an unhappy, bi-polar ghost. Don't worry, it'll get better. Jack just needs to find his sanity with BOTH hands and stop dropping it all the time, that's all!
Chapter Three

Aster woke when the floor reached up and smacked him a good one.

Wait. No. He'd rolled out of bed.

He groaned, and sat up. Only when he'd done his best to rub the sleep from his eyes and failed utterly, did he realize he wasn't alone.

The ghost was crouched on the balls of his feet, watching him.

Aster realized he hadn't gotten much of a good look- or rather, paid that much attention- the last time he'd seen the ghost. He'd been too shocked, so he'd picked up the basics and not much detail.

The ghost had the most arresting blue eyes he'd ever seen.

Jack smiled, the expression bright and open. "Hi," he said. "You're not the old guy. You must be the new guy. There's always a new guy." He sighed, and the joy in his expression faded, turning to despair. "Bet you can't hear me either."

He and the others had talked about ghosts while North drove around last night. Not that any of them knew much, but pooling their information meant they all knew a little bit more.

Ghosts, the reactive kind, had a harder and harder time holding onto reality the older they got. After a certain point, they ceased being reactive, and since they weren't repeaters, captured memories, they faded away.

He wondered how old Jack was.

"I can hear you. And see you."

Jack jumped, his wide eyes going even wider. "You- you can-"

"Hear you." Aster scrubbed at his face with both hands. Nope, not awake yet. "See you. God, I'm tired."

"You shouldn't take the Lord's name in vain."

"Way I'm feeling, it's sure not in vain." Water. A good, hot shower, boil himself awake. He even had towels to dry off with, since North had insisted on picking up a few at the grocery store.

Why did the grocery store sell towels? And clothes- there'd been pants and shirts and socks right there next to the cleaning supplies. Was that normal? Was that something all big city stores did or just American ones?

There was something wrong with the world when clothes and bath towels were sold next to toilet cleaner and dish detergent.

"Right," he said, and Jack wrinkled his nose. Well, tough for him, Aster'd grown up half a click from the outback proper, and his accent got thicker when he was tired. Probably as hard to decipher as an Irishman taking the piss, but less intentional. "I'm grabbing a shower."
"Wait," Jack said, but Aster ignored him and stumbled out of the room.

Shower. Blessedly hot water... Oh yeah. Aster groaned, and leaned sideways against the tiled wall as the hot water pounded on the back of his shoulders. The showerhead had a setting called 'massage', and he had to try it.

When he woke up.

Maybe in a few minutes.

The water was just so nice and warm... He considered the small bar of soap, fresh from the wrapper, on its little shelf. Wouldn't take much effort to scrub down, would it? He was probably even awake enough for it.

There was a faint draft behind him, so he turned and squinted against the water spray.

A thin arm was sticking through the shower curtain, the linen sleeve not getting wet even though the arm was also immersed in the spray. Aster frowned, watching, as the ghost touched the shower hose. The metallic hose frosted over.

A second later, the water turned ice cold.

Aster shrieked, and dove sideways out of the cold water.

Right into the shower curtain.

The curtain tore free of the rings, dumping him on the cold floor. Aster fought his way free of the clinging plastic sheet, and found himself looking up at Jack.

"It's rude to ignore people," Jack said.

And then he vanished.

Aster swore under his breath, and stood up. Yup, he was awake. And now he needed a new shower curtain.

"Stop laughing, Tooth." Aster pulled the phone away long enough to take a bite of toast- peanut butter was nothing like vegemite, he really needed to find a supplier- and chew, before talking into the receiver again. "It's the third time he's pulled that trick."

"Stop being so entertaining when he freezes the water, then."

"No, he's getting back at me for ignoring him. Which I don't. If he's not around, I don't say hi, that's not ignoring him!"

"Stop complaining. It could always be worse."

Aster took another bite of his toast. "You're only saying that 'cause you don't live with him."

Aster studied his options carefully. Make the wrong choice, he'd be stuck with the result for years, years where he'd suffer and everyone would pity him. But how would he know what the right choice was?

"Aster." Tooth sounded like she was pinching her nose. "Aster, it's the same shade, just pick one."
"They're not the same shade." One of the options was Autumn Bronze, the other Desert Camel. Not the same at all. Desert Camel was a little lighter, a little more yellow, than Autumn Bronze. And then there was the color Warm Tan, which was like Desert Camel but even less yellow, more white.

"I'm paint shopping with a crazy person," Tooth muttered.

"Desert Camel," he decided, and headed over to the service desk.

Tooth made him buy lunch as payment, after they'd loaded up the paint cans in her car.

"Why can't you just leave everything as it is?" she asked.

"I removed the wallpaper."

Tooth grimaced. The cabbage-sized roses were bad enough, but the background of the wallpaper was bright yellow, clashing with the honey-brown wood flooring. And when Aster had removed the wallpaper, he'd discovered more wallpaper, and more, until he'd revealed finished plaster. So he had to paint. His living room currently looked like a mess.

"Well, you certainly couldn't leave the wallpaper," she agreed. "It was pretty bad. But did you have to spend an hour looking at paint samples and debating the difference between three shades of light brown?"

"I'm an artist," he said, and managed to hold the stuffy, stuck up pose a full three seconds. She broke down in giggles.

"So how's your roommate?" she asked.

"He switched the salt and sugar, but at least I've been able to have warm showers lately." Getting out of the showers, though... Jack had been standing there, waiting, just this morning. Staring. Aster had almost cracked his head open when he'd fallen backwards in the shower, trying to hide private bits with the new shower curtain.

"Oh," he said. "I need to buy a new shower curtain."

"What, again?"

"Not my fault."

"Sure it wasn't," Tooth said, and grinned. "When does the furniture arrive?"

"Not until after my things finish shipping over from Oz. I'll have my books, clothing, and video games before I have anywhere to put them."

"Poor baby."

"Stop laughing, that camp bed is killing my back."

Tooth took a bite of her curry rice, and smiled sweetly. "Poor baby."

Aster huffed at her. "Demon woman."

"Love you too, sweetie."

"What're you making?"
Jack again. Aster didn't let himself tense up. "Dinner. Figured I couldn't mess up spaghetti and meatballs." With generic store-bought sauce. He could cook, or at least, he could boil water and typically manage not to poison himself. The microwave was his best friend.

"It looks good," Jack said, probably a lie since Aster hadn't even added the noodles to the water yet. "Smells good too."

"That'd be the meatballs." He was following the directions very carefully. But how did you know you'd flipped round little balls of shaped meat?

"I miss eating," Jack said, strangely serious. He normally wasn't. Even when he was ranting at Aster for 'ignoring' him, Jack tended to sound like he was holding back laughter. This time, he didn't. "My mom made the best stew... Mutton. We had sheep."

Aster hummed and nodded, not about to poke at that thorny issue again. Jack hadn't said anything about intestine garters or sodomites since the first day, he'd like to keep it that way. "Chicken dumplings. Though it was my dad that cooked, not my mom."

"Your dad cooked?" Jack walked forward, through one of the new kitchen chairs without, apparently, noticing. "My dad could make one thing only- half-burned, half-raw rabbit. I had Mom teach me to cook just so we didn't all die when she got sick."

"Pescetarian." He elaborated, when the ghost looked confused, "I don't eat meat, unless it's sea food. Otherwise, fruits, vegetables, wheat... eggs. I like egg dishes. Just can't make 'em very good."

"Strange," Jack murmured. He leaned sideways against the counter. For some reason, he didn't go through it the way he had Aster's new furniture. "So you can't cook?"

"Not really."

"Want some pointers?"

Which was how Aster ended up with burnt noodles, watery sauce, and ashes instead of meatballs. He called out for a pizza.

Shopping when your only mode of transportation was a motorcycle made things interesting. Especially when the only store that sold vegemite was on the other side of town from his home, part of a strip mall, right near the expressway overpass. Not that he minded the drive, exactly, but when it was raining- not even raining, spitting the occasional droplet- he kind of resented the trip.

But he wasn't about to give up his vegemite, and he'd run out just this morning. He thought Jack was stealing some, somehow, despite being a ghost and not having to eat.

The parking lot was only half full; early enough he assumed it was mostly the employees' vehicles, maybe a few early risers stopping off in the Starbucks at one end of the line of stores. The other end was anchored by a large Fresh Mart. In Aster's opinion, vegemite, anzac biscuits, and tim tams weren't 'international' foods at all, but there was a few oceans between this Fresh Mart and home.

Funny, how homesickness could sneak up on a bloke and then smack him between the shoulder blades.

He shrugged his shoulders to try and rid himself of the feeling, and headed in to do his shopping.

He had a few more things to pick up than just vegemite and whatever struck him as looking good.
To that end, he got himself a cart instead of a basket, and started going up and down the aisles.

Aster picked up a few fruits and vegetables he could eat raw—no cooked to mush food for him, thanks—and another loaf of the odd, nutty bread he'd discovered and fallen in love with. He wandered up and down the personal care aisles, not exactly looking for anything. For a minute or two he studied the nail polish on offer, half an idea whirling in the back of his mind. Those were really tiny brushes, and the colors were interesting enough...

Maybe not today, though. And if he wanted to make a proper painting out of *nail polish*, he'd have to get a lot of it. Maybe later.

He made his way, very slowly, to the tinned food aisle. He had a lot of tinned food already, but there wasn't any harm in looking. Besides, the next aisle over was for the 'international'. He preferred going up that one from the frozen section towards the cash registers, he just remembered where everything was better that way. If he didn't go down the tinned aisle, well, things would be backwards.

Maybe it was a touch anal, but who cared? Really? Who cared about his shopping habits?

Aster checked out a tin of beets, as it looked like they were on sale, and then headed down the aisle. There was only one other person in the aisle, a shorter guy stretching up to try and reach—what was that... soup of some kind. Who put *Campbells* soup on the top-most shelf?

"Here, mate," he said, and reached over the man's head to snag a tin. Cream of mushroom. Pity he didn't like mushrooms, Campbells made good soup.

"Oh, thanks." The guy he'd helped grinned, and reached up as if to adjust glasses he wasn't wearing. "These used to be on a lower shelf, don't know why they changed it."

"Pro'ly hired a new bloke, someone tall enough to think everyone else lives at six feet." Aster smiled. "An' no worries."

He headed on down towards the next aisle, vaguely aware that the bloke he'd helped was following him. He did frown a little when the guy headed up the international foods aisle right behind him, but it was a free country. Just because the guy didn't look like the kind who'd pick up Chinese rice cakes, with the—was kanji the right word? He was pretty sure that was Japanese, actually—authentic writing on the package, didn't mean that was true. Books, covers, judging, and all that.

He glanced back over his shoulder while he picked up his jar of vegemite, and managed to catch the guy's eye.

"Oh!" The bloke actually blushed, a mottled pink that spread across the bridge of his nose and forehead. "Oh. Ah, sorry, I'm not following you, honest."

"Free country," Aster pointed out. "An' there aren't any rules 'bout who can shop in what aisle or anything."

"No, I guess not, I just suppose it could be a bit... annoying." He reached up, again, and dropped his hand before touching nonexistent glasses.

"New contacts?" Aster asked. The guy looked confused, so he elaborated. "You look like you're going to fiddle with some specs, but you're not wearing any."

Aster nodded, and chatted lightly with the guy all the way over to the frozen food section. To his amusement, they both loaded up with a selection of frozen dinners, though Aster went with vegetarian and the guy, who said he was called Zach, got the hungry man with roast beef and then another with pork.

"Can't cook either?" Aster asked, as they turned towards the cash register.

Zach hunched his shoulders. "Oh, I burn jello. Ah, Aster?" He fiddled with the handle of his basket. "This, um, you don't have to say yes, please don't think I'm weird, but would you like to have a coffee with me?"

Chapter End Notes

Yes, things are going slow right now... except when it comes to Jack's pranks. Oh, Jack... Eh well, just 'cause he's not doing it to see Aster naked YET (did you guys look in last chapter's end note for the inspiration pic? Oh my god those abs those shoulders those arms... hnnng!) doesn't mean that shan't change... in fact, change will be very soon, yes indeedy!

Oh, and things are hinted at next chapter. Whee!

Speaking of- does anyone want to see a sneak-peak of Kitty Jack? It's fun! I got to pull out my inner poetical writer, she whom is almost smothered on a daily basis! Anyways, let me know, I'll see what I can do.
The man formerly known as Kozmotis Pitchner, now called Pitch Black, stalked out his tower's back door, through the long-dead garden with its skeletons of bean plants and the ghosts of cabbages, all the way down to the murky pond that had claimed more lives than he currently cared to count.

The shadows writhed and twisted around him like living things, whispering of everything that had happened since the sun had set. He lifted one hand, and tendrils of darkness curled around his fingers like mist, cool to the touch.

He looked up at the moon, low on the horizon and nearly full. "You're watching me, aren't you?" he hissed, eyes narrowing. Damn him. Damn Manny. "Do you think I'll just let it stand? You'll slip. You will slip, and fall, and then..." He hissed again, but this time in anticipated satisfaction. Oh, it would be so nice to see Manny broken and helpless.

"Gather your allies," he told the moon. "See if you can hold onto them." He flexed his fingers, shadows flexing along in time.

He turned away, ready to go back inside, and paused momentarily. The young boy standing in the doorway stared at him, wide-eyed and silent.

"Oh, my dear Nightlight," Pitch murmured, eyes glowing a bright gold. "What have I told you about leaving the house?"

The boy shrank back, and faded through the closed door.

Zach smiled when he saw Aster walk over to the table, and ducked his head. "Thought you weren't going to come."

"Realized I didn't have your number when my 'bike broke down," Aster replied. Jack hadn't been happy about being abandoned. Although, his rear wheel popping could have just as easily been debris on the road. He'd thought he'd missed it, but maybe he hadn't. "Least the tow truck didn't take forever."

"At least. I'll, ah, I'll have to give you my number...?"

Aster smiled and nodded, even as he wondered if Zach had any kind of backbone. To be fair, it was probably nerves. Most people weren't mages, who could be called upon to make life or death choices with little warning, and so needed to be trained to remain calm at all times. Not that Aster ever was calm at all times- the last time he'd run out of ocher red paint came to mind- but he clearly didn't have the same set of butterflies Zach was suffering from.

First dates were generally pretty nerve-wracking.

Aster shrugged off his jacket and sat down across from Zach. "So," he said, and looked around the coffee shop. Not a Starbucks, thankfully. Looked more like an artsy, independent place. Prices were marked up on large chalkboards, the baristas looked like they'd throw a punch at anyone who dared stiff them of their rightful tips, and either the lighting was low on purpose, or half the light bulbs needed replacing.
Really, it felt quite like his favorite hangout back home. All that was needed now was for Drake to stagger in drunk singing Waltzing Matilda. It was a Thursday, after all, Drake always got drunk and sang Waltzing Matilda on a Thursday.

He swallowed down the sudden feeling of homesickness, and forced his attention off the atmosphere and back on his... date.

Right. Date. There the butterflies were. About time they showed up.

Zach looked up from where he'd been fiddling with his napkin, and smiled faintly. "You, you look like you approve?"

"Nice place. Reminds me of one back home," he said, truthfully. "Favorite of yours?"

"Oh I- I don't get out often enough to have a favorite." Zach laughed, sounding a bit nervous. Fair enough. "I spend most of my time at work."

"Guess you could say the same about me," Aster admitted. Though, technically, the real money came from his stock portfolio. "Artist," he said, at Zach's confused expression. "Sell my stuff online."

"Oh!" Zach straightened up a little. "I, um, I do photography, sometimes. I work at a computer lab? We, well, magazines and stuff, I'm not one of the photographers, but sometimes we need stock backgrounds...?"

"Photography's your passion, though?" Aster prodded.

Zach shrugged his shoulders. "It puts food on the table," he said. "Really..." He bit his lower lip. "I've always meant to travel, actually. I'd like to be a travel writer."

"Yeah?" That was promising. "Where'd you start out with?"

"Oh, I, um, I actually have tried getting my foot in the door, with Pennsylvania. Write what you know, right?" Zach looked down and fiddled with his half empty coffee cup. "But I'd really like to see Australia."

"It's a beaut," Aster said, grinning. "I grew up in Rabbit Flat."

"Is that in New Zealand?" Zach looked like a hopeful puppy. "You have the accent. I have a good ear for accents."

Aster was tempted to let that pass- Rabbit Flat didn't even show up properly on Google Maps, after all- but New Zealand? He wasn't a Kiwi; though he would admit, proudly, to being a Bushie, considering where he'd grown up. "Actually," he said, but Zach clearly wasn't listening.

What followed amounted to the most painfully boring two hours of Aster's life to date. And that was including the time he'd tried setting a world record for watching paint dry. He heard about Sydney's Opera House- he'd been there. He'd entered a watercolor painting of the building to his school's competition, won, and got tickets to the symphony and almost missed out because the doctors had thought the pain he was feeling was a burst appendix instead of the more logical "tripped and fell and jabbed a stick into my kidneys" that he'd told them was the reason.

Zach knew all the rumors about dingos, which... yes, some dingos were bad news, but they were typically cross-bred with dogs- like wolves, dingos preferred their humans at a distance- and he couldn't remember the last time he'd ever seen a 'dingo eats baby' headline in the papers that hadn't
turned out to be a hoax.

There were talks about sheep, rabbits, cane toads (Aster had given his brother the 'frog smacking club' because it was hard to explain to TSA agents- on the American side- why they really didn't want to know about the mysterious stains on the golfing nine iron), the differences between wallabies and kangaroos, and drop bears.

Drop bears! He'd actually brought up drop bears! That was the point where Aster excused himself and got a coffee.

And then, because he was a glutton for punishment, he went back to that table and listened to a bloody stupid Septic Tank go on about Australian politics, Australian contributions to various wars, and...

He pretended to get a text on his phone, and phoned up North once he'd apologized to Zach.

"Oy, Nick," he said. "What'd you ring me for, you drongo?"

"Bunny?" Stupid nickname. "I did not call- do you need easy out?"

"What d'you mean ya need bail? What'd you do?"

"Easy out does not mean implying I am jailbird."

Aster shrugged at Zach, and stood up. "Look, you bloody- fine. An' I suppose Sandy's there- yes. Yes. Mmhm, I have heard that about best friends." He paused, made a face, and sighed. "Which one? Yeah, yeah, I'll find it."

He flipped the phone closed on North's spluttering denials of any kind of criminal intent, and sighed. "Gotta go get my friend outta jail. Apparently he an' his friend were trying to find a cab, got picked up for being drunk and disorderly." He paused, and added, in a stroke of genius, "Nick probably shouldn't have tried to kiss the officer."

Zach looked mournful. "I'll call you?"

"Sounds good," Aster said, and snatched up his jacket and headed for the door, before Zach could remember to give him a phone number.

Two hours being lectured about his own country, with the lecturer getting every second word wrong. He'd have to swing by North's and borrow his friend's heavy bag, just to get the itch out of his fists.

And apologize for the slur on his friend's character. North would whine if he didn't.

Bloody Russians.

North let him in without question, though the moment the front door closed behind Aster, the man started swearing in... well, Aster didn't recognize all the languages. Russian, certainly, but maybe a bit of Polish and even Greek.

"Nice statues," he said, eying the main features of the entry way.

North paused in his cranky recital. "This is Dick and Jane," he said. "Came with house."

The statues were just a touch bigger than life sized, and had clearly been sculpted as nude figures. Unless North and Sandy had decided to switch the genders of the names, Jane was the female nude,
and Dick was the male. Jane had been dressed in a day-glo orange wrap around skirt, while Dick was wearing a hat. And not on his head, either.

"Right. Enough pleasantries, got a heavy bag I can borrow?"

North made a face, but led the way to the basement. He and Sandy had turned the thing into a near professional gym, with everything from high tech exercise machines to free weights, a boxing ring, and punching bags of every weight.

Aster immediately moved to the closet where the exercise clothing was kept, and changed out of his date clothing and into sweat pants and a black tank top just a touch too big for him.

If the pants hadn't been expensive, meeting-the-bankers slacks, or the shirt his favorite Acca Dacca shirt, he'd have happily ruined them with workout sweat and the spar he was planning on with North after. However, his only pair of good slacks- or any slacks- and his Acca Dacca shirt were worth saving, even if they had been tainted with the date from Boring.

North made a face when Aster explained his reasoning. "AC/DC is not all that," he said, and picked up the maligned shirt as though it were a dead rat and he was trying to minimize contact.

"Blasphemy," Aster snarled.

Then he landed a roundhouse kick on the heavy bag.

North was kind enough to stay quiet while Aster worked out his frustrations. He should have stretched first, and he'd feel the pain later tonight, tomorrow, even to the rest of the week after this. But he couldn't have stood the time it'd take to make sure he was loose enough, and limber, to kick and punch the way his aggravation demanded.

No. Not aggravation. Sheer, bloody minded rage.

He'd said koalas were harmless! No! No they weren't! They were psychotic little bastards with long claws and eternal hangovers because they ate plants that got them high! If anything had ever inspired the drop bear myth, it was an angry koala!

Aster managed to snarl out a word here and there, while North stretched and listened.

And then they sparred. North put Aster down in the first minute, and then they got back up and did it again. And again. By the fifth time Aster hit the mat, he felt better. Calmer. Exhausted enough that he wasn't grinding his teeth with anger any more.

And bruised, but that wasn't the point.

North helped him up, and then they headed over to the showers. Much cleaner than anything found in even the best gyms, Aster noticed, before he stripped down and all but melted under the hot water. There wasn't any awkwardness with North joining him; they both knew that they weren't interested in each other that way. Aster turned his back to North, North turned his back to Aster, and neither was tempted to peek.

He got dried off and dressed, in his Acca Dacca shirt- the only proper pronunciation for the name, North- and borrowed sweat pants.

"I don't know why it got to me so bad," he said.

North finished pulling on his pants, and squinted at him. Aster had to make a conscious effort not to
wince at the sight of his friend, bare chested and still slightly damp. Too much body hair, too tall, too broad... No. Just no. North was his friend, even his best friend, but about as physically attractive as a pile of gravel.

Then North pulled on a shirt. "It got to you, my friend, because it is subject close to your heart." He sighed, and added, without a trace of accent, "If I heard someone saying things about New York that weren't true, I'd be upset too. Of course, there's so much that's wrong about New York, it will take a lot more to upset me than it'd take to upset you."

"There is that," Aster agreed. He shook out his aching hands. Should've put on some wraps before pounding the bag. "Well, my first date on American soil was an utter disaster. Think it's a sign?"

"Of course it is sign," North said, back in his bad Russian accent. "Is sign you should come out to bar with Sandy and me."

"Don't tell me you two go to gay bars," he groaned.

North just smiled, and clapped a hand down on Aster's shoulder, in support or comfort- probably both. And Aster smiled back.

Whatever, he didn't need to date. He had his friends, he had his artwork, and he had plans for his new manor he had to work on. Attempted romance was just a complication he didn't need.

And he forgot about Zach. He wasn't important anyways.

Chapter End Notes

Oh look, a Pitch and a bad date.

Also, guys, my buffer chapters took a beating 'cause freaking heck that chapter... - strangling motions- but I'm past it, so more action. Whee. Apparently I'm not so good writing character snippets, although Sandy's cute when texting, apparently.
Chapter Five

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The delivery truck headed through the gates, leaving Aster with a pile of boxes that still had red sand in the tape. He touched the corner of the nearest box, and sighed. He missed Australia. Mum, Dad, his siblings... He missed going rabbit hunting with his youngest brother, who competed with him to see who could catch the most conies bare-handed. The conies were always taken down to the butcher, who checked to make sure the meat was safe to eat and then turned the rabbits into food for man and beast.

He missed listening to dingoes out in the bush, missed going down to the ocean and watching the surf and the clouds. He missed hearing the familiar accents of home, from the thick, bush-native drawl to the almost-British of city dwellers.

He ached for his home, an almost physical pain that made him sway back and forth slightly with the force of it.

It passed, after a few minutes. Aster sighed, and ran a hand back over his hair, for the moment pulled back in a loose braid. Not for the first time, he vowed to get his hair cut short. Not for the first time, he promptly forgot said vow.

Aster picked up the first box, which by the weight had to have either clothes or some of his lighter art supplies in it. He dropped it in his entryway, and then went back out for another load.

In all, he'd had twenty boxes shipped over, most of them weighing anywhere from six to thirteen kilograms. He knew, just knew that if he tried complaining about that to any Yank, they wouldn't get it. Maybe if he said fifteen to thirty pounds, they'd clue in. Especially when you were talking about a weight you carried in front of you, like a sleeping toddler or something.

He stretched up and back once he'd finished carting everything in, and felt his back pop when he did. When he relaxed, Jack was standing in the middle of the room, staring at the boxes.

Aster blinked. "'ello," he said, cautiously. His odd roommate had been a bit off ever since Aster's disaster of a date, mostly not around and sulking when he popped in to make the artist's life miserable. Cold showers weren't something a bloke wanted to get used to, but Aster was heading that way. Jack needed to stop freezing the pipes, they'd shatter eventually and that'd just be a mess.

"What's all this?" Jack asked. He looked up from the boxes, and tilted his head.

"My stuff." Aster picked up the maybe-clothes box, and started up the stairs. "Shipped over from home."

"Oh, right. You're not from around here." Jack followed Aster, balancing impossibly on the stair railing, dropping off only when his hair brushed the ceiling. "What is it, though?"

"Stuff." He dropped the box on the floor, instead of on the camp bed, and then tore the tape off. He wadded the tape up into a messy ball and tossed it aside. He'd get it later.

Jack frowned at that, and then poked the tape-ball with one bare toe. It frosted over at his touch.

"You should pick that up."
"In a tic." Yup, clothes. Pity his wardrobe wouldn't arrive for a while. And this old house didn't have much by way of closets; mostly just for the bathrooms, and then the shelving didn't exactly have much by way of doors on it. So he'd just have to have a clean pile and dirty pile until he had somewhere to put the stuff, so what? It was how he'd lived back in Oz, no matter how much his mum had sighed and insisted he pick up his room.

He didn't know why she had complained about his mess so much; she was just as bad. If Aster's father wasn't a neat freak... well, he was, so at least the kitchen had been kept clean.

Jack made a bigger face when Aster dumped the box of clothes out on the floor, and tossed the box to the side. It might have been only because the cardboard went through one leg, or it could have been because of the mess. "Really?" he asked, sounding plaintive.

"What?"

Jack sighed, and pinched the bridge of his nose. "Never mind..."

Aster shook his head, and moved on to unpacking the rest of the boxes.

Jack followed him the entire time, making pained faces and sighing a lot while Aster stacked his books up in one corner of his living room, video games and gaming systems next to where he'd eventually have a television. The art supplies were carted up to the studio to await the tables and easels and computer he'd bought but hadn't received yet.

"Why don't you have any furniture?"

"Because I only just moved in?"

Jack shook his head, and jumped up to perch on one empty box. Aster had to blink and look again, because- no, the brain was refusing to accept that sight. The cardboard should have flattened under Jack's weight, except all it did was frost over. Just another reminder that the ghost didn't have any weight- was barely there at all.

It also didn't help that the picture Jack made, crouched at his ease on the cardboard, grinning up at Aster, made quite the... alluring image indeed. He wanted to grab his sketchbook, because damn if Jack wouldn't make the perfect, cheeky wood-elf.

Or maybe an ice-elf, considering the coloring...

He didn't have any commissions at the moment, so a few prints of more generic things could always be good. Mind, the instant he put out that he was open for commissions again he'd have so many requests he'd not have to worry about work for a year, but that wasn't the point.

"'Ey, Jack." Aster looked away, and fiddled with- what even was this? He paused momentarily to study the thing from all angles, before finally figuring out that it was what happened to the plastic rings from a six pack of stubbies when it half-melted and fused into a ball. He shrugged, and tossed it from hand to hand. Jack leaned forward, defying gravity and all common sense. "Yeah? What?"

What, what? Aster frowned at him. Jack stared back. After a minute, it clicked, and Aster about clonked himself in the face with the plastic ball when he went to tap his fingers against his forehead. Right, right, question. "Would you pose for me?"

"Pose... huh?" Jack tumbled off the box, and managed to roll back up onto his feet with no apparent
damage or notice. "I don't know what you mean?"

Aster wondered what would happen if he reached over to smooth down that rat's nest of hair. His fingers would go right through the boy, probably. He shoved his hands in his pockets, dropping the ball to the floor. "Well, I mean taking a pose, and then I'd sketch you."

"Just... any pose?" Jack tilted his head to the side.

"No, no, it'd be things like... like sprawling on my bed, or sitting on the windowsill or something."

"Oh."

The ghost turned and paced away, until he was standing next to the window. He went partially translucent, so it was possible to see the suggestion of the wooden frame through his arm and shoulder, though not much more than that.

"Jack?"

The boy reached up with one hand, and pressed the tip of a single finger to the window pane. The glass immediately frosted over, fractal patterns spreading from that single point of contact. Aster was used to lines, maybe fern patterns, but this... this looked more like a star, an ever more complex and growing image of a six pointed star.

"That's beautiful," he murmured, when the ice looked to have stopped spreading.

"It's just ice," Jack said, something odd about the tone of his voice. Maybe how he sounded older? Older than Aster was, older than the rundown manor house. "It doesn't... do anything."

"Makes me smile," Aster said. And it did. It was beautiful. And now he really wanted to find a camera. Pity he didn't own one, unless you counted the crap version in his phone.

Jack turned and looked at him, seeming to solidify as he did. At least it wasn't possible to see the vague outlines of things through his body. "Does it really?"

"It does." Aster swallowed, and took a step forward. His foot crunched the plastic ball, and he almost stumbled to the side. He waved his arms wildly, before catching himself. "It- your ice is a beaut, Jack. I promise."

Jack looked from the frosted window, to Aster, and back again, and then smiled. It was small, and faint, but there, and so unexpectedly sweet it made something inside the artist ache.

"Well, that's something, at least," Jack said. "Sure. I'll pose for you. Not like I have anything better to do."

Then he vanished.

Aster felt like the breath had been knocked out of him. He looked around the room, grimaced, and wished he had a couch he could collapse onto.

His furniture couldn't get here anywhere near fast enough, at this rate.

There were times he regretted the choices he'd made that had brought him to this place. Not that he disliked the results, mind; he was able to live in unparalleled comfort, was able to do good works in both his role as a leading figure of Burgess and the greater Pennsylvania area and as the Head of North America's mages. If he had a ridiculous amount of luxuries, well, he had earned them.
It was only that some times, he would catch sight of his reflection, be it in the mirror, the polished brass and teak of his desk, or his computer monitor. Trials, those he’d faced and mastered, and those he’d faced and failed, had carved lines into his face. His hair had gone white at an early age, a side effect of his magic he had always suspected, but between the white hair and the lines, he looked old.

His receptionist called him dignified, though never to his face.

He sighed, and moved over to the window. His office was on the second-highest floor of Burgess’ tallest tower. Twenty stories below, people of all races and walks of life hurried back and forth, both on foot and in their cars. He remembered the first car; remembered how the motor association had lobbied to change attitudes until jaywalking was a crime and the driver was mostly blameless for such crashes.

Things changed so... so quickly, it seemed. Had it really been so long since he’d first moved here to America? Nearly four hundred years, now.

Manfred Lunanoff shook his head, and returned to his desk. He worked slowly at his opening speech, and paused when the email notification whistled the first few bars of "Happy Together" at him.

Ah, yes, dinner plans. His cook had prepared a nice duck with sour apples and port, with a lovely caramel flan for dessert.

Well, that quite put paid to any plans for working late. Manfred stood up, and headed out to reception to give that sweet Lilliana the rest of the afternoon off. No doubt she would enjoy the extra time with her fiancé before he had to leave on his business trip.

Aster wasn’t sure, at first, what had woken him. His bedroom was darker than most caves, just the way he liked it- but cold. Who’d turned off the buggering heat? He partially uncurled from the little ball he’d scrunched up in to conserve warmth, and stretched one arm out into the cold, cold air to fumble the lamp into life.

Then he screamed and jerked back, away from the thing looming over the bed.

It was only after he’d hit the floor with his arse, with bruising force no less, did he realize the thing was Jack.

And that the blankets hadn’t followed him all the way off the bed. One leg was still covered, but from the knee up, well...

Not for the first time, he regretted his habit of sleeping in the nude.

Jack stared, wide-eyed, and the room got colder. Ice crystals actually began forming on the carpet. Aster yelped, and jerked his leg off the bed, because that was right next to Jack, who was crouching on the foot without dimpling the blankets.

"Wha - fucking hell's wrong with you, Frostbite! Bloody buggering hell you doing?"

Jack snarled, and his eyes actually glowed. "Make them stop!" he howled, hoar frost covering his face and arms. "Make them stop an' so too will I!"

It was too early for this.

Jack snarled again, and then vanished. Aster scrubbed at his eyes, but he could still see the bright
blue glow Jack's eyes had held. Damn. Damn and bloody hell. What was going on? Stop who?

And where the hell had he tossed his pants to?

He dropped his shields and stretched his mage senses out as far as he could, and then flinched. Okay, that was... not good. Pants were suddenly much less important. He grabbed the first pair of sweatpants that came to hand, and pulled them on as he stumbled out the bedroom door and to the stairs.

He had to wonder, as he shoved his feet into his motorcycle boots, just when he'd attuned enough to his property that he could feel the manor house from his bedroom.

And then he was too busy running and holding up the waistband of the sweatpants to worry about it.

The summer night had an odd, chilly bite to the air. Jack? Probably. The ghost had full run of the grounds, after all, though Aster mostly saw him in the gatehouse.

The manor's front doors were open. Jack, or the five bright lives up on the second floor?

It didn't matter. Aster felt the floorboards shuddering under his boots, with senses both physical and metaphysical, and then tore up the stairs three at a time.

The second floor felt much more dangerous than the first. This must have been the area most damaged by the fire a century back, or rot, or both. Certainly the walls were stained black the way they weren't on the ground floor.

Aster paused at the top of the stairs, and then turned and ran through a large hole in the wall to the next room, and the next. Damn bloody architecture, no hallways, just room leading to room leading to room.

Where the hell were the kids?

The chance glimpse of a patch of frost led him from what might have been a sitting room to what was definitely a bedroom. The floor- he hastily reached into what was left of the wood, and poured as much magical energy into it as he dared. He wanted to solidify the wood, not encourage the rot!

"What the HELL do you brats think you're doing?"

The five teenagers all jumped, and the one currently holding the bottle of whisky dropped it. The bottle bounced once, and then tipped over on its side. What was left of the liquid poured out, and promptly froze solid.

Aster ignored the frozen booze, just as he ignored the ghost hovering in the center of the room, snarling at the teenagers. Jack wasn't doing anything, at least not yet. Aster would have to be the one to take the lead.

The kids could see him, after all.

"Well?" he growled, and stalked forward. "Don't you idiots know this is private property? Do you want to die? Look at the floor, you bleeding drongos! Thing could collapse at any moment! Get up! Move!"

The nearest teenager staggered up to his feet, and glared at Aster. The boys- and it just figured the five of them were all boys- had brought a couple flashlights and a storm lantern for illumination. Way the boy was standing, the light was all behind him. Jack floated around until his glowing eyes
illuminated the boy's face, not that anyone but Aster noticed.

"You can't tell us what to do," the boy said, doubtless trying for intimidating and managing only whiny. He must've had just a little more liquid courage than the others, because he was swaying back and forth, like his balance was off.

"Hell I can't," Aster snarled back. The boys all flinched. Yes, gentlemen, this was what a real intimidating bloke could do. "I own the property now, and you're trespassing. I can call the coppers and have you all arrested for being bloody stupid!"

"You can't," the boy said, but one of his friends hissed at him.

"Shut up Damien!"

"But he-!"

Aster growled, then grabbed the standing boy- Damien, apparently- and pulled. He had three inches and at least a hundred pounds on the boy, and unlike the boy he was all muscle. Someone had been spending just a bit too much time playing video games instead of getting bruised and bloody playing football.

He spun, and shoved the boy out the door, and glared. "Stay there!"

Then he turned back to the other four, and jerked his thumb back over his shoulder. "Join him!"

They were smarter than their friend. They hopped to, collecting their bottles and lights. One boy caught sight of the frozen booze, and looked freaked out.

"Watch," he told them, then walked carefully over to where they'd been sitting, and stomped one foot down onto the floor- and then through the rotting wood. He didn't even have to put much magic behind the blow. He pulled his foot free, and then walked over to the doorway. "You lot want to die? That it? Out!"

They hurried to the stairs, shivering in the cold air. Jack floated beside Aster, looking just a touch less wrathful, but still plenty pissed off. Long as he didn't go turning the place into an ice palace, he could be just as unhappy as he wanted to.

The boys didn't get rowdy until they were standing on the lane, at which point they all started muttering complaints to each other. Aster glared at them, and folded his arms.

His sweatpants slipped down until they were only just clinging to his hips. Damn it, he must have grabbed the pair he'd borrowed from North. Aster did his best to ignore just how much skin below his naval was showing, and settled for glaring at the boys.

It took a few, because they were teenage boys and they were mildly drunk, but slowly the complaints petered out and they began to look worried.

Good.

"Have you any idea what could've happened?" Aster growled. He did his best to enunciate carefully, but there were limits, with his temper and all. So long as they understood what he was saying, it'd be right. "You idiots! First of all, you could've all gone through that floor and broken your bloody necks, and you shut your gob right now!"

The boy, Damien, cringed back. Aster was in no mood to listen to justifications and denials.
"Second," he said, and glared at all five equally, "you fucking trespassed. On my property. I said it before- I'm well within my rights to call the police on you."

He paused, and then grinned. Or, well, showed his teeth.

"Where Oi'm from," he said, deliberately thickening his accent to ludicrous amounts, "we skin a man dumb enough to do that. Five a' ya shouldn't be a problem, just take a tick or two. Got a knoif in here somewhere..." He patted at his sweatpants' pockets, surreptitiously pulling them up a touch at the same time.

The hoons were drunk enough to believe him. Aster made a few more vague threats, and then snarled at them to get the hell off his property and stay off.

They went, running as fast as they could. Hell, only one of them fell, and then only the once.

Aster folded his arms again, this time against the faint chill in the air. Felt cold enough to freeze the balls off a brass monkey, it did.

He looked sideways at the ghost responsible for the cold, and sneered. "Can ya turn the bloody air conditioning off, ya larrikin?"

Jack turned, and frowned. "What's air conditioning?"

"The cold, ya buggering idiot!"

"Oh!" Jack's eyes immediately stopped glowing, and after a second or two, the air began to warm up. "Sorry. I just... I got upset."

"Understandable," Aster muttered. His sweatpants were sliding down his hips again. He did his best to ignore it. "They do that often? Treat the place like their own private party?"

The ghost dropped down to stand on the ground, and shrugged. "I guess? It's always worse when they'd sneak in to have sex." He stopped talking, and the silence got a brooding, sullen air to it.

Aster huffed, and wished Jack wasn't a ghost. If the boy were alive, he'd be able to reach over and touch his shoulder, offer a bit of physical comfort that had doubtless been denied him for too long.

Instead, when he shifted his weight from one foot to the other, his stupid pants fell down.

Aster squawked and caught the hem before too many things had become visible, but he knew Jack had gotten an eyeful. Again.

When he looked up, the stupid ghost was grinning. Aster had lucked out of the commentary when he'd woken up, but clearly that luck had changed.

"You look cold," Jack said, and then pulled one of his disappearing acts.

It took Aster a minute- it was late, and he was tired, so sue him- before he got it.

And then he did his best to turn the air blue with his cursing.

Chapter End Notes
Stuff happened, and I just finished writing a chapter where more stuff happens, and yay stuff!
Aster's furniture arrived two days later.
All at the same time, it felt like.

He'd open the gate for one delivery truck, they'd show up at the gatehouse and start unloading, and he'd get a call that another truck had arrived. And another. And another.

The king bed he'd ordered, frame in pieces and mattress wrapped in a whole bloody lot of plastic. Dining room table, also in pieces. Chairs. Sideboards, a massive hutch for the dishes since he didn't have a realistic amount of cupboard space. A couch, not in pieces but in a way he wished it was, because it was freaking huge and blocked one entire doorway. Stacks of bookshelves, the stand for the television, and yes, the new television too.

Aster directed everyone as best as he could, but he just knew that the furniture for his art studio would be piled up in a corner of the living room, the hutch was going to go in his bedroom, the three wardrobes in the dining room... Whatever, he'd ask North over, get him to help muscle everything to its proper place.

He kept a wary eye out for Jack, just in case the ghost decided to add to the chaos in some way, and finally spotted him by the gate. He was staring at the road outside, barely heeding the delivery men other than to move out of their way every so often. When he didn't, they walked right through him, drawing a flinch and gasp from the boy, and a comment from the man that there was a cold breeze. When they commented at all, that is.

Jack wasn't causing trouble, at least. Although Aster didn't quite like that expression on the ghost-boy's face. It was... speculative.

Nothing he could do about it with the delivery men about, though. Aster satisfied himself with checking on Jack anytime he went down to the gate. The rest of the time, well...

Handsome men in tight fitting shirts. An all-you-can-ogle parade.

What could he say, he had his priorities straight.

"Bunny."

Aster jerked upright, sudden blood in his eye. "What did you call me?" he growled, turning to glare at North.

North did his best to look innocent. "Is your name, is it not?"


North shrugged his shoulders, and folded another pair of pants, child sized. There were holes in the knees, so he put them in the 'needs repair' pile. That pile happened to be twice the size of the other two piles, combined.

"There is a man," he said. "Behind us, across the street. He has a pair of binoculars and is watching
A... man? Aster raised his eyebrows, and then looked back over his shoulder. It took a second, about the same length of time it took Zach to realize Aster was looking at him, and panic. The bloke tried to jump to his feet, but managed to get tangled in one of the café's trendy metal chairs and fall to the ground with bruising force.

What the bloody, buggering hell... "I will never understand you seppos," he grumbled, and went back to his own folding and sorting.

The sad thing was, he knew exactly what the binoculars meant. Not that he'd ever been victim to this before, but, well, what kind of deliberate blindness did he have to be suffering not to know? Besides, his sister'd had an ex who didn't know the meaning of the word no... well, not until he'd been caught by the coppers, with the supplies and plans for a kidnapping on him.

Funny thing, that. It'd taken some doing to nudge the officer's mind so he noticed the out of date plate registration on the truck, but it'd been worth it.

Bastard had been put away for six months, but that'd been long enough to work a subtle little cantrip on him. Any time he so much as thought of mistreating anyone, be it former or current girl, neighbor, co-worker, anything, he got sick. All the power the Bunnymund mages had been able to put into the cantrip meant it'd last a year, but by that point the bloke would either be 'cured' of his idiocy or get himself into more trouble. Either way, it was the limit of what they could do.

Zach apparently had taken more from their one night out- and a failed night at that- than Aster had. He wondered how the man had found him.

"He is problem?" North asked, with a flick of his eyes to indicate Zach behind them.

"Naw, mate. Ignore him and he'll go away."

"Or," North rumbled, as he folded a toddler-sized jumper with surprising delicacy. "I could have quiet word with little man-"

"No."

"No?"

Aster consigned a pile of socks to the 'irreparable' pile. Why would anyone donate a bunch of socks, without pairs, toes, or heels? Maybe they'd heard that the donation center took such things, shredded them, and sold the shreds to a recycling plant that turned 'em into cloth or something...

It'd explain the used underwear, for sure.

"One thing I've learnt from watching this sort of thing, Nick. More attention you show that lot, more encouraged they feel. And besides, your idea of a quiet word would land you in jail." Aster smiled, and patted North's forearm, just above the tattoos. "Ignore him. I'll bet you... what do you want?"


Aster winced. Great, Christmas. Why the bloody hell was North so fucking obsessed with that holiday, anyways? It'd gone from a holiday for family, celebration, and fun, to a commercialized excuse for buying useless nonsense. Oh, sure, kids had fun during the season; they got time off from school and prezzies under the tree. But really!
"What kind of picture?" he asked, warily. Which was only reasonable. Most 'holiday pictures' he got commissioned to do were sentimental tripe, overly gooshy scenes that would've given cavities to the Tooth Fairy herself.

"Me, as Santa." North looked around the sorting going on, barely contained in the donation center's small parking lot. "Maybe you could make print that can be used for holiday signs?"

Oh-hoh, now there'd be a proper challenge. Aster grinned to himself, already thinking about it. Not that he'd have to change much. "Going to doll yourself up to look like what I do?" he asked.

"Would be good and proper, yes?"

"Got yourself a deal. I'll do it even without the bet."

"Ah, good!" North clapped Aster on the back, and almost sent him face first into the bin of unsorted donations. "The sooner the better, I will be making rounds of children's wards at hospitals soon! For, ah..." he trailed off, and looked sad. "Children who will not be seeing next Christmas."

Ah. Yeah. Aster nodded, and straightened up. "Consider it done," he promised his friend.

And he forgot about Zach and his binoculars. For the moment, at least.

Sand.Man: It's getting annoying.

E.Aster.Bunny: What is?

Sand.Man: Did you pay attention to a word I sent?

E.Aster.Bunny: Trying to paint Jack. Little shit keeps walking through things. Like walls. What?

Sand.Man: You are a horrible person and no one likes you.

E.Aster.Bunny: According to my facebook I'm friends with over a thousand people. Take that back.

Sand.Man: Won't. And facebook doesn't count.

E.Aster.Bunny: Point. Gimme a second, little shit is trying to read over my shoulder.

Sand.Man: Trying?

Sand.Man: Bunny?

Sand.Man: You did mean Jack, didn't you?

Sand.Man: He can read?

E.Aster.Bunny: Yes. He can.

E.Aster.Bunny: Thank you for setting him off.

E.Aster.Bunny: Going to have to thaw out my bed now.

Sand.Man: Do I want to know?

E.Aster.Bunny: Pro'lvl not. What'd I miss?
Sand.Man: Your stalker's being annoying.


Sand.Man: Wimpy guy with glasses, probably gets described as 'nice' by coworkers and neighbors, the kind who feel entitled to things just because they're 'nice' and spineless.

E.Aster.Bunny: Don't recall anyone by that description.

E.Aster.Bunny: Though you probably mean Zach.

E.Aster.Bunny: Other than you mad lot, he's the only Seppo I know in the area, other than a few lawyers.

Sand.Man: He decided to follow North yesterday.

Sand.Man: Ran into me.

Sand.Man: Called me a child.

Sand.Man: Very annoying.


E.Aster.Bunny: Less attention you give him, sooner he'll vanish.

Sand.Man: HE CALLED ME A CHILD

Sand.Man: THAT CANT BE TOLERATED

Sand.Man: AND HE SITNKS OF BDA CONE


E.Aster.Bunny: You're forgetting how to spell.

Sand.Man: ILL CAM DOWN WHEN HE GOWESAWAY

E.Aster.Bunny: And basic grammar rules.

"So how long has it been now?" Tooth chased a dangling string of cheese with her tongue, and then took a large bite of her pizza. "Feels like forever," she said, through the full mouthful.

"Classy," Aster deadpanned. "Been State-side going on two months now, as you well know. Little over, actually. Why?"

"Has your little problem calmed down yet?"

Aster groaned. Inadequate defense against a headache or no, he took a large bite of his garden salad and chewed thoroughly. "Getting more erratic. You'd think he'd have settled down by now. I'm starting to think I'm gonna need a more permanent solution."

Like an exorcism.

Jack had gone from small pranks, to prowling the grounds day and night. Aster had, out of sheer self defense, started to automatically drop his mental shielding the moment he got home, only putting it
back up when he left. Of course, that meant he was aware of the damn ghost day and night, like a threatening snowstorm on the horizon, but better that then getting surprised whenever the eternal boy showed up to make cryptic comments, or just to glower.

Water pipes had frozen and burst, and Aster had repaired it himself rather than call someone in, who'd wonder at water freezing during what was supposedly the warmest spring the area'd had in a long while.

Warm, his arse. Bloody yanks and their bloody weather.

Aster hadn't slept through a full night since- well, since his furniture had been delivered. There wasn't anything wrong with the bed, or any of the rest of his stuff. No, the problem was Jack. He'd show up in Aster's bedroom, usually anywhere between midnight and three in the fucking morning, and then stare until Aster woke up.

If the Australian didn't wake fast enough, the damn bastard would freeze the bed sheets.

Aster refused to start sleeping in shorts or pants, simply because throwing the covers off and revealing the fact that he was nude, was still the fastest way to drive the buggering ghost-boy off.

Jack didn't seem to remember that fact from one night to the next, which was useful 'cause once he got run off with embarrassment he didn't show up until after dawn, but it meant he pulled his trick every single night, which was just a...

Aster huffed, and chewed his salad with rather more vigour than it required.

Between that and the black ice that met him every morning, well, Aster was getting very annoyed with his ghost.

"Well, you know you can rely on us," Tooth said. Aster looked up, almost surprised that she was still there. He'd gotten a bit... distracted, thinking about Jack.

"Yeah, well, full moon's coming up," he pointed out.

"One week. We'll meet up at North's, prepare the supplies..." Tooth finished off her slice of pizza. Aster looked down at his own plate, somewhat bemused to see a decided lack of salad. He must've been eating without realizing it again.

Aster shoved aside his empty plate and leaned back in his seat. "And once that's done, I'll be able to do some proper artwork again."

Tooth giggled. "You still owe me a commission."

"So I do," he agreed. "And I'll get you one soon as I don't have anyone looking over my shoulder making confused faces at the subjects."

"What subjects?"

Aster about jumped out of his skin. Tooth sent her cup of soda flying. Ice, and a bit of watery soda, splattered across the floor.

Zach pulled out a chair, completely oblivious to Aster staring in a strong mixture of disbelief, annoyance, and some unnamed emotion that had his fingers starting to itch with magic. Where the hell had the idiot come from? And why? And what the hell was he thinking?
"You're rather clumsy, aren't you?" he asked Tooth. "Your drink..."

Tooth glowered at him. Aster considered sitting back and watching the explosion, but some part of him cringed at the idea of public evisceration. "Right, Toothy," he said, and stood up. "Shall we get?"

Tooth raised an eyebrow, and stood up. "Yeah, we've got to hit a few stores before I go back to work." She turned and smiled, friendly-like, to the poor worker mopping up the spilled drink. "Sorry about that."

"Oh," the boy flushed bright red. "No, no problem, these things happen, accidents... uh, happen."

Aster did his very best not to smile.

"Aster, wait!" Zach grabbed for Aster's wrist, and succeeded partially; he caught the Australian's sleeve.

Aster looked from his sleeve, pinched tight between Zach's fingers, and then up at the man's face. "Let go," he said. After a second, he realized he'd just growled, and the little hole-in-the-wall pizza joint had just gone quiet.

Zach, showing all the survival signs of a city boy trying to catch his first Eastern Brown Snake, didn't let go. "I just want to talk to you."

Well, that expression just made Tooth flinch.

"You've been following me," Aster said, deadly quiet, deadly cold, and deadly calm. "Following my friends. Annoying them. That's stalking behavior. Let go of my sleeve. Now."

Very slowly, Zach did as he was told. His face was ashen, lips twisted up in what might have been worry, but his eyes... his eyes were angry.

"I could call the police, but that would be more time and effort spent on you than you deserve. You're following me after a single disaster of a bad date when I want nothing more than to forget you. You're a joke. You got everything about my country wrong. Now." Aster drew himself up to his full height, and folded his arms. "You will leave me alone. You will leave my friends alone. You will move on with your pathetic life. Do not follow me."

He added a bit of magical emphasis to the last part, and the idiot rocked backwards in his seat, eyes glazing over as the bit of spellwork took effect. It wouldn't last. Maybe a few minutes. Long enough, and next time Zach chose to show up, well...

He was giving his friends carte blanche to deal with the moron.

"C'mon Tooth," he muttered, and headed for the door.

When he got home, there was a ghost waiting in his entryway.

"Where were you?" Jack snarled, eyes sparking along the edges with blue light.

Aster paused, and glared at the ghost. "Out. With a friend."

"The man was there," Jack muttered, and walked circles around Aster, oblivious to walls and furniture as usual. "The man from before. That man. The man was there. You were with the man!"
"Gonna have to be more lucid than that," Aster muttered. He made his way to the kitchen. He felt like the apple cider he'd picked up a few days ago. Had a feeling the sweet might help balance out the sour he was currently feeling.

Jack continued to circle him, muttering, all while Aster got himself a glass of the cider. He leaned sideways against the counter, with a wary eye on the ghost.

Jack had switched to pacing, muttering to himself in a mix of current English, Old English, and some other language. Not Russian, he'd recognize Russian, thank you North, but possibly German? Or Danish, maybe...

The ghost suddenly spun, hovering in the air, eyes glowing a brilliant blue. "You were with him!" he shrieked, and the temperature suddenly plummeted.

Frost crawled over the walls, the floor, the table and the cabinets.

Pipes shrieked as the water in them froze, and then they burst.

And the glass of cider by Aster's elbow shattered.

Aster jerked away from the explosion of glass shards, and then turned his immediate attention to closing up the long gash in his arm caused by said shards. Only when he'd done with that did he turn to yell at the ghost, but the ghost-boy was gone.

That...

He marched over to the phone, tested it, and then dialed Tooth's number when it proved to still work. "That thing we were talking about earlier?" he said, before she could do more than say hello. "It's on. Next full moon. Hell if I'll put up with anymore of this shite."

Chapter End Notes

Just a reminder, Aster and his friends are rich, ergo they do not have day jobs. Well, Tooth does, but her hours are her own. (Yay child psychology and being one of the leading lights...) On the other hand, everyone needs to do something with their time- in Aster's case, volunteering for charity and doing art.

Oh yeah, Zach showed up too. Go figure.
Chapter Seven

If he hadn't been mind bogglingly rich, the past week would've bankrupted him.

Jack froze the pipes. Aster could actually count on one hand the number of times Jack had shown up and not frozen them. The bedsheets were shredded, completely, and needed to be replaced. The less said about Jack's ranting, raving, shrieking, and all out lunacy, the better.

As if that wasn't bad enough, that idiot Zach had not taken a hint. Aster knew, just knew, that was his fault. He'd spoken to the man, acknowledged him, and now Zach wanted more attention. Maybe after the exorcism his friends would help him with a little spell to erase him from the would-be writer's mind. That'd probably solve the little stalker problem right off.

And then there'd been buying the supplies, and preparing everything, for the exorcism. Well, on the one hand, there'd been the conversations with his friends while they worked. It'd been too long since he'd been able to talk openly about magic, with anyone. Even his family.

"He couldn't possibly have been this annoying before."

Tooth flipped through an old, handwritten book that only she could read. Not because it was in an odd language or anything, but because the handwriting was terrible. "Maybe it's because you're a mage."

Aster raised his eyebrows, but North was the one to ask the question. "What do you mean, Toothy?"

"Aster's a mage. A powerful one."

Yeah, there was that. It was a question of belief, of course. A mage had to believe in his powers, which so often appeared to run counter to the laws of physics. Water running uphill? Plants growing a thousand times regular speed, or moving to grab people? Fire burning without fuel, the wind itself picking someone up without harm and carrying them about?

Most people didn't believe in magic, and that disbelief was a boulder the mage had to shove aside any time he did his spellwork.

Aster had no problem shoving that boulder aside. Most of the time he never even noticed it. North, Tooth, Sandy, they were like that too, like him. Most other mages weren't, so they stuck to little things. Cantrips to keep milk from curdling, charms to help protect the home or their property, things like that. Subtle, that was the key for most mages.

Hell, most mages these days went into computers. When you got down to it, computers ran on bits, little electronic switches that were either on or off. Even with that boulder, it was stupidly easy to flip those bits. Mage-programmers were some of the best in the world, and Aster suspected the late Steve Jobs might've been gifted, at the very least. Probably not trained, but few mages these days were.

What was the point?

"What's my strength got to do with it?" he asked. He was in charge of making the ofuda. Japanese papers to bind spirits, at least this version was for that. It was boring, compared to his usual work, but there was something about using the brush, and the old fashioned ink he'd mixed up by hand, and the rice paper...
Well, maybe something to look into later.

"Most mages... Well, most mages don't make ripples," Tooth said, referring to how mage-energy radiated through the ether like body heat. Less powerful mages had less energy about them. The stronger ones... well, they had more, obviously.

"And?"

"Well, maybe he's drawing off some of those 'ripples' you cause. Ghosts aren't exactly normal, or at least his kind aren't. Maybe he was a mage too."

Huh. Well, it sounded plausible, at least to him. Tooth had studied more on the metaphysical side of magic, so to speak, so he'd take her word for it.

And then the week was over, and it was the night of the full moon.

His friends slipped over, one at a time, with the preparations for the exorcism split up between them. Aster had to admit, he was worried. Jack had been quiet so far, but... the ghost was powerful, able to freeze things during summer. What'd he do about an exorcism? Hell, he hadn't even tried encouraging the ghost to move on yet. Exorcisms were the spiritual equivalent of nukes. Rude to just jump straight to the really big guns.

"Bunny!" North put down his box of supplies. "Where will we do this?"

"Down near the... south? I think it's the south corner, near the back. Less chance we'll be seen."
Aster looked up at the sky. "Pity we can't do this shit indoors."

"Da, da, is true. You are worried?"

"Just seems rude, is all."

North pulled a piece of paper out of his pants pocket. "Here. I sent email to Manny."

Aster frowned. "Manny?" Ah, the paper was a print-out of an email. North had mailed someone with the handle "maninthemoon" of all things, with the ghost problem and asking if an exorcism was really a good idea. "maninthemoon", or Manny, had emailed back confirming that it seemed like the only option. "Who's Manny?"

"Manny is head mage of Americas," North said. "North and South. Is very old, very powerful. Very, very good. Some say he can see anything that is visible under moon itself. What he does not know of magic can be fit onto littlest toenail."

Fair enough. Aster nodded and picked up one of the boxes. "Let's go. Got a bit to do before the others get here."

Of course, he had to leave North to set up when Sandy and Tooth arrived, with their own boxes of supplies. Once the four of them were together, they got to work.

Being outside, there wasn't any point in laying out ground cloths or anything like that. Instead, they marked the ritual circle out with pale gravel, a light gray that was almost white. With a bit of kicking, the circle would vanish when they didn't need it anymore. More gravel, slightly darker in color, was used to mark out a simple, four pointed star. Aster was in charge of that; no one else managed it well enough.

They put four candles, one at each point of the star. Each point corresponded with the cardinal
directions of the compass; unlike most such ritual circles, the candles were all white, not colored. Each candle was as thick as Aster's wrist, a little over a foot high, and on top of a waist-high, brass candlestick.

Then they each took a spot. North was, all but inevitably, to the North. Sandy took West, Tooth took East. Aster took South. Each of them had bowls; small, palm-sized, and made out of hammered silver. Aster's bowl held a small bit of dirt from his garden. Tooth's held nothing, standing for air. Sandy had water; for all that Sandy preferred to use sand as a visualization tool in his magic, he was more like water, flowing and adapting and finessing. North's bowl held fire, which burnt without fuel.

The positioning of the elements with the cardinal directions was a bit awkward, as usually water would go to the north and fire to the south, with earth to the west... Really, only Tooth was in the 'proper' spot... but it worked. Aster felt the magic of the ritual circle click into place, like nothing else in his experience.

The four of them spoke together, though by the feel of things it wasn't strictly necessary. "The circle to close, protection to raise, let all be revealed to our gaze."

The poetry might've been bad, but it worked. Aster felt the magic solidify behind him, and between one blink and the next, a milky, semi-transparent force had ringed the quartet. The wall curved up at the top, to become a dome, and it anchored in the line of pale gravel that formed the circle. There. Whatever happened next, one thing was for certain. Until they took it down, Jack- once summoned- wasn't getting out.

Tooth looked up from her bowl, eyes a milky violet color, from corner to corner, without sclera or pupils to be seen. She looked into places the rest of them couldn't, found knowledge only she could bear. "Jackson Overland Frost," she intoned. "I name you. I Name you. By your Name I bind you. By your Name I know you. By your Name I Know you."

And then she looked startled, but it was much too late to pause and talk about whatever she'd Seen. Aster took up his part, lifted his little bowl until it was level with his diaphragm, and spoke. "Jackson Overland Frost. By your Name I summon you. By your Name I bind you. To this circle you come, in this circle you stay."

There was a sudden rush of ice-edged wind, a hint of whirling snow, and then the ghost boy hovered in the center of the circle, the center of the four pointed star, looking furious.

His eyes were solid blue, glowing like twin spotlights, to the point that whatever he looked at was illuminated faintly with the blue light. Sparks of energy, the same vivid shade of blue, crackled around his hands and arms, and dripped from his fingers. He was semi-transparent, though that seemed to be borne of rage instead of anything else.

"What the hell?" he shrieked, and the grass, the gravel, everything inside the circle promptly frosted over. Aster shuddered; the ice was cold on his skin, even if it was melting almost as quickly as it'd formed.

The ghost-boy began swearing and threatening at the top of his lungs, as more and more ice built up on the ground. Aster bowed his head, against the cold radiating from the boy as heat radiated from a furnace, against the steadily building wind, and against the rage and terror that beat against his mage senses. There was nothing sane in the ghost-boy now. Only the frenzy of a caged beast, insane and desperate.

They were doing the right thing. They were. He believed it. Had to believe it, because otherwise this
was torture, and he didn't have anything to do with torture-

Sandy began his part. Some might have thought a mute man would be... ineffective in a circle. Or that he'd be unable to sign with his hands holding the bowl. They would have been wrong.

Sandy was surrounded with glowing, golden lights, that flowed and twisted through the air, forming signs. It was as much calligraphy as it was American Sign Language, as much dance and art as speaking. The forms were the same as in the sign language, but simpler, purer, beautiful.

The little man invoked Jack's Name, invoked the cleansing power of water. Only when Jack had been cleansed of his rage, his desperation, and all other negative emotions, would it be possible for him to move on. And only water could do that.

The ghost-boy screamed louder, forgoing words for wordless screams of pure rage. Aster about fell to his knees at the intensity of the emotions.

North stepped forward, and lifted his bowl of fire high. He spoke, but Aster couldn't hear him over the sound of Jack screaming. Just- just screaming, a high, thin sound that drove out everything else, as ceaseless as the north wind's howls and bringing ice and death in its wake.

He fell to his knees. The bowl nearly tumbled out of his rapidly numbing hands, but he held tight. He had to hold; the bowl, the circle. But it was getting so cold. The frost wasn't melting on his skin anymore. Instead it was getting thicker, so his clothes were stiff with it, and his exposed flesh burnt with the cold before going numb.

He managed to look up. Tooth had staggered back, and clutched her bowl to her chest with one arm, while the other was raised to protect her face. Sandy was clearly in pain. The water in his bowl had slopped over the sides, and frozen, locking his hands against the silver.

North alone seemed unaffected by the cold, his bowl held high as he futilely tried to shout over Jack's screaming. Or- no, that wasn't Jack. That was the wind. Where had the wind come from?

And then everything went to hell. Hand basket not required.

Jack curled up into a ball, and for a second Aster thought it was actually working.

Only then Jack uncurled.

There was a sudden pressure, a blizzard in miniature contained by the circle. Aster screamed, must have, but he couldn't hear himself, couldn't even feel the vibration in his throat. So he might not have been screaming after all.

Aster held as long as he could, focusing entirely on the circle, on having to hold it. Jack would move on shortly. He would. He had to. They just had to hold until that moment.

They didn't hold.

*He* didn't hold.

Aster looked up just as Jack looked down, and for a brief second the ghost wasn't a raging monster, he was just a boy. A scared, confused boy, in pain and alone.

His hold on the circle faltered, and it shattered.

The wind picked up, and all but lifted Aster off his feet. It *did* lift Sandy up, and throw him back at
least a meter, maybe two. They all dropped their bowls—well; Sandy only dropped his when the ice,
on hitting the ground, broke and freed his hands.

The whirling snow was like nothing Aster had ever experienced before, discounting a few dust
storms when he'd visited West Australia. He couldn't see anything, not even his hand at the end of
his arm. Occasionally the snow would part enough for him to catch a glimpse of something else—a
tall bush, bent over in half by the wind and the weight of the snow—Tooth, once, and another time
North—and Jack.

Jack was somehow visible through the snow. He was the epicenter, the source, and no matter how
the wind threw everything around, Aster could still see the boy clearly.

Well. The exorcism hadn't worked. Now what?

There was a brief clear in the snow, just long enough for Aster to get a glimpse of the near wall on
the edge of his property.

And the body tumbling over it.

Everything went still. Everything. Where there had been howling wind was sudden silence. The
snow hung in place, frozen in midair. The only sounds were Aster, puffing like a steam engine,
North swearing—well, like himself—and Tooth coughing as she tried to catch her breath.

Sandy. Where was Sandy?

Oh, there. Aster blinked a bit, as a small hillock of snow suddenly shifted, and Sandy sat up, looking
irate.

And then he turned his attention to the person who'd just dropped in on their little party, and almost
groaned.

Zach. Why the bloody hells was Zach... Stalker. Right. Sanity went out the window when the idiots
started thinking with their dicks. What a fucking gobdaw.

Jack turned and looked at Zach. A clear layer of ice covered the boy, head to toe, and he continued
to drip blue sparks like water.

"You."

Zach looked up at Jack, and Aster saw the moment of realization.

Realization turned to horror, and Zach turned and clawed at the wall.

Jack snarled and flew forward.

North got there first.

He put himself between Zach and Jack, and held up twin sabers made out of white-hot flame. Jack
screeched, sounding like the wind howling through millions of tiny icicles at once. North swiped the
swords at Jack, obviously not even trying to connect, just drive the ghost back.

Behind North, Zach had gotten to his feet and was scrambling to climb up the wall. Aster looked at
him just long enough to see that the idiot was on his way out, and then looked back at the fight.

It wasn't going well for North. A large hump of snow lifted up and was flung forwards at a gesture
from the ghost-boy, and knocked North down.
Tooth raised one hand, and a miniature whirlwind sprang up in front of Jack, but he merely went around it. The delay had been long enough, though. Zach tumbled over the top of the wall just as quickly as he'd entered, and Jack hit the property line moments after.

Aster winced. Even considering Jack was murderously angry with them, with him, he still...

Jack was smoking, and the air smelt like ozone, when he pulled away from the airspace over the wall. It'd made him angrier, hitting the barrier.

Sandy and Tooth marshalled their strength, but they'd never practiced fighting with magic. North was still down, fighting and melting his way out of the snow cocoon Jack had trapped him in.

Which left Aster, he supposed. Well, he'd been lying about long enough.

Now if he could only make his fucking stupid limbs obey his will.

The cold felt sunk into his bones, but he staggered to his feet. The movement caught Jack's attention, and he stopped fending off Tooth's little whirlwinds and Sandy's glowing streamers. Instead, he went translucent, and wind and streamers went through him without effect.

The boy's glowing eyes were focused on Aster. The rage that twisted Jack's beautiful face was entirely for Aster; the betrayal that beat at his mage senses for him alone. It hurt, but he shoved the pain away. They'd tried to help the boy, the only way they really could. It hadn't worked, and they'd hurt him, and now what were they supposed to do?

Something. They had to do something.

And it was Aster's turn to do something.

"Why?" Jack asked, his voice almost to human-normal, and sounding betrayed. "Why would you do this?"

"We were trying to help you," Aster said. His chattering teeth didn't mangle the words too badly.

"Help?" Jack snarled like an enraged dog. "Help? You thought this was helping me?" He gestured at the circle, now utterly destroyed. The careful lines of gravel had been scattered, the candles blown out and knocked aside.

Jack snarled again, and then moved forward, seeming to walk through the air. "You didn't help," he said.

He paused, just in arm's reach, and glared at Aster. With Jack in midair, they stood eye to eye.

Aster saw his death in Jack's eyes.

Pity his magic had always been better with plants than anything offensive. Sure, he could use his magic to increase his strength, his endurance, his speed, but to combat a ghost the physical didn't mean much of anything.

Still. He didn't want to die.

So he punched Jack in the cheek, fully expecting his fist to go right through and piss Jack off even more.

Instead, he hit.
Jack was thrown backwards into the snow, and he actually hit it, leaving an impact. He sat up, blinking rapidly, and then lifted his hand to his slowly pinking cheek. "You hit me," he murmured, sounding utterly bewildered. "You..."

He paused, and looked up. The blue glow in his eyes was gone, the sparks dripping off him vanished as though they'd never been. Jack blinked several times, and opened and closed his mouth like a landed fish. "You touched me," he breathed, and looked around.

He looked horrified, but when he looked back at Aster, horror turned to wonder, and... hope?

"You touched me," Jack said again.

Then he faded away, out of sight, and out of the reach of Aster's mage senses. Leaving the quartet with a bunch of melting snow, bruises, and more questions than they could have possibly imagined.

Chapter End Notes

Yes guys, it's the exorcism chapter! Woohoo! Enjoy a little bit more mage theory with your angry-Ghost-Jack.
Chapter Eight

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Jack paced back and forth, dodging the remains of walls and fallen pieces of rafter on automatic. Every so often he didn't go far enough around, and he'd step into the burnt lumber. It was... horrible. Like whatever body part had gone through the thing had just exploded into thousands upon millions of bee stings. It hurt, so much.

Was that why he'd gone crazy? Was that why? He raked his hands back through his hair, fingers catching on tangles- and how could his hair get tangled when he was a ghost? How did that work, anyways? It didn't make sense- and then took two handfuls of hair and yanked, hard. The pain was real, and it wasn't like the going-through-stuff pain.

He ran through his mental inventory of curses, oldest to newest, and then turned and moved to a grimy window. Night had fallen, but he didn't feel tired.

When was the last time he'd felt tired?

Jack pressed the heels of his hands against his eyes, and fell to his knees. Everything hurt. Everything. He remembered... a nightmare, something that couldn't have happened but clearly had.

He was dead.

Oh. Oh, God. Please no. He was dead?

Had to be dead, he realized, and looked around the burnt-out room, too tired to feel properly horrified, but unable to feel anything else.

He was a ghost. He was... but that meant everything he remembered...

Jack shifted so he was hugging himself, and rocked back and forth on his knees. He remembered screaming, for years it'd felt like, as everyone ignored him. He remembered being walked through- oh God he remembered being walked through, and the pain- and ignored, and...

And he remembered that man. How long ago had it been? Jack had been so cold, and the man had let him in, and given him a drink...

And then Jack had woken up in Hell.

He rubbed his forehead with one hand. The man must have killed him. It was the only thing that made sense. But why? Why would anyone...? It made no sense. And then the man... had Jack been able to talk with him? Maybe, maybe not. He couldn't remember. But the man had left, and Jack had stayed? Clearly he'd stayed. Hadn't there been others? He thought he remembered others, but... everything was so blurred, so far away, in his memory, so he couldn't be sure.

After the man had been other people, hadn't there? A family. A rich family, because there'd been servants. Jack had tried talking to them, hadn't he? But it hadn't worked, so he'd started screaming, and that hadn't worked, but he couldn't touch them and...

He was shaking. Remembering was hard. It was like trying to move a huge boulder off himself, without help. He could do it, but- it was hard.
Jack went back to rocking, back and forth, until the shaking had calmed down. Better not to try to remember too hard, he decided. His head felt like it was splitting in two. Hurt.

He did remember, though, there'd been another man. A different man from the one who'd... killed him. God, he was dead, wasn't he? But the other man, he'd been... what, the father? There'd been a mother, and... two children or three? Maybe four? He'd beaten the children, that was the thing, and... Jack thought he remembered one of them dying.

He growled, and ice began to spread from where he knelt. The ice was his, he knew that, the same way he knew that he'd somehow set the fire that had burnt down the house. Because the man had killed a child. Because... yes, that was right, because the father had murdered one of his children, because the... the boy, yes, the boy had been- something had been wrong with his mind, he'd remained a child in his head even as his body aged. And Jack had felt protective of the boy, hadn't he? Because... because the boy hadn't seen Jack, but he'd known Jack was there.

And then the father had killed the boy.

So Jack had set the house on fire.

"Enough," he told himself. Enough remembering. What little he had was... horrible. And the rest was a dark fog of pain and rage, and he didn't want to remember that.

He'd done... things. People had died. Because of the fire or because of the ice he'd created where there shouldn't be ice. Because... And there'd been other things, but he couldn't remember it all, and didn't want to, because...

"Enough!" he said again.

There were other memories, more recent ones. Of... What was his name, Bunny? That didn't seem right.

But that was the word that stuck in his mind when thinking of the most recent man to live here. Bunny... Bunny was different. He saw Jack, he spoke to Jack...

"He touched me." Jack cradled his jaw with one hand, and sat back on his heels. "No one's ever touched me, not in so long..."

Bunny was different. And he'd spoken with Jack. Those memories were disjointed too, but they were still bright and clear. Memories of talking, of watching Bunny cook on the funny stove, or draw in his books. Memories of playing pranks, and other memories of yelling.

Jack winced away from those memories. He... he'd been crazy, that's what it was. He'd been crazy, and then Bunny had punched him and everything had snapped back into place. That was the only explanation. Being... being dead hurt, and he'd forgotten that other people could be hurt too, but he remembered now, he did!

"I do remember," he whispered. He felt more like himself than since he'd died. That was good, right?

He shivered, and got back to his feet, and started pacing again. He needed to talk to Bunny. Bunny- and there'd been three others, Bunny's friends? He didn't remember their names, though, if he'd ever known them- Bunny had been trying to help. Isn't that what he'd said? He'd been trying to help Jack, even though the... the exorcism, that's what it was called... it'd hurt, but it had been meant to help.

So why hadn't it? Jack held up his hands, and studied his palms, and then turned his hands over and stared at the backs. It made no sense. He was a ghost. Exorcisms sent ghosts on to the afterlife. It
should have worked.

He needed to talk to Bunny.

But first he needed to work up the courage to just leave the room, never mind the manor.

"So." Tooth set the bowl of lukewarm water in front of Sandy. The man immediately put his hands in the water, and winced. Numb fingers waking back up with the painful feeling of pins and needles, Aster assumed.

"So?" North repeated.

"That happened."

They nodded. What else was there to say?

Aster felt safe in judging his friends were just as tired as he was. Working magic was hardly the easiest thing in the world, whatever stories and movies showed. Those games that had magic cast from hit points had it closest, although even that wasn't quite right. Aster felt like he'd been hit by a steamroller, which had then flattened him out a half-dozen times. The others looked about as bad.

North had set his beard on fire at some point, so it was now six inches shorter and a sooty black on the bottom. Tooth just looked exhausted; moving air was probably about as easy as moving water, which was to say, it was fucking hard as hell. Sure, air and water both wanted to move, but making 'em move against the way they wanted to...

Aster frowned to himself. He was pretty sure his train of thought had gone for a detour through scenic countryside.

At any rate, Tooth looked knackered. Sandy looked like he was a few minutes short of losing fingers to frostbite, though as a mage he could encourage his body to heal faster, and more thoroughly, than a normal person could.

The Australian looked down at his own hand. He'd punched a ghost. He'd- that wasn't supposed to be possible. "They're supposed to be non-corporeal," he said, and realized after a moment he'd spoken aloud. Hadn't exactly meant to.

North got up from the table, moving slow like every joint hurt, and rummaged through a few drawers until he found the kitchen scissors. Then he sat back down and began trimming his beard. "That is not a normal ghost," he said, accent halfway between Russia and Brooklyn.

"No," Tooth agreed.

They sank into a fugue of exhaustion, at least until Sandy straightened up and began forming his light shapes, in lieu of removing his hands from the water.

"Yeah," Aster agreed. "We didn't screw up. Must be something we didn't account for."

But what? What could they have missed? He looked over at Tooth, but she said she never remembered much from those kinds of rituals. They all knew Jack's Name by now, but anything else she'd picked up on was gone.

Tooth shook her head. "I don't know," she murmured. "There was something, but... mist, shadows... I can't remember."
"Perhaps it will come back," North said, and set the scissors down. "Such has before, yes?"

"I don't think it's the same thing at all." She frowned down at her hands. "Those other times... I was always looking at something that had... had affected more than one person."

"Pretty sure using magic to study for history exams is cheating," Aster mumbled.

Tooth waved one hand in dismissal. "Oh, probably, but it isn't as though I was trying to get a degree in the subject."

Eh, true.

Sandy raised his eyebrows, and suggested blood ties.

"Doubtful, at this point," Aster pointed out. "I mean, what, closest tie would be grandkids? After that I don't think it'd be close enough, would it?"

"Depends on whether or not first cousins married, maybe." Tooth made a face.

North muttered something about inbred European nobles. Aster thought about first cousins marrying—ugh. No. Very tempting to copy North's comment.

"Let's assume not, just for my mental well being," he said.

"And even if..." Tooth wrinkled her nose briefly. "Far enough from the source, so to speak... and Jack doesn't look old enough to have had children, does he?"

"Depends," North and Aster said at the same time. Aster mimed taking his hands off the wheel.

"If very old ghost, though how he still is here if so, I do not have first idea. But if old ghost, could be from time when marrying young, yes? Especially if needed by the family. So, could have had children, yes. Likely to, perhaps not."

"So, possibly a child or two in his name, but most likely nieces and nephews," Tooth summarized.

"That doesn't feel right, though."

"Because, even if you've got the disturbing first cousin marriage, nieces and nephews aren't close enough, past the first generation," Aster pointed out. He was starting to feel a little better. Well enough to get up and fetch out four bottles of beer. Nothing too heavily alcoholic; he, like his friends, drank for the taste, not intoxication.

Although how North claimed to drink that rotgut vodka for the taste, Aster had no idea.

There was the expected murmur of thanks when he handed the drinks out, and a quiet pause while they all took their first few sips. Well, that was good. Aster nudged his bottle a bit further away from him on the table. Way he was feeling right now, and on an empty stomach, the beer would hit much faster, and a lot harder, than normal.

"Well, what about something else, then?" Tooth asked. "What if he is a mage? I mean, with the snow?"

What the hell kind of mage could control snow? Aster took a sip of his beer in thought. Snow and wind, actually. Water and air, and plenty of it. Because Jack was a ghost? Rumor had it ghosts created cold spots just by being energy sinks, so that part wasn't so strange, but actually making snow? Then whipping it around with the wind? That was... harder, yeah. He could maybe see Jack
"Couldn't be trained," he said. "Y'know the story, rank beginners are the ones doing the impossible, 'cause they don't know it can't be done."

North frowned at him. "Why do you think Jack would be untrained?"

"That blizzard. Miniature blizzard. Any of us willing to try that?"

Tooth snorted, and then blushed. Sandy shook his head, and signed his explanation.

"Right. Who'd be stupid enough to try? Everyone knows a mage is strongest only in one element."

Which was absolute bunk, of course. It wasn't a question of strength, but of preference, or that was how Aster had been raised.

Others had been taught different, from what little he knew. And anyways, preference did become strength. That belief thing again.

"True," North murmured. "So, possibly mage. Could a mage ghost be able to fight against exorcism?"

"Probably," Aster said, once Sandy had put in his own two cents worth of enthusiastic agreement. "But I dunno if a mage ghost could've held against everything we tossed against him. I mean, he held to the bitter end, and then shattered the circle."

Or Aster had failed to hold his end of the circle. One or the other.

North cleared his throat. "What of focus?"

"Who's focus?"

The faux-Russian rolled his eyes, and took a healthy swig of his beer. "Focus for ghost. Like doll, or chair, or... building, even."

Aster snorted, but then gave it some thought. He shared a glance with Sandy. "Maybe. Instrument that killed him? Something he valued in life?"

"It could be anything," Tooth pointed out. "But... Maybe a combination of things? If he's a mage, and had a focus..."

"Aw, hell." Aster set his beer down with a thunk. "We had the ritual to strip his ties to his rage and all, and to the world, but we didn't remove any ties to a focus or anything. Damn it."

Although... maybe the exorcism had at least helped? Jack certainly hadn't gone aggro after the punch to the face; the exact opposite, in fact. He hadn't calmed down until getting hit.

And Aster was maybe getting a headache, thinking about having touched a ghost, but... Well. It'd clearly happened.

"Do you feel safe enough to sleep alone?" North asked.

Sandy looked up and offered North's bed as an alternative. North could sleep on the couch, apparently.

Aster chuckled at the ensuing argument. "I don't get those two," he confided in Tooth. "But they're
good friends."

"See if you say the same thing when you're roped into North's Christmas preparations," Tooth murmured back. "But really, do you think you'll be fine, considering?"

"I'll ward my bedroom, at least. Should be good for a day or two. We'll see after that." Aster looked down at his hands. "I touched him. Worst comes to worst, I'll kick Jack's ass."

He didn't want to. Jack looked like a kid. But if he had to? Yeah. He would.

Hopefully Jack would snap back to sane, if scatterbrained. Because Aster wasn't sure how he'd live with himself if he did have to beat the boy up.

Chapter End Notes

So, now you know why Jack reacted that way to Zach. Resemblance to bad guys of the past is not good for your health, apparently. And theories as to why the exorcism didn't work! Guess which one's right!
Chapter Nine

See the end of the chapter for notes

It took three days before Jack showed up again, and when he did, it was bright and early in the morning, sitting at Aster's kitchen table.

The boy was huddled up on a chair, toes curling around the edge of the seat, arms wrapped around his knees. He looked up when Aster came in, an expression of hopeless despair on his face.

Well. Aster swallowed, hard, and turned to the fridge, stalling for time. Jack seemed different. For one thing, he... well, he wasn't walking through anything, and he wasn't looking through anything either. Before, there'd always been a kind of disconnect, like his eyes weren't focusing properly. Seeing things that hadn't been in place for decades, maybe. And his pupils had always been shrunk to the size of pinheads. Now... well, if Aster hadn't known any better, he'd have said that was a real boy sitting on the chair, looking half-starved.

He pulled out the carton of orange juice, and took a swig directly from the box.

Jack cleared his throat. "I think you're supposed to use a glass."

"Only one that drinks this stuff. Not afraid of me own germs, mate."

The ghost looked confused. "What's a germ?"

Aster studied him over the carton of orange juice. "Never mind that. What brings you 'round?"

Welp, that was the best 'sorrowful puppy in pouring rain' expression he'd seen... ever. Apart from actual puppies in rain, that is. "I'm dead, aren't I?"

Aster nodded. "Yeah. You are."

Jack closed his eyes, and rested his forehead against his knees. "I... I hurt people, didn't I?"

"Can't say. Wasn't here. But..." Aster set the orange juice aside, and pulled out the bread. Toast sounded good. He hadn't ever set toast on fire. At least, not yet. "Maybe. I don't know. Normal people can't see ghosts, or hear them, or touch them."

"That explains... but you can see me."

"Not normal, mate. I'm a mage." Jack looked confused. "Magic. I can cast spells and stuff."

"You're a witch?" the boy asked sounding vaguely alarmed.

"No. Mages and witches are different." Question of religion these days, but according to family history, witches had been more like herbalists than using actual magic. "Anyways, my friends and I are mages, and mages, like cats, can see ghosts."

"And touch them," Jack murmured, and pressed his fingers to his cheek.

Aster considered mentioning that he hadn't known physical contact was possible, and then kept quiet. He busied himself preparing his toast instead.
"Aster?"

"Mm?" Where'd his vegemite get to this time? Aster kept a wary eye on his... companion... while hunting through the cupboards.

"There was a guy," Jack said. "Did I... hurt him?"

"You mean Zach?" Jack looked confused, so Aster elaborated, "Gobdaw that showed up during the, uh, exorcism."

"Yeah, him." The boy still looked confused, but probably more at the slang than anything.

"Naw, you didn't hurt him. He got over the wall- an' he shouldn't have dropped in, first place. Why'd you go off at him?"

Jack picked at the edge of the table. Interestingly enough, his hand didn't go through the wood. "He looked like a guy I'd seen. He'd killed..." He paused to clear his throat. "He killed a boy. A century ago? But... I liked the boy. I think."

Oh. Aster spread vegemite on his toast, and took a few bites before replying. "I'm sorry to hear that. Zach's an idiot, but I don't think it's in him to kill anyone."

"I'm glad he's not hurt, then."

Conversation stalled at that point. Aster ate slowly, as much to have something to do as because he was hungry. Jack certainly wasn't any help, picking away at the table edge in silence.

It couldn't last, of course. Jack looked up from his table picking, expression woebegone. "Why did you try to exorcise me?"

For a moment, Aster thought the boy had said 'exercise him', and he choked on his bite of toast. "Uh. Well. You were a bit aggro, ya know? Kinda causing trouble."

"I don't remember." Jack went back to picking at the edge of the table. "I'm sorry."

Aster finished his toast, and took the plate over to the sink. He considered washing it, but... nah, not just yet. "Why didn't it work?"

"Huh? Are you out of dish soap again?"

Ghosts should not sound that annoyed at a common housecleaning gaff. "No, no. The exorcism. Why didn't it work?"

He turned around in time to see Jack shrug, and uncurl a bit. "Don't know," he admitted. "It... it hurt, though. Are exorcisms supposed to hurt?"

"Not from everything I've heard." Aster leaned back against the counter, and folded his arms. "But... it's hard, even for other mages, to share info. Even with the 'net and all."

Jack sat properly on the chair, bare feet thumping faintly against the floor. Aster tilted his head a bit to the side, just so he could squint at them. "A fish net?"

Aster left off studying those long, narrow feet with their delicate toes. "Huh? Oh, ah, yeah, you wouldn't know about the internet, would you? C'mon."

"Why?" Jack stood up, though.
"What else have I got to do with my day?"

Jack shrugged at that, and followed Aster up to the office.

The internet was insane, and Jack had to retreat to the manor because his head hurt.

The very idea seemed impossible, but it was right there. As real as the grass, or the trees, or the rat that just skittered through Jack's foot.

Jack made a face at the last, and hopped up onto a railing. Or, well, the remains of one. It was odd. He could still see the way things had used to look like, and if he let his eyes go out of focus... He was pretty sure he could still feel the old stuff, as if fire and neglect hadn't destroyed most of the railing, the floor, and the walls nearby. He was pretty sure that was part of why he could walk through walls- besides, of course, being a ghost.

It was easier to wonder about the impossibility of the internet, than question his own existence. He was dead.

It got easier to think, to say, every time he formed the words. He was dead.

Jack breathed slow and even, even though he didn't think he had to. But... he had a heartbeat, still. He felt it. And when he stopped breathing, well, he didn't seem able to hold his breath any longer now that he was dead. He was pretty sure that wasn't right.

Internet. Think about the internet. Not about a pulse he shouldn't have, or how it was easiest to walk through the new walls instead of the old ones.

Jack turned, and considered the drop down to the first floor. The railing didn't creak under his weight, but he hadn't expected it too. If he stepped off the railing, dropped down to the floor below, he wouldn't get hurt. He knew that already.

So why did his heart start to beat faster at the thought? In fear?

"This is stupid," he muttered, and started walking back and forth along the railing. There was a stretch, about five feet or so wide, where the fire had destroyed the wood and so there was nothing to walk on. But, if he let his eyes go out of focus enough...

He could feel the wood, sanded smooth and polished every morning by one of the maids, beneath his feet. He could see the faint touches of frost that spread from his toes. He could-

-make out the fire-burned edge of the landing, nothing under his feet, and then gravity asserted itself in a painful way.

Jack lay on his back, and wheezed for breath he didn't need. Probably didn't need. His body disagreed.

Okay. That was enough of that. Brooding had clearly gotten him nowhere but on the first floor, somehow making an imprint in the dust. What was Aster up to? It was almost dawn.

Jack couldn't remember the last time he'd made Aster shriek with shock and fury at a hot shower turned suddenly cold. It seemed appealing. Maybe he'd do that.

Once he figured out how to move again, that is.
"Jack! You evil little shite!" Aster tumbled out of the shower, and managed to catch himself before cracking his head off the floor. "What the hell!"

The ghost blinked innocently. "I have no idea what you're talking about, Aster."

"Arsehole!"

"I... can guess what that means, I think..."

He snatched a towel off the rack, and wrapped it around his waist. "What, you like taking a gander at my dangly bits? Cut with the ice water, Frostbite!"

"No?" Jack looked confused. "I mean, no, I don't like- Hey, where are you going?"

"To get dressed!" Since his nice, warm shower had turned into freezing hell with the touch of a ghostly finger against the taps. Aster shivered, the cold water beading on his skin and playing hell with his skin's sensitivity. *God,* but he hated the cold!

Jack followed along behind, like an overly cheerful dog or something. He *bounced* while he walked. Even as annoyed as he was, Aster did notice that Jack didn't go through any walls. The closed door didn't stop him, unfortunately.

"Do you not understand the subtle message in a closed door?" Aster deliberately dropped the towel, and then looked over the pile of clean clothes to see what was on offer.

Not a lot. Looked like he'd have to do the laundry at some point. Damn.

"It's not that subtle," Jack pointed out. Then he flopped down on Aster's bed. The pillow and blankets actually depressed under his weight. Aster couldn't help but stare.

"Are you just going to wander around naked all day?" The ghost-boy deliberately looked Aster over. Aster blamed an overactive imagination and unsatisfied libido for the idea that Jack's gaze might've lingered about the hip area. "Also... why would you get tattoos on your hips?"

Oh. So his gaze had lingered. Just not on anything fun. "Because I wanted to?" He turned and began rummaging through the clean clothes. Jack made an odd sound.

"And the rest of them?" he asked.

Aster smirked. He'd gotten tattoos on his shoulders, down his back, and on his hips, in little bits and pieces so it didn't hurt all together at the same time. "Same reason, mate."

"They're kind of interesting, actually. I think I remember the native tribe nearby having similar designs on their blankets? Maybe?"

"These are inspired by the Aborigines of Australia." Aster tapped one shoulder marking. "But yeah, probably the same idea."

Jack made a thoughtful sound, and when Aster glanced back over his shoulder, the ghost was staring up at the ceiling. He made a very pretty picture. Very pretty. Aster's mouth went dry.

It had everything to do with being an artist and nothing at all with his sexual preferences. Was it his fault Jack just about embodied everything, physically, that Aster found enticing? The boy- and he had to remember that, Jack was a *boy*- was slight, but not fragile looking, not feminine in appearance. Elfin, though; all he needed were the pointy ears and a bit of greenery in his hair.
Aster swallowed, hard, and heard his throat click. "Jack?" he asked.

"Yeah?" The boy blinked, and looked over at him. "What, still not dressed?"

Mm? Oh, right. Pants in hand, should be on legs. Aster quickly got to it. "Remember I asked if I could sketch you?"

Jack shrugged. "Maybe? I don't really... have clear memories of before you hitting me, sorry."

"Oh." Aster found a clean enough shirt, and pulled it on. "Well, would you mind if I did? Right now?"

"No, I wouldn't mind. Do you want me to do anything?"

"Just lie there, as you were," Aster said, as he headed out of the room. "I'll be right back."

He could already envision the picture. An elfin prince, reclining on a weathered, stone altar in the middle of a twilight forest, while his fursona, Bunnymund the Pooka, leaned over him to kiss the prince awake...

It felt a bit odd to imagine that sort of thing about a boy he wasn't dating, never mind about a ghost, but... as long as he kept it to art, it'd be fine.

Chapter End Notes

This chapter is dedicated to Taco, who deserves ALL THE HUGS. ALL OF THEM. AND CAKE AND BALLOONS AND TO LIVE CLOSER SO I CAN KIDNAP HER AND KEEP HER IN MY CLOSET. -cough- Or something. Yeah... MOVING ON NOW.

So yeah, Aster has no idea what 'keeping house' entails, but he also hates cleaning so... Man must have the best immune system ever, considering he's growing mold on his plates and stuff.

And I got a rejection letter for my manuscript. Time to edit and try again with another publishing house!
Chapter Ten

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

If Aster had known how much things would change in just a week, he probably would've gone out and gotten a prescription for Valium. Or at least more beer. Something that'd let him stay calm while waiting for the other shoe to drop.

It was Jack's fault, that's what it was. Not that he was being the hoon from before the exorcism- well, apart from making Aster's hot showers cold enough he'd bleed ice cubes after- but he was being frighteningly well-behaved.

And there. Always there. He'd show up just after Aster'd had his brekkie, and hang around until just after dinner. Every so often- which meant every other minute- he'd scuttle forward in a piss-poor excuse for stealth and brush a hand over Aster's shoulder, or down his arm, or just touch his fingers to Aster's back and it was driving him insane. Rather attractive young man who happened to tick off the boxes for all Aster's kinks? Touching him frequently?

Yes. Insane.

The only time he got any peace was when he was either on the computer or watching something on TV. Jack considered both devices to be 'demon-boxes', although by the wry twist of his mouth, he was at least halfway accepting of them. Just not interested. Yet, Aster figured. Jack was as curious as three cats, had somehow managed to wiggle the recent Bunnymund family history out of him, and was practicing making himself solid enough to pick up things.

And move them.

Which meant Aster found everything from towels to his dirty underwear trailing in a line down the hallway, to the stairs, down the stairs, through the living room, to the small utility room with the washer and dryer. When he confronted Jack about it, the ghost had laughed and then vanished on him, with no explanation.

He also hid Aster's sketchbooks- in his study. The shoes were impossible to find, until Aster tried looking in the entryway. The dishes weren't being cleaned, but he'd had to buy an entirely new set because Jack had managed to lift, drop, and break every single plate, bowl and glass he'd owned.

When he'd complained to Sandy and North, his two friends had laughed at him, the arseholes, and then Sandy had accused him of being a slob and North had suggested Jack was trying to clean, and Aster had left in a huff because he was friends with crazy people.

He wasn't a slob!

Tooth wasn't any help, either. Not only did she laugh at him, she agreed with North. And, to add insult to injury, said she was going to contact his mother and tell her he wasn't going to die of food poisoning after all.

"Don't you dare!"

"She's been calling me at least once a week just to make sure you're not dead," Tooth pointed out. "She suspects you might not answer if she calls you."
"What're you even doing up that late, anyways?"

"She calls very early in the morning, her time, which means I only have to stay up a little past my bedtime to talk to her."

"Why are you even talking to my mother anyways?"

"Because the last time you washed dishes, you were twelve? And I'm certainly not washing dishes for you."

Aster hissed in frustration. "You can't tell her about Jack."

Tooth smiled, slow and evil. "Watch me."

So he'd had to bite the bullet, stay up late, and Skype call his mother before Tooth could start lying to her.

And somehow he'd had to explain that no, he didn't have a boyfriend, he had a ghost, and then his mother had gotten the strangest idea that Jack was courting him...

He'd finally given up and agreed with everything she was saying, which meant she'd gotten him to agree to send her an oil painting of Jack, because she couldn't see ghosts and she wanted to know what 'my son's American boyfriend looks like'- as if he had boyfriends of other nationalities!

Hell, as if he had a boyfriend at all! When he most certainly did not!

"Just- Tooth's a lying liar who lies," he warned his mother. "Don't believe anything she says."

His mother, dearly beloved and all that nonsense, laughed and hung up on him.

By the end of the week, pretty much everyone he cared about had laughed at him, accused him of being a slob, and at least in Jack's case, managed to dye his underwear pink by putting the whites in with the reds, with hot water.

He'd also discovered where his would-be stalker had vanished to; there was a clinic that served people with 'stress disorders', which was a nice way of saying Zachary had checked himself into a genteel mental hospital, with talk therapy instead of a pill diet. Tooth had hit him when he'd described it that way, but whatever. Zach had been annoying. Aster would be as nasty about it as he wanted to.

Aster had also, through the week, spent far too much time sketching Jack. Mostly from memory and a healthy dose of imagination, because the images he sketched weren't... the sort of thing Jack would pose for. Oh no. Far too many of them involved a lack of shirts, pants, underwear... Far, far too many had his fursona wrapped around the young man's image, touching...

Instead of working on the commissions he'd promised to do, instead he'd been indulging in his fantasies, and there was no excuse. None at all.

A week to the day after the exorcism-that-didn't, Aster made himself pull up the half-done sketches for Tooth's commission.

And then spent three hours staring at the computer screen, unable to make his brain work.

"What's the demon-box showing today?" Jack asked. He was perched on an arm of the sofa, on his toes, and leaning out too far to be normal. Gravity should have grabbed him before now.
"Mythbusters," Aster admitted. He needed a daily dose of explosions. The science show was good for that. And sometimes you even learnt something, like how toilet paper could be braided into a rope and used to escape from jail, or just how many things Hollywood got wrong. Physics didn't bend like that in real life.

"I don't... huh?" For the first time Aster could remember, the ghost-boy turned and looked at the TV, instead of pretending utter terror. "Uh... is something wrong with his face?"

With...? After a moment, Aster figured it out. "Never seen anyone but Caucasians, have you?" he asked, and patted the couch cushion. "Siddown, ya little terror. Nothing's wrong with Grant, he's Japanese."

Jack looked confused, but he sat down. "Japanese? What's that?"

"Someone coming from Japan." Aster smirked as the boy's confusion grew worse. "I'll show you a world map later, Frostbite."

Jack nodded, and turned back to watching the show. He made several confused noises, but for the most part stayed quiet- until the first explosion. He jumped and squeaked, and shifted several inches closer to Aster. And then, when the show switched to the Build Team testing gun myths, he repeated the squeak-shift with every gunshot. By the third commercial break, Jack was leaning against Aster's side, and Aster had wrapped one arm around the boy's shoulder, and it was really hard to remember he was cuddling a ghost.

A ghost, and a young man who wouldn't welcome Aster kissing him during the commercials. Really wouldn't. Clothing, and the occasional historic-sounding words, said Jack had been born before being gay was something other than illegal. So no, very much, Jack would not appreciate being kissed by another man.

"What... what's a Honda?" Jack asked, and Aster spent the rest of the commercial break explaining cars and different brands, as best as he could in the space of a minute.

And then it was back to explosions and guns with a ghost cuddled up against his side.

It went like that for the rest of the show, with Jack staying mostly quiet as he watched, and asking questions during the commercials. Like- what was a cell phone? Why did women go crazy for a bottle called 'axe'? How did they get the people inside the demon-box and why didn't they starve to death?

"You little shit," Aster said, half in awe at that last question. "You know there's no people in there!"

Jack blinked innocently up at him. "Of course I don't know there's no people in there."

"Bastard," he said, casually. Jack stiffened and made to pull away. For some reason, though, Aster's grip was tight enough to prevent it, ghost or no.

"I'm not a bastard," the ghost muttered, and ice started to form on his cheeks.

"Not that kind of bastard." How to explain. "Aussies- and yes, I'll explain that, I'm from Australia, I'll show you the map later- tend t' call each other bastards. No harm meant."

"Like..." Jack chewed on his lower lip. Aster watched far too intently. "Like 'my man' or...?"

"Yeah, pretty much. Alright for friends to call each other bastards, but... intent matters."
Jack nodded, and settled back against Aster. "Alright. That's okay, then."

Aster nodded, and resisted the urge to press a kiss to Jack's hair.

Not for the first time, he had to wonder if there was something wrong with him.

Jack shifted uneasily, waiting on the couch for Aster. The living man had gone to get a book or a map, or a book of maps, leaving the ghost behind. He'd wanted to grab hold of Aster's oddly textured shirt, cling, and beg him not to go.

He hadn't, of course. That sort of behavior was rude. But he'd wanted, the same way he'd wanted-needed- the feel of Aster's arm over his shoulders. Well, no, he'd wanted a lot more than just the arm over his shoulders; Jack had wanted to slide his fingers over Aster's heavily muscled bicep, wrap his hands over the equally muscled shoulder, and breathe in the scent of warm skin and living human. Press up against Aster's side, close enough to feel the man's heartbeat in his own chest, to be forced into swaying back and forth that little bit as Aster breathed.

Jack shivered, and tucked his hands under his armpits. He felt cold. He'd been warm when Aster had been touching him, but now he was alone and the cold was sneaking back in.

Every bit of skin that had felt the pressure of that warmth and life- and how did it all work? He was dead, he shouldn't feel anything- tingled, fighting the cold. At least, those bits of skin were going numb slower than the rest of him.

Aster came back, and Jack felt pathetically grateful.

"Cold, Jackie?"

He shook his head. Well, yes, he was cold, and it hurt, but it was because he was dead. When Aster sat back down beside him, he shifted until he could press up against him. The living man's warmth began to sink into him again, and Jack uncurled the slightest bit.

"Right." Aster set a book on his lap. It was very big, and the cover was shiny and colorful. Jack reached over and felt the odd, slick surface, traced his fingers over the odd symbols he thought were... letters? He couldn't remember, but they looked familiar.

"World Atlas," Aster said, and tapped the cover. "That's what the letters spell, if ya wanta know."

"I don't... I can't read. Anymore," Jack said. He wasn't sure why he'd clarified it. He wasn't sure if he'd ever been able to read.

"It's easy enough," Aster promised. "You'll pick it up quick. So." He opened the book to the first glossy page, and then to the next. And then there were maps.

Aster pointed at each country and named them, and Jack followed along, fingers tracing the borders shown in thick, black lines. His skin was very pale next to Aster's; it made the Australian look very dark.

"Mind," Aster said, and gave Jack a quick, sideways hug that left him breathless. Need for breath be damned. "I can tan darker than this, but this country doesn't have a proper summer. Bit chilly, even during their so-called heat wave."

Jack wondered at that. He couldn't imagine anyone with skin darker than Aster's was.
And then Aster turned the page, and there was a larger map of the country Africa, and pictures of people. But what people! Jack had a hard time believing his eyes, at first; the handsome men and women with their dark brown skin seemed as mythical as gryphons and dragons, but the pictures weren't drawings. They were something called 'photos', a way of capturing images of real things with a machine called a 'camera'. Which made the pictures real, and the people in them real.

"But... why are they so brown?" he asked, and touched one picture. The woman was smiling, her teeth very white against her dark skin. He wasn't sure if beautiful was the right word. Handsome, though; he could call her handsome. She looked strong, and confident, and the odd clothing that revealed so much of her skin was bright orange and yellow against her skin and the dusty colors in the background.

"Protection from the sun," Aster explained. "They get more of it in a season than America gets in a year."

"If they move from Africa..." His tongue wanted to stumble over the new word, so he said it slowly. "Do they pale?"

"Nope. Born this way, stay that way." Aster paused, and looked oddly at Jack. "That a problem, mate?"

Jack shook his head, and turned the page. His fingers began to slide through the paper, but with a bit of concentration that stopped. "No," he said, and looked at the new pictures. More people, and odd animals that looked familiar enough to be incredibly strange. Some of the people in the pictures were white- Caucasian, Aster called it- and others were a pale brown, or even darker than the people on the first page, their skin nearly black. "Why would it be a problem?" he asked. "They're- they're used to it all, aren't they? Differently-colored people?"

"Yeah," Aster said slowly.

"What- what about before? When they first met wh- Caucasians?" Jack looked up from the book. "What did they think of us?"

Aster shrugged one shoulder, the one Jack was leaning against. "Dunno. Wasn't there. What do you think?"

"They're very handsome," Jack said, almost at once. "But they're showing a lot of skin. It doesn't seem decent."

At that, Aster started laughing, and it took several minutes before he stopped.

"Their country's a lot hotter than America," he said, when he'd calmed down a bit. "Hottest day of the year here would be a cool winter's day for them, I figure."

Jack wrinkled his nose. "I like the snow," he said. "I don't want to visit Africa." Ignoring the fact that he couldn't leave the manor or its grounds.

"To be honest," Aster said, "I don't particularly want to visit either. If I want to go somewhere hot, dusty, and with a bunch of nasty critters wandering about, I'll just go home and kip at my parents'."

Then he turned the page and showed Jack the map of Asia.

There were so many different Asian countries. And so many different people! Now he saw what Aster had meant, when he said the man "Grant Imahara" was Japanese. Jack wasn't sure the word for the Asian people were handsome; their narrow eyes made them look sleepy and content, to him,
the kind of slow, quiet pleasure in a good day that made him want to smile just thinking about it. When he said as much to Aster, he got another hug in response.

And on through the countries they went, in what Aster called 'alphabetical order'. Australia was where Aster was from, and there were a mix of ethnicities in the pictures.

"Oz- Australia- used to be Britain's prison colony," Aster said. "Then we weren't, but we were still picking up every gobdaw and yahoo that'd come up with the scratch for the voyage." He sounded fond when he said it.

They continued to go through the Atlas, and Jack felt himself positively boggle at the many different countries, the names and the people and the styles of clothing. Some of the clothing made him itch to wear the same styles, while others made him want to blush and hide his face, they were so risqué. And he knew, just knew that this was just the tip of the mountain, that there was so much more about these other countries that wasn't in the Atlas, because there wasn't room.

They reached the end of the book after nearly three hours. Jack sighed a little when Aster closed it. "Are there more books like this?" he asked. He touched the slick cover again.

"Mm? Well, yeah. Or there's shows on TV." He nodded at the demon-box, and smirked at Jack's expression. "It's not going to hurt you."

"I know that," Jack muttered. "It's just... loud." And bright, and confusing.

"Tell ya what. You try a couple shows I suggest, see if you feel the same way after."

That was fair, he supposed. Jack held his hand out, to seal the bargain.

Aster's hand was large, and all but swallowed Jack's. And so very warm, he realized, as he felt his fingers tingle, as though his blood was flowing through his veins again.

Impossible, of course; he had no blood anymore.

But Aster's touch made him feel alive.

Jack swallowed, hard, and smiled. He was doomed; doomed to hunger after this man, the life he made Jack feel, and doomed to a cold eternity in hell when Aster finally left him.

He couldn't find it in himself to complain.

Chapter End Notes

And so, Jack begins to learn how the current world works, and what everything looks like. Huzzah for him!
Jack drifted closer to the house, more than a little confused by all the talking and laughing coming from inside. There was a great deal of activity going on in there; activity that was completely out of the ordinary for Aster. Jack had gotten the impression that Aster preferred to go out to socialize. Apart from Jack, of course. And Jack did try not to be a bother, really... except he couldn't help but mess up, a lot.

The world today was just so- so strange, so confusing- and Aster was the only person he could ask advice of. The 'television shows' on the demon-box in the sitting room did help, mostly, but there were some things that just... they were so alien to Jack he had to ask for help.

Like the obsession with famous people, and what made someone famous. Even after Aster had explained, he still didn't understand. Although that could have just been that, when he was alive, the famous people tended to be royalty, or as good as royal. And completely unapproachable. While today, the 'celebrities' seemed to crave contact with the public, and do crazy things to get the attention. And it didn't matter if the attention was good or bad; to a 'celebrity', it was all good.

And much as Aster had tried to explain, Jack still didn't know how getting drunk and being on drugs and walking around without clothes meant they sold more 'music disks' and 'videos'. Shouldn't it have been the other way around?

When he'd been alive, it had been. Anyone too extreme had been viewed as crazy, and to be avoided. Anyone who'd gotten drunk in public would have been all but ostracized, especially if they did so frequently. Drugs and questionable fashion choices would have gotten even worse reactions.

He shook his head, and moved even closer to the building. None of that had anything to do with the fact that there were people in Aster's home. Laughing loudly enough Jack could hear them through windows and walls, even.

He considered the situation for a minute or two, and then shrugged. There wasn't anything stopping him from going in and looking. Apart from Aster, no one would see him. And perhaps there would be some amusement in making rude gestures and expressions while Aster was prevented, by manners, from doing anything.

Almost as amusing as freezing the shower water was. Jack chuckled to himself and walked through the front door. Quite literally through; he still hadn't figured out how to turn doorknobs yet, though he thought he was making progress. Maybe in another week?

Not that it mattered, one way or the other, but... it made him feel more alive, being able to pick up and move things like everyone else.

And it was nice to help out, he reminded himself. Although that was at least partly in self-defense. Aster's idea of 'clean' was an entire ocean removed from Jack's idea of the same state. He was pretty sure that, before he'd started figuring out how to wash dishes and do the laundry, there had been things growing in corners, on abandoned plates and socks.

It was a good thing that, as a ghost, he couldn't get sick. He had no idea how Aster had survived this long on his own.
The noise was coming from the kitchen, so presumably that was where the company was. Jack did check the sitting room, mostly because he had to pass through it. The demon-box was on, set to one of the channels Jack had found he liked—Animal World, he thought it was called—but the room was empty. The kitchen, however, was another story.

Aster was there, as were three other people, two men and a woman. Jack shoved down his initial impulse, which was to disapprove of a woman wearing pants. Times had changed, he reminded himself, for what felt like the thousandth time. Women could wear pants and men could wear skirts, and there were more scandals coming out of Christian churches than he really wanted to think about.

Not to mention Botox. That had been a nightmare to learn about, and then some.

One of the men was a midget—no. Hadn't there been something on the demon-box? Dwarf, was that the right word? He'd have to ask Aster later.

It was amazing how many rude words there were for people these days. Jack didn't understand it, and wasn't sure he wanted to.

The— the short man, for lack of knowing the polite word—was very... yellow. Blond hair, and tanned skin, and even his clothing was in shades of yellow and tan. He was sitting beside a man who looked like the modern day depiction of St. Nicholas, if St. Nicholas had tattoos and lifted weights as a hobby. He was even dressed in a red shirt, black trousers, with Christmas-themed suspenders. Or, Jack assumed they were Christmas themed. They were patterned with holly leaves, and holly was a plant associated with Christmas, wasn't it?

The woman was simply astounding in how she looked. Her hair was multi-colored, her clothing brightly colored, and there were feathers dangling from her earlobes. She reminded Jack very much of a brightly colored bird he had seen on the Animal World channel, a peacock— or maybe more like a bird of paradise? Was that the right creature?

Sometimes it felt as though he was learning so many new things so quickly, his brain would leak out his ears.

Aster caught sight of Jack in the doorway, and stilled. He had been talking to his—his friends?—and gesturing with a bottle of beer, but when their eyes met, he stopped. Jack shifted his weight from foot to foot, and considered leaving. His earlier idea of playing harmless pranks felt wrong, now.

Now that he was able to see their faces properly, they looked a little familiar. Had they been over before the exorcism? They must have been; there was no other way they could look familiar without his actually recognizing them.

The short man blinked, and made several gestures with his hands. The woman's lips parted, not quite a gasp. And the big man, like the modern version of St. Nicholas, seemed to stare right at Jack.

"Don't just stand there in the doorway, cobber," Aster said. He took a sip of his beer. "Come in and I'll introduce you. An' no worries, my mates are mages too. They can see you."

They... could see him? Jack felt the blood drain from his face, an odd sensation considering he no longer had blood anymore. "You... are?" he asked weakly. He reached over and pressed one hand against the wall for support.
"We are," the woman said, and smiled at him. "It's nice to finally meet you, Jack. Please, won't you join us?"

The other two men, the strangers, nodded. Aster gestured towards a chair beside him. They must have dragged in furniture from the sitting room, Jack thought, even as he took a seat. He perched on it, toes curling around the plush arm. His chair certainly didn't belong in the kitchen, and neither did the woman's chair.

"Right then," Aster said, and tilted his bottle in the woman's direction. "This's Tooth. That bloke is Sandy," the short man, "and that one's North."

Jack nodded, mentally assigning the names to the people. They were all so different in appearance, he didn't think he would have a problem remembering who was who. Although- Tooth? That was an... odd name, to be sure.

"Is there..." Jack flushed, and paled again, when it became evident that these new people could hear him, as well as see him. "Is there a reason why you look like St. Nicholas?" he asked the large man, North.

North laughed, and slapped the table with one hand. The glasses and bottles on the table rattled, and actually shifted position a bit. "Close! I am Nicholas St. North, and I was blessed with good looks!"

Jack flinched and almost fell backwards off his perch. Aster reached over and caught his shoulder, saving him from a tumble.

"Yeah, North's a right wanker, he is," Aster said.

Jack peered at the mostly empty beer bottle. "How many of those have you had?"

"Two," Aster said. Sandy held up three fingers and grinned in a way Jack could only describe as 'evil'.

"Right." 'Two' indeed. It took a little effort, but Jack managed to pick up and move the beer bottle out of Aster's reach. "No more for you."

The other three people stared at him, while Aster grumbled- and got a new beer from the refrigerator. Jack glowered at it, but the Australian was holding on tight with a death grip, and clearly ready to fight for his right to drink alcohol.

Well, this was Aster's home. If need be, perhaps these friends of Aster's would be willing to help haul him to bed, or at least to the couch in the sitting room. Jack mentally shrugged, and leaned back.

"So, ah," he said, and stared at the new trio from behind his bangs. "You look familiar?"

Mentally, he blessed how much he'd watched the demon-box. It was one thing to talk to Aster, but quite another to talk to these people, and he had no idea why that was. At least watching the different conversations on the demon-box gave him some idea of what to say. Polite social chitchat, wasn't that the phrase?

"You probably saw us during the exorcism," Tooth said. She turned to look at Sandy, who was wiggling his hands about, and added, "Sandy's very glad you seem to be okay. You appeared to be in pain when we were, well..."

"You got that from twitching thumbs?" Jack raised his eyebrows at Sandy. "How... Why don't you talk?"
Sandy wiggled his hands some more. This time North spoke. "Sandy is mute, yes? No voice. So he uses sign language, hand shapes that mean words. Is very good, good way to talk without waking up neighbors!"

Jack nodded dubiously. He suspected there were downsides as well- but at least this way Sandy could communicate easier than, say, writing everything out on paper, or miming everything?

"So, you were part of the exorcism?" he asked. They all winced, including Aster. "That, um. Well, that's good, I guess."

Now they were all staring at him as though he was crazy. Jack hunched his shoulders and eyed the collection of glasses and bottles. Maybe he should start cleaning up... something to do. Something other than crouch there and be stared at.

"Good?" North asked. Aster reached over and pressed the inside of his wrist to Jack's forehead. "How could it be good? You were in pain, yes?"

His stomach muscles, or his memory of them, tensed. "I- well- I was crazy," he said, stuttering only a little. He also batted away Aster's hand, though really he wanted to hold the man's arm tight to his chest and curl around it.

Stupid, but... warmth. Life. He wanted it, like plants wanted the sunlight.

Sandy gestured for him to continue talking. He didn't need a translation to understand that gesture!

"I wasn't safe," Jack said. If he didn't look at anyone, it was easier to talk. "I was- and you were trying to stop me. Maybe not the way you intended, but I'm not... I'm better, now."

"Jack?" Tooth reached over, and he looked up. For a long moment she hesitated, but then she touched his forearm with the tips of her fingers. And he felt it. Another person who could touch him. He could now talk with, be seen by, four people. It was astonishing.

"Jack, if you ever need help, if you're ever worried or scared about anything, I hope you'll come to us. Somehow," she added, and smiled faintly. "I know it will be difficult, you can't leave the manor or its grounds, but... we'll be visiting more often now, you know. So you can talk to us. Any time, about anything. I promise."

Jack looked over at North and Sandy, who both nodded. Then he looked over at Aster, who'd already finished off the latest beer, and was smiling lopsidedly at him.

"'Course you can come t' me," he said. "Idiot. You're my favorite, don't ya know?"

Jack blushed, and looked down at his hands. People he could talk to... people he could ask for help. He wasn't at all sure what to think about it, or the feelings Tooth's words had inspired. But he felt warm, and... welcome. Yes, that was it. He felt welcome.

So he looked up and smiled, unable to put words to his feelings. But then, perhaps he didn't have to.

It was past two in the morning by the time Aster's friends left. Jack wondered out loud why they had stayed so late when they'd have to work in the morning. Aster had stumbled through an odd explanation that boiled down to it being the weekend and his friends being all self-employed. Whatever that meant. Jack resolved to ask for a better explanation when Aster was fully awake. And sober.
"Right," he said, when Aster trailed off. "I think it's time for bed."

The Australian blinked up at him, confused. "You don' sleep."

"You do." He reached down, and caught Aster's arm. The man's biceps were so big that Jack's two hands couldn't completely circle Aster's upper arm. It was somewhat intimidating, but in a good way. Although how it could be good to be intimidated, Jack didn't know. It was very confusing.

"Roight, roight," Aster muttered. What did that word even mean?

Aster was steady enough, with someone to guide him. Although he did insist on all but crawling up the stairs. Jack didn't argue; it looked safer than letting the swaying Australian try to walk up them, especially since there wasn't any way for Jack to catch him safely.

Was there? No, probably not. Jack still had difficulty lifting things more than ten pounds in weight. Aster was... certainly more than that, and very solid. Nicely solid, Jack thought, and then wondered why he had.

They made it safely to the bedroom. Jack helped Aster pull off his shirt, only because halfway through it seemed Aster forgot what he was doing, and made sure to toss the shirt into the laundry basket he'd insisted on. It made telling clean clothes from dirty easier. As for Aster's pants, well, Jack didn't touch them. He just kept an eye on Aster to make sure he didn't fall over and hit his head or something.

"Here." He pulled down the bed covers for Aster. "Get in."

Aster hummed and nodded. He was still wearing socks. He'd managed to take off his jeans, but not his socks? Jack stared at the other man's feet, unsure why the sight of Aster, naked but for those socks, had made a small flock of butterflies take up residence in his stomach.

"Jackie?" Aster slid into bed, and caught Jack's hand in both of his. "Hey there."

"Ah...?" Jack tried to pull away, and couldn't. Not that he felt like he was in any danger, but it did seem a bit... awkward. Rude, even, to be in Aster's room like this.

"Yer a beaut, mate," Aster said, and tugged on Jack's captive hand.

Jack bent forward at the waist, confused.

And then Aster kissed him. It was- thorough. Thorough was a good word. And there were lips, soft and warm, pressed against Jack's, moving against his mouth, and a tongue licking at the seam of Jack's lips and he opened his mouth against that gentle pressure and then Aster's tongue was in his mouth and what the hell? -?

Jack pulled free and jumped back, eyes wide and shaking. Frost covered the carpet for a foot around him in every direction.

Aster blinked at his reaction, yawned, and then rolled over and began to snore.

Jack stayed where he was for a very, very long time after that.
Seriously though. (No, Jack is not aware of how much he's been groping Aster.) This was a fun chapter to write. It moves the plot along... and then the plot moving along will move the plot along, and fun things will happen, oh my yes...
"Jack's avoiding me."

Sandy continued his bench presses.

"It's been three weeks now, and I haven't seen him once."

The dwarf did pause, but only to rack the weights and move over to the treadmill.

"Dishes are being done, and I've still got clean clothes, but... he's invisible, mate, and I don't know what I did to cause this."

Sandy signed, in short form, 'He blames you?'

Aster huffed, and made use of one of the free weights. "What else could it be? I was drunk. You know it, I know it... I don't remember anything from after you lot left. I must've done something." And the possibilities were terrifying. Especially considering his little crush on Jack.

If he'd flat out admitted it- that might cause the ghost to go into hiding, so to speak. He was fairly certain he hadn't done anything physical. He still had all his bits, and there hadn't been any ice damage anywhere.

And he'd looked.

The plants outside weren't blighted, not even a single blade of grass. The manor, well, it was difficult to tell what was new damage, at least inside, and most of the second story wasn't safe to walk around, but he didn't think Jack had done anything in there. And his own home was unmarked, by ice at least.

He had lost several notebooks to the order in his study, but other than that...

Aster sighed, and frowned when Sandy didn't respond. "Look, just... have you got any idea how I might draw him out?"

'Summoning,' was Sandy's suggestion.

"Oh yeah, dragging him out of wherever he's hidden himself, that's a great idea." Aster snorted. "Next suggestion?"

'Ask later. Working now.' Sandy upped the speed on the treadmill, until he had to sprint to keep up. And, not so incidentally, wasn't able to sign his answers.

"You're a lot of help." The Australian dropped the free weight back in its rack, and stretched. "Fine. North's in the office, yeah?" Sandy nodded. "Right then. Guess I'll go home."

It wasn't like he didn't have things to do. Tooth's commission- she was being very understanding, but also very impatient- and a number of other commissions as well. His mother had sent an email prodding him about a sketch of Jack, which... he had plenty of sketches, but none that were appropriate to send to his mother.
He was pretty sure she didn't know where he posted his artwork, online. At least, she'd never mentioned it. And as long as she didn't mention it, he'd quite happily go along with his life.

His father, at least, still thought Aster didn't know what an erect penis looked like. That man had turned denial into an art form.

Aster wandered through the house, barely giving the Dick and Jane statue in the front entryway a first glance, never mind a second. Too much on his mind.

Fretting over Jack was a stupid thing to do, really. What could hurt a ghost? And he'd wander back into Aster's life quickly enough. He just... missed him, was all. Jack was, in a way, his roommate. And now his roommate had gone on an unscheduled vacation, of all the stupid things, so he didn't have anyone to talk to at three in the morning when the muse was on him. There wasn't anyone urging him to watch the 'demon-box', no one asking questions, no one pulling his pencil, paintbrush, or stylus away and pointing out that he hadn't eaten since breakfast and the sun had set, therefore it was time for dinner...

It was surprisingly lonely.

And his artwork was suffering, to be perfectly honest. It was astonishing how hunger pangs and sleep deprivation made it hard to be creative.

He started up his bike, and then headed out into traffic, only half of his attention on the road. For a non-mage, a dangerous habit. For a mage, it still wasn't a good idea, but at least he had a built-in early warning system, far more reliable than any technology.

If only Jack would show up so Aster could talk to him! He was sure that if he could just talk to Jack, he'd be able to find out what had happened that night, and make things right again. People said things when they were drunk. He was sure he could give reasons for just about anything that might have come out of his mouth, reasons that would be both absolutely true and completely misleading. Whatever it took to get Jack's company back.

He grumbled under his breath, and wove through the light amount of traffic all the way to his home. Aster made another mental note to find a good gardening service- the expanse of lawn and garden was getting quite overgrown- and then promptly forgot. He left his bike out in front of the house, and headed inside.

No Jack. Again. The TV was on, still set to the History channel. The breakfast dishes were cleared away. The washing machine was on. And Aster was completely alone in the house. He checked; mage senses didn't lie.

He dumped his jacket on the back of the couch, and then headed upstairs to his study.

Art. Art was good. He pulled up the rough outline for Tooth's commission, turned on his music, and set to work.

Three hours later, he'd managed to at least sketch things out, but no more than that. And he was pretty sure hands weren't supposed to look that... that... stupid. And bloody hell, why did Tooth's commission have to involve so many feathers?

Right. Because "Queen Toothiana, Warrior-Daughter of the Sisters of Flight" was feathered. Aster had always figured people who did the Live Action Role-Play had the proverbial 'roos loose in the top paddock, if only because the costumes tended to border on the absurd. Tooth's was a bit better, since her outfit was just a body stocking with feathers, and a pair of wings like a dragonfly's, as
compared to some of the nonsense he'd seen. Wings- *eagle* wings- sized big enough to lift a human. Even making them out of lightweight materials didn't change the fact that they were heavy. He was always surprised when people didn't fall over.

Queen Toothiana looked a touch different in Aster's artwork, if only because art wasn't limited to purely human proportions. A bit of a different face shape than Tooth had in real life, something that evoked 'pixies' and 'elves', feathers everywhere instead of just what'd be covered by clothing, a shorter torso and longer arms and legs than were 'human normal'.

Tooth enjoyed her LARP'ing. Something about dealing with troubled and emotionally bruised children and the deep, intense need to *hit something* with foam swords. Aster had a feeling Tooth dealt with children who'd come from broken homes and abusive situations, instead of the 'overworked youngsters being treated like prizewinning pets instead of people' the way she claimed. Or maybe she handled both kinds of damage, broken and burnt out.

Tooth also enjoyed commissioning pictures of her Queenly self. She had a standing order for certain prints, in fact, that he *knew* she gave out to children. Queen Toothiana was someone for the kiddies to trust. Guardian of Memories, kickass warrior, Guardian of Children... Queen Toothiana had a number of titles, and stories a-plenty, and the kids no doubt slept easier at night thinking the fairy warrior was watching over them at night.

Aster shoved away from his desk, and turned to head downstairs, get a drink.

And then promptly screamed in terror and fell backwards off his chair, onto the floor.

Tooth scowled at him. "Oh, very brave of you, Aster."

Aster pressed one hand to his chest, heart going a mile a minute. "Warn a bloke next time!" he snapped. "Cough, snap your fingers, make noise, *something*! Bleeding hell, Tooth, you about gave me a heart attack!"

"You'd need a heart for that!" Tooth moved over to his desk, stepping over his legs on the way. "Well, at least you're working."

"What's that supposed to mean?" It took a moment, but he untangled himself from his chair and stood up. "And what're you doing here?"

"Checking up on you." Tooth turned away from his computer, arms akimbo and expression one that boded no good. "Sandy texted me."

"What, that I've had artist's block?" Aster growled, and headed out of the study and down the stairs. He needed a drink.

When he pulled his fridge open, though, he got a bit of a shock. "What the hell?"

Tooth paused in the doorway. "What?"

"Some bloody thief made off with the contents of my refrigerator!"

Tooth shoved him aside, and looked in. There was half a stick of butter left in the fridge. A carton of eggs with three left. And- he checked the freezer half- ice cubes.

"Oh, thank god, he must have cleaned your fridge out."

"Jack, and probably to keep you from dying of food poisoning. There must have been rotten food. That is the usual reason to clean a fridge out, you know. Because something's gone bad and smart people," she paused and poked him in the chest, "don't eat food gone bad."

Aster turned the scowl on her. "And what're you implying?"

"That you'll eat just about anything, even if it smells funny and is covered in fuzz."

"Would not!"

Tooth's smile wasn't pretty. "That's not what your mother told me."

He slammed the fridge door closed. "Stop talking with my mother!"

"I like her." Tooth poked him in the chest again. "You've been pining over Jack."

"I- I have not!"

"Sit down. I'll get the glasses."

Aster did, only because it was easier and less childish to go along with it. Tooth got two glasses out of the cupboard, filled them with ice and water, and set one in front of him. "You've been spending all your time and energy looking for Jack, haven't you?"

"Sandy told you that?" He sipped at the water, and did his best not to feel betrayed.

Although it was hard not to. The idea of his friends gossiping about him, talking behind his back, possibly making fun of him... coming to conclusions that made him look stupid... He didn't like it.

"He told me you were worried about Jack, and knowing how you are..." Tooth set her glass down on the counter. "What's wrong?"

The bottom of his glass left wet rings on the table. He went to work turning the rings into an interlocked chain. "Dunno. He just up and vanished three weeks ago, just after... I think I said something when I was drunk."

"Something?" she prodded.

Aster sighed. "He's pretty. He's... Tooth, if I sat down and figured out all of what I'd see as perfect in... Well, he's a bit too skinny, but he's a ghost, he can't eat or put on weight or anything, and his clothes are a nightmare, but..." He stared helplessly at her. "And he's... he's Jack. Now he's sane, he's sweet and funny and so freaking smart. Like a sponge. Just absorbs everything, but only the good stuff. None of the nasty."

Tooth stared at him for what felt like hours, and then tossed back her water like it was alcoholic. "You're in love with him."

"No!"

"Don't you dare lie to me, Evelyn Aster Bunnymund!" She smacked the countertop.

"Don't use that name!" God, how he hated his first name. "Fuck it, Tooth, I'm not... It's a crush, sure. Who wouldn't have a crush on the boy? He's attractive. But he's a ghost. It wouldn't... it couldn't..."

"Do you really think that matters? You're in love, Aster." She slumped back against the counter, and rubbed a hand over her face. "You... said something to Jack?"
"He's... from an older time, yeah? I figure I said something to make him scared." He went back to the wet rings on the table. "Don't remember a thing from after you lot left that night, though."

"Well, this is a mess," Tooth agreed. "I don't know what to tell you, Aster. You can't make plans until you know what you said, and what Jack thinks. Just... be patient. Work. Wait. He'll come back. He's missed people. He'll talk to you if only because of that."

Tooth left not long after that, after a few more reassurances. Aster left the glasses on the counter and went back to his study. Difficult as it was right now, he'd just have to work. It'd distract him from worrying over Jack, at least.

Still, he thought, as he turned his music back on, he didn't want Jack to talk to him just because there weren't any better options. He wanted...

Oh, to hell with what he wanted. It didn't matter, and it wasn't going to happen, no matter how much he hoped! Sooner he accepted that, the quicker he could move on.

Aster picked up his stylus, and got to work.

Chapter End Notes

Okay guys, everyone feel sorry for Aster! He's pining over Jack, so he is... Poor man. (Apologize for almost anything that came out of his mouth... Uh, Aster? That'd be your TONGUE.) Jack will be in next chapter, I promise.

And in other news, I've sent my novel off to yet another publisher. Huzzah! Wish me luck!
Chapter Thirteen

Chapter Notes

Warning: The opinions of the author are not necessarily the opinions of the characters, and vice versa.
(For one thing, the author does not use religion to argue for or against homosexuality. The author uses "who the hell does it hurt?!" as an argument. If someone can possibly make an actual, non-spitting argument about who's hurt in an adult, consenting, same-sex relationship, the author promises not to point and laugh at the other side of the debate.)

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

The ice was a full two hand-spans thick, more than enough to lock the gates. The visiting woman would have to wait until the ice melted before she could leave.

Jack felt a little bad about it, but... not much. Tooth would survive. Or climb the wall, but not before he had a chance to talk to her. Or get yelled at. To be perfectly honest, if he didn't talk to someone, he was going to fly apart and create a summer blizzard.

That... would be extremely rude.

His hands shook, and he watched the gatehouse, waiting. Tooth left, and got in her car. The car started, and began to drive down the lane to the gate. She stopped fifteen, sixteen feet away from the gates, when the late afternoon sun caught and glittered on the ice.

She stared at the ice, and then unerringly looked up at him. "Jack," she said, sounding unamused but, for the moment, calm. "Come down here please?"

Jack nodded, and half-closed his eyes to concentrate better. The miniature windstorm swirling about him, holding him up in the air, began to decrease in strength. Slowly enough that he fell softly, not so slowly it took half an hour, like his first few attempts.

Well. First few successful attempts. He wasn't including the times he'd been picked up and thrown into the barrier around the manor.

"Tooth," he said, once he'd touched down on the grass. "I, um. I'm sorry, but I need to talk with you."

Tooth looked from the iced gates, over to Jack, and back again. "I suppose you do. Come on, you can sit in the car with me."

Jack raised his eyebrows, but nodded. Tooth had to open the passenger door for him, but once he was in, everything seemed solid enough. At least, so long as he didn't concentrate on going through things.

Tooth joined him, and turned the car off. "Alright. Talk."

Jack stared out the front window at the ice. Ice was... good. Solid. Unusual, in that water expanded when frozen, instead of contracting. There had been a program on the demon-box-TV with Very
Excited Scientists explaining how they couldn't explain the phenomenon.

"Aster kissed me."

It took him a second to realize who'd said the words. Jack blinked several times. He'd been trying to figure out the best approach. Circling around obliquely, maybe. Commenting on how he knew he wasn't very masculine in appearance- he was a ghost, not a vampire, mirrors still worked- and how Aster must have gotten confused while drunk...

"He did?" Tooth squealed. "Oh. Oh." She sighed, and he just saw her hand fluttering, out of the corner of his eye. "Good."

He whipped about in his seat, one shoulder sinking through fabric in his distraction. "Good?" he asked, too strangled by shock to scream. "Good?"

"The pining was getting painful to watch," Tooth said. She smiled, and touched his shoulder. "Please get your arm out of the seat back, Jack. It looks painful."

"It isn't. Pining?" He drew one leg up, so he could sit more comfortably. "I don't... huh?"

"Oh, Jack..." Tooth sighed, and patted his shoulder. "Things have changed."

Jack shook his head faintly. "But... Tooth. It- God's law-"

"I hate it when people deliberately set out to-" Tooth paused, and took a deep breath. "Okay. Bible, huh? Here's something right from the Good Book itself. Matthew chapter eight and Luke chapter seven. Do you know it?"

Jack frowned. The memory was a hazy one, as though viewed at a great distance. "I think so? Ah, it's the same story...?"

"Yes," Tooth said. "Basically, Jesus is passing through a city, and a Roman Centurion- that would be a Roman soldier- asks him to heal his servant. Now, in Matthew, the original Greek used the word 'pais'. Now, the fun of trying to translate words into English... Well, from Greek, to Latin, to English, with maybe a few side trips here and there..." She shook her head. "In Greek, 'pais' is generally taken to mean 'male concubine'."

Jack choked on an unnecessary breath. "Male...?"

"Concubine. Well, actually, only the Centurion refers to the servant as 'pais'. Everyone else uses the word 'doulos', which just means slave," she said, sounding thoughtful. "So I'd think it's a term of endearment."

Jack tried to speak, but could only open and close his mouth like a landed fish. "How do you know all this?" he asked, finally.

"Made friends with a really good Catholic priest, and provide therapy for a lot of kids. Including ones coming from an extremely religious background who have issues with their sexuality. Jesus himself never spoke against homosexuality," she said. "That sort of thing can be found in the Old Testament, but Jesus just said to follow the Ten Commandments. Most of what people spout off against homosexuality these days is taken out of context."

She paused, and grinned. "Like that one passage that's meant for before the coming of Jesus Christ. It makes me laugh. They're trying to use something that basically means they don't believe Jesus is the Son of God."
"Passage?" Jack asked weakly.

"If I remember which one, I'll let you know," she promised.

"But, Tooth... everything I remember..."

"Do you blame a man who's born blind?" Tooth asked.

That was... "What? No!"

"Or what about someone, oh, born mute? Or a dwarf? Or both, like Sandy?"

"No!" Jack shook his aching head, almost frantically. "No, that's not- it's not their fault, it's not anyone's fault! It's just... how they're meant to be!"

"Being homosexual, or heterosexual, or bi- that would be both attracted to your own gender and the opposite- is something a person is born as. Like being blind, or deaf. Like the color of your skin." Tooth stared at him, until he cringed back against the car door. "Do you think someone who prefers their own gender is a bad person, Jack?"

"I don't... I don't know," he admitted. "I'd seen... But they were always sneaking around, like it was shameful..."

"Any sexual intercourse between teenagers, whether they're the same gender or opposite, is considered shameful in today's society. Probably because we're a generation of prudes," Tooth admitted. "But also because I think most teenagers don't remember birth control, and end up pregnant."

Jack shook his head again. "But I- Tooth, I just don't understand!"

"I wish you could talk with Father Donahue," Tooth muttered. "He's got a really good way with words. Jack, as far as religion goes, let me just say this. The Bible says 'love everyone'. Jesus didn't stutter. He didn't say 'love everyone except homosexuals'. He didn't say 'love everyone except people who disagree with your views'. He said 'love everyone, period'. Okay with that?"

He thought about it. Tooth didn't seem to mind how much time it took. It... It did make sense. It was probably made easier by the fact that, while he remembered bits and pieces of his life, they were faded, difficult to bring up. He couldn't remember names, for instance, or things he'd been told; only impressions, feelings. Things that he knew had been the opinion of the time, the opinion he'd shared, but he had to grope mentally in order to put words to the opinion.

And in an odd way, Tooth's explanation was a kind of comfort.

Jack supposed he hadn't wanted to think of Aster as a bad person.

"So, um. How does... You were using words, earlier. Homosexual and heterosexual?"

"Homosexuals are also called gays, for men, and lesbians, for women. Heterosexuals are called straight."

"Gay means happy," Jack said, wary now.

"Yeah, that changed."

He rubbed a hand against his forehead. "So... wishing someone a gay day...?"
"Will probably get you punched in the face, yeah," Tooth agreed. "There's still a lot of stigma against same-sex relationships. I mean, in some parts of the world, it's still very much illegal."

"Tell me?" he asked.

She did.

Tooth was no expert- she said that immediately, once they left the stuff she had experience with- but she told him as much of the homosexual history of America as she knew.

"People died for their rights, to be treated the same way as everyone else," Tooth said. "I don't know if everyone's equal- there's always going to be someone who wants to walk all over everyone else- but things are a lot better now."

"Is there anything on the demon-box that might help?" he asked, once the quasi-lecture wound down. To be fair, he had asked for it. "I can change the channels now."

"Well," Tooth said. "You know the History channel?"

Of course. It was becoming one of his favorites.

"Gay Pride week starts on Monday... Two days from now. That might help. You'll get more accurate facts, at least."

Jack nodded, and looked over at the gates. The ice had almost melted. He opened his mouth to say goodbye, and let her go home, when he said something he hadn't intended to.

"Tooth? How does it... work?" He blushed, and looked away.

"How does what work?" she asked.

Oh. He had to elaborate? "You can't... You can't sheathe a sword in a sword," he blurted out.

Tooth stared at him, and then began to giggle. "Oh, Jack, there's much more to love than..." She giggled some more. "Okay. It's actually very simple. You, um, you know how it works between a man and a woman?"

"Yes." He had a vague memory of a painfully awkward talk, as painfully awkward as this was turning into, and then... sheep?

"Well. Do you know about alternate methods? Hands, mouth...?"

Face crusted in a thick layer of frost, Jack nodded. He wasn't sure how he knew- memories from before he'd died, somehow? Glimpses of teenagers, snuck out to the manor, where they were sure not to be interrupted? However he knew, he did know what she was talking about.

"Well, ah, it works the same way for men. Hands and mouth, I mean." Tooth shrugged. "If you can masturbate alone, you can also give another man a hand-job, and blow-jobs are just- don't freeze my car, Jack. It's alright."

"You don't have to elaborate," he said. Frost covered his seat. "I think I get it."

Tooth grinned at him. For some reason, the expression made him feel very nervous. "Are you sure? Because really, I don't mind-"

"Tooth!"
"Alright, alright, I'll stop. Well, men might not have a vagina, but everyone has an anus."

Anus...? After a moment, he realized what the technical term really meant. "Up a man's butt?" he asked, shocked. "B-but- but-"

"Men have a prostate," Tooth said. "It, um. How do I put this? Women don't have one... And I'm not a medical doctor and never looked this up. The prostate is part of how men get aroused- and having it stimulated by another man's penis, or a toy, feels really, really good. Or so I've been told."

"Why would anyone tell you that?" he asked.

"Therapist," she said, and added darkly, "Everyone who knows that tends to tell me things I don't need to hear. Especially when drunk."

Jack scrubbed both hands over his cheeks. "So, um. Um. But. That sounds. Painful?"

"Lubricant." She tilted her head to the side. "Would you like me to bring you information pamphlets?"

"That..." Jack shivered. "That might be a good idea."

"Alright. I'll come by tonight with them. Meet me by the gate? That way Aster doesn't have to know."

Jack seized on the offer with both hands. "Yes, thank you! I don't want him to know."

Tooth started up the car, and buckled her seat belt. "Jack? Can I ask you a question? You don't have to answer."

"Go ahead."

She bit her lower lip, and then nodded. "Did you like it, when Aster kissed you?"

Did he like it? That was a hard question to answer. "I don't know," he admitted. "I... He's the first person to have touched me in three hundred years, Tooth." He paused a moment. Three hundred years? How old was he? "It could have just been that. Or... I don't know. I don't know how to find out."

Tooth nodded. "Thank you for being honest. If you want? I'll come by every evening. I'll sneak in, and we can talk, just the two of us. Maybe I can help you figure it out."

"Thank you, Tooth. For all of this."

"My pleasure," she told him. "And Jack? One last thing. Please stop avoiding Aster? You're worrying him... and he thinks he hurt you."

Hurt him? How? "He didn't. And... I'll stop hiding."

"Thank you, Jack. He's one of my best friends. I don't like it when he's hurting."

"I don't like it either," Jack admitted. He slid out of the car, and waved at Tooth as she left. Only when she was out of sight- quite easy, with the walls in the way- did he turn away and look at the gatehouse.

Aster was hurting, because Jack had hidden away.
Maybe it was time to stop hiding.

Chapter End Notes

So- Jack has had his talk. Next chapter, things get steamy, and I'm not talking about the shower.
Chapter Fourteen

Chapter Notes

Warning, Not Save For Work

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Jack wrapped light around himself, until he was invisible. It got easier every time he'd done it; those science programs on the demon-box had helped. Now that he knew how light worked, he could hide from the mages, even while standing right in front of them. Between that and his ability to just walk through things, well...

He could go anywhere he wanted, now. So long as it was on the manor grounds.

The sudden rush of anger shocked him. He almost lost control over his invisibility. It took him a minute to wrestle the emotion down.

What was that about? He hadn't cared before.

Of course, before, he hadn't known how much he was missing. How limited his little piece of the world was. There were things he wanted to do now, to see, and... he couldn't. He was dead, and trapped.

Jack closed his eyes. He leaned up against a wall. He had the demon-box, to bring the world to him. He had Aster, and Aster's friends, and... and maybe, if things got too intolerable, Aster and his friends would do another exorcism? He wouldn't fight, if he chose it.

But wouldn't that hurt Aster?

Tooth thought... She thought Aster cared for him, the way couples serious in courtship did. Jack... didn't know enough to say if she was seeing things correctly or not. Certainly, when he'd 'returned', Aster had been delighted. And apologetic; apparently he thought he'd said something while drunk.

Jack hadn't corrected him.

He'd watched the shows on the History channel during Gay Pride Week. There was more than what Tooth had told him. Facts. Statistics. Doctors explaining how people used to treat homosexuals, and naturalists who pointed out how frequent homosexual pairings were in nature.

If Jack believed in God- and he wasn't sure, now, that he did- then he'd have to believe that God had intended for homosexuality. Of course, a God that would do that, and also let all the hate towards his own creations continue, would either be highly sadistic or have a terrible sense of humor.

Or just incredibly long-range planning, he supposed, but it was hard to rail at something like that.

Jack shook his head, and pushed away from the wall. Trapped or not, there were things here to keep him interested.

Like Aster.
He took a deep, unnecessary breath, and walked through the door.

It was late; that had been part of the routine. Wait until the unofficial 'bedtime', wait another twenty minutes, and then go in.

And watch.

Several times over the past week, Aster had been asleep. He slept the way he lived, messy and quiet. He sprawled, taking up the entire bed which would have otherwise been big enough to fit Jack and his entire family, with a little room to spare. He drooled. And he slept naked, which wouldn't have been noticeable except the blankets went everywhere except over him.

He had a lot of tattoos, on his hips and thighs, and no tan lines. Anywhere.

Also, he had the most muscles Jack had seen on anyone, probably because of the nudity. Even in sleep they were... there. Very firm, rather taught, and Jack had maybe stared a little. Or a lot.

Okay, he stared a lot.

The other times Jack had come in to watch Aster, he'd found the artist masturbating.

Jack had blushed. He'd looked away. The first night, he'd walked right back out of the room and hid in the manor until dawn. The second, he'd stayed, not able to watch but not able to leave, until the very end where Aster orgasmed and groaned Jack's name.

This made the third night he'd come in to see Aster, skin flushed and penis erect, one hand rubbing up and down his own- own manhood- and the other stroking over his chest, fingers rubbing against his nipples.

Jack shivered, and put his back up against the door he'd just walked through. It was hard to know what to think, or feel, while he watched. Shame, for intruding on Aster's privacy. Curiosity, and embarrassment at being curious. An odd curl of desire, low in his stomach, that strengthened the longer he watched.

Aster's- well. There were many words. Horn, manhood, penis, erection, dick, cock, prick... How was he supposed to know the right one?

Cock, Jack decided. It had the right tone. The kind of word you could snap or groan or say, a bit earthy, and not fit for polite conversation.

He remembered someone saying that if you were having polite conversation during sex, you were doing it wrong.

At any rate, Aster's cock was flushed a dull red-violet shade, dark even against his naturally tanned skin. Veins stood out against the skin. And his hand was wrapped somewhat tightly around that most sensitive body part, but Jack knew, from half-remembered experience, that it wouldn't be painful at this moment in time.

Aster groaned, and the hand roaming about his chest paused. He opened his eyes, but Jack didn't think the other man was able to see anything, let alone an invisible ghost.

He reached over to the bedside table, and managed to fumble the drawer open. Jack moved to get a better view, cheeks frozen with embarrassment. And then he had to swallow an uncomfortable, confused sound, when he saw just what Aster had pulled out of the drawer.
One of the objects was a- a- well. It was blue. And made of hard plastic, though he thought, from the way Aster was holding it, there was just a bit of give to it. And someone very imaginative, or with a lot of experience, had made it look like an erect cock. A surprisingly normal sized one, he realized, a little smaller than Aster's.

The other object was a tube of something. Aster unscrewed the lid, and squeezed out some of the stuff. It looked like clear jelly.

Lube, he realized, and almost squeaked.

The fake cock was coated in the lube, and then Aster shifted so he could press the blue tip against his- his...

Jack blushed harder, until his hair was iced into spikes, but he didn't look away. It seemed quite impossible for Aster to fit that... up there... but somehow he managed. Aster groaned, and stroked his cock faster, and pulled the fake cock out of his... ah, his ass.

He pushed it back in, groaning again. Jack moved closer, his pulse racing. Aster looked quite... quite... words failed him, as Aster wriggled about on the bed, a blue plastic sex-toy up his ass, veins and tendons standing out on his arms as he stroked himself and slid the toy in and out. Alluring was a possible word, a good word, but Jack didn't think it encompassed everything about the scene.

Certainly, not the part where he wanted to yank that toy out of Aster and replace it with his fingers. Or better, his own cock.

Which was... erect. Jack managed to look away from Aster just long enough to blink down at his own groin. What the hell?

He shook the question of blood pressure aside, and looked back at Aster.

He'd moved closer to the bed, Jack realized, just as Aster groaned Jack's name. Jack shivered, and leaned forwards, looking from Aster's face- twisted up in an expression of pained ecstasy- to his arms, with the muscles flexing, to his cock and the toy up his ass, and back again.

Aster shivered, moaned Jack's name again, and then orgasmed. His seed splattered all over his stomach, even up to his chest, and he went boneless.

Jack's eyes were all but glowing, and he pressed one hand to the bulge in his trousers. That had been... educational.

The Australian had fallen asleep without cleaning up, or removing the fake cock from up his ass. Jack frowned, and then got one of Aster's dirty socks from the floor. He wiped Aster's stomach off-the man didn't so much as twitch- and then, feeling greatly daring, pulled the fake cock out and put it in the bedside drawer with the capped lube.

Then he took the dirty clothes out of the room to the washing machine. He had a bit of thinking to do.

Aster rolled over and groaned. His arse wasn't nearly sore enough for him to feel this good. He was alone in his bed, which meant... yup, he'd used the old standby again. A dildo was a poor substitute for a real cock up the arse, and a hand was an equally poor substitute for having his cock up someone's arse.

Preferably a pretty, young ghost's arse...
He groaned again, but not as pleased as before. Right. Jack. Wasn't proper to go thinking about him like that, he wasn't an adult yet and never would be. And he wasn't interested besides.

And, Aster reminded himself, Jack wasn't comfortable around him anymore. It wasn't too obvious; Jack just watched him now, all the time, his eyes narrow and almost glowing. Any time Aster walked into the living room, Jack would change the channel on the TV to the comedy network, even if there was a show on that he hated. He talked to Aster, still, but always perched on furniture just out of reach. He didn't offer to model for sketches, either. There was less teasing, fewer smiles, and more silences and skulking around.

Well. There went his post-orgasm happy.

He rolled back over, and reached down to pull the dildo from his ass.

It wasn't there.

Aster opened his eyes, and looked down his body, as though that might answer where it'd gone. He'd fallen asleep with it, or a similar type of toy, inside him more than once. None of them had ever fallen out.

Or cleaned him up. He hadn't done anything of the type the night before, he never did, but someone had wiped most of the mess off his stomach.

And returned the dildo and lube to the bedside drawer.

Aster shivered. Jack was the only person who could have done that. But... why? And what had he thought? Sodomy had been illegal even a handful of decades ago, never mind as many years as Jack had been a ghost.

And yet.

"Too early," he decided, and shut the drawer. He'd have a shower. Have breakfast. Wake up. And then he'd think about it.

He started the shower, and turned the temperature up past his usual preference.

Boiling himself awake might help make sense of the universe. Or just wake him up faster. Either, at this point, was acceptable.

He hissed at the heat when he got in, and then got the soap. Jack's little habit of freezing the water meant he'd gotten quite practiced at soaping up and scrubbing down as quickly as possible without missing anything.

Almost to the expected minute, the water cooled. Not quite as much as normal- and because someone had twisted the tap, instead of freezing the pipes.

"Jack?"

"Yes?"

Jack's voice had come from directly behind him. Which meant Jack was directly behind him, and his body was having an inappropriate reaction to that little fact. Aster's back stiffened, and he considered, for all of half a second, punching himself in the groin.

It wouldn't solve the problem, but at least Jack wouldn't catch sight of him with a woody.
And then Jack stroked a hand down Aster's flank.

Aster about jumped out of his skin, and did hit his head against the showerhead. "Argh, Jack, what was... uh."

Jack smirked at him. "I thought you'd like it if I touched you. You do, don't you?" He glanced down at Aster's groin. "Yeah, you do."

Aster tried to reply, but Jack was naked. Very, very naked.

And wet.

He looked the boy over, twitching faintly at the glisten of water droplets on delicate collarbones, or the curve of a hip, or the physical signs of interest. "Jack?" he managed.

"I turned the water down 'cause it was too hot," Jack explained. "You don't mind?"

No. No he didn't mind. At some point, he managed to shake his head in the negative.

"Good." Jack stepped closer. Considering the size of the shower, it only took a second step for them to be chest to chest, and erect penis to erect penis.

Aster moaned at the not-quite-contact, and pressed his trembling hands to the cool tile behind him. "J-Jack?"

"Yeah?" The boy put his hands on Aster's hips. He was a touch cool, but not cold. Aster gasped at the contrast, and bit his lower lip. "Aster?"

"Wh- wha-?"

"Oh," Jack smirked again, and rubbed his thumbs in circles over Aster's hipbones. "That."

Yes. That. Except that, whatever that was, flew out of Aster's mind while his brain turned to mush and melted out his ears. Every little circle sent jolts of pleasure straight to his groin, and if this kept up he'd come untouched and that would just be embarrassing.

Then Jack moved his hand, fingers dragging over Aster's skin, until he could wrap his hand around Aster's cock.

Coming untouched wasn't embarrassing. Coming after only two and a half pumps of Jack's hand, screaming the boy's name, that was embarrassing.

Aster shook, and clenched his eyes shut until the stars faded. When he dared crack one eye open, Jack smiled at him, and moved in even closer.

"So, good?" the boy asked.

"Yeah," Aster said. "Very." He considered asking what the hell was going on and whether or not he was dreaming, but there was a hard, fleshy object poking into the top of his thigh, and somehow a ghost had gotten an erection.

He wrapped one hand around Jack's hip, and looked down. "Want me to take care of that for you?"

Jack shivered, and pressed closer. "If you want," he mumbled. His eyes were definitely glowing, and the frost on his cheeks was competing with the quasi-hot water for life.
"Oh, I want," Aster muttered, and bent down to kiss Jack.

Jack didn't pull away, like he'd half-expected, but clumsily did his best to copy what Aster was doing. It made it easy to switch their positions, until Jack was the one pressed up against the tile and Aster was the one pressing into him.

He pulled away from the kiss, and looked down at the ghost. Jack looked more than ready to pull him right back down and continue what they'd started.

He then looked confused when Aster knelt down in front of him.

"Aster?"

The artist patted Jack's hip in reassurance, and then took the ghost's entire cock into his mouth.

Jack yelled, hands immediately grabbing hold of Aster's hair and yanking. Aster growled as the pain shot down his spine, transmuting to pleasure just in time to hit his groin. He sucked hard at Jack's dick, pulling back until only the tip was in his mouth, then going all the way back down again until his nose pressed against Jack's pelvis.

It didn't take long. Less time, in fact, than it'd taken for him to orgasm. When Jack came, though, there wasn't any liquid. Just a loud yell, a hard tug on Aster's hair, and his cock losing a bit of its desperate hardness.

Aster pulled back, and licked the taste of Jack's skin off his lips. Jack blinked down at him, and smiled oddly.

"Wow. That was. Wow. Good idea." He sagged back into the wall, blinked some more, and even as Aster watched, he faded from sight, clothes reforming on his body again.

Aster blinked at where Jack had been standing, and then shook his head. He turned the water off, got out, and dried himself off.

"Did that really happen?" he asked his reflection.

His knees ached. He had to assume it had.

Chapter End Notes

Oh look, stuff happened. Jack has adjusted to same-sex couples. Including being in one.
Aster stumbled into the kitchen, and looked about. No Jack. That was... good? Or bad? He didn't know. Presumably the whole... shower... thing... had actually happened and he hadn't hallucinated it, which meant...

It meant...

He had no idea what it meant.

Jack was a ghost. An old ghost, at least a century, maybe two. He was trapped. Aster was the first person who'd talked to him... since he became a ghost, most likely. And what other options were there? Aster's friends, who didn't visit all that often? Strangers on the street?

He clenched his fists until his arms trembled, and then sighed. Food first. Then... he didn't know what he'd do then.

"You should cook eggs."

Aster whirled around, and stared at the boy sitting on the windowsill. "Jack!"

"You... don't look happy to see me." Lie. He was happy to see Jack. Confused, but happy.

"I don't understand."

Jack raised his eyebrows. "Being happy? Cooking eggs?"

"You- shower." Aster gestured to the roof over their heads. "Why?"

The boy looked away. "I wanted to." He paused, and added, "It was fun."

Was that the only reason?

Aster moved over to the fridge, and pulled out the carton of eggs. "I need to go shopping," he muttered. With the eggs used up, he'd have nothing to eat. Unless he went shopping, or got takeout.

"I made a list," Jack chirped. "And you'll want to scramble the eggs, not fry them."

He stared down at the carton. "Is there anything else you'd like to tell me? Maybe how I'd rather cut my hair or wear my clothing?"

"I like your hair. And your clothes." Jack... did Jack just look him over and lick his lips? "Especially those jeans." He paused, and added, "You might want to change before you go out."

Confront, or go along with? Decisions, decisions... Aster heated up the frying pan while he thought about it. "Why?"

"I can see your underwear." Underwear? But he wasn't... "Or lack of it."

Aster turned and looked at Jack. Jack looked back, grinning faintly. "It's a good look for you," the boy said. "Just maybe not one you want to parade in public."
"I have no idea what you're getting at," he said. His voice shook, despite himself. "The shower, the— I think it's flirting, but it's you, I don't know. What are you getting at?"

Jack hopped down from the sill. "I like you." He paused, and then laughed. "I like you a lot. I don't know if it's love. But being around you makes me happy. Makes me feel... alive, as stupid as that sounds."

"It doesn't sound stupid." Aster swallowed around the lump in his throat. What more could a ghost want, than to feel alive?

"Anyways." Jack waved one hand, as though to brush away the faint awkwardness he was clearly feeling.

"So you... like me... which lead to you accosting me in the shower?" Aster moved away from the stove. "Why? You don't like men-"

"How do you know?" Jack tilted his head to the side.

"Because- because-" Because Jack was from that kind of era. Because his early threats had involved sodomy, with the implication that it was worse than death. Because that was how Aster's life worked; either his relationships were train wrecks, or he went about with unrequited feelings.

"I. Like. You." Jack enunciated each word very carefully. "I've laughed with you and argued with you and watched you while you worked. You explain things to me, and you don't make me feel stupid. You're a good man, and for that alone I would like you.

"But it's not just that," Jack said, volume dropping until he was almost whispering. "You make my heart race, when I don't... I want to touch you, to curl up against you and feel you, to..." He blushed frost, and looked down at the floor. "I want to kiss you. To- to make love to you. With you."

To... Aster's stomach clenched, and something warmer than mere desire made his groin tighten even as it felt like his heart was melting. Jack started twitching seconds after his confession, and icing over the floor. Clearly he wasn't nearly as confident as he'd been acting, and the display of nerves only made the warm feeling strengthen.

It had taken quite the set of balls for that confession. Aster had been on the confessing end of things enough times to know that. And Jack had done it beautifully, but now he was waiting for Aster's response.

Only fair to give him one, instead of dragging things out.

Words didn't seem quite right, though. They'd never been Aster's strength. And there certainly wasn't time enough to do even a quick sketch. Instead, he walked forward, until he could reach over and cradle Jack's face in his hands.

It felt equal parts like he was taking forever to press his lips to Jack's, and going far, far too fast. Jack moaned into the contact, and caught Aster's elbows with his hands. The kiss was sweet and slow, no matter how much Aster wanted to race forwards, wrap his arms around Jack until there wasn't a breath of air between them, press the boy back against the table and tear the worthless clothes off him.

No. Slow. Sweet. Gentle. Like the first warm breeze after a long, painfully cold winter, that's what was needed right now.

Jack moaned, and licked his lips just as Aster pulled away. His tongue skimmed, danced, over
Aster's bottom lip- and slow and sweet and gentle went out the fucking window.

He crushed Jack down against the table, so everything from the hips up was pressed against the sturdy wooden surface, and did his damnedest to get that heartbeat racing.

Jack gasped and wrapped his legs around Aster's hips. He clawed at the Australian's shoulders, getting a double handful of shirt and *pulling*. If he could have, it was quite clear he would have torn Aster's clothes off.

Fortunately or unfortunately, depending on how a bloke wanted to look at it, they were interrupted.

By the smoke alarm.

Aster reared back with a snarl. Jack looked more than a touch wild about the eyes, and didn't unwrap his legs. It made it somewhat difficult for Aster to twist around and see what had set off the damn alarm.

"My eggs," he said, and sighed.

Jack took several deep breaths, and then relaxed back on the kitchen table. He looked more than good enough to eat. "Guess you'll have to go shopping sooner rather than later."

"Yeah." Aster stepped away, once Jack let him, and took the pan off the heater. "And when I'm back? We're picking up where we left off."

"That sounds very, very good. And maybe, if you convince me, I'll show you how I take my clothes off."

Good point. Jack was a ghost. How *did* he get his clothes off?

Aster resolved to be very convincing indeed, just so he could find out.

As it turned out, Jack needed only to will his clothing away. It was as easy for him as pulling a shirt off and skimming down a pair of jeans was for Aster.

Neither of them, it turned out, wore underwear.

"Well," Jack breathed into Aster's ear, "You'll actually never know."

"Wanker." He rolled over and pinned the ghost to his bed, and then pressed kisses to Jack's mouth, his chin, along the line of his jaw and down the side of his throat. "We'll see about that."

Jack's laughter turned to groans and quiet encouragement, and his fingernails scraped deliciously up and down Aster's back.

They went further than in the shower, but not nearly as far as Aster wanted. He'd cupped Jack's buttock with one hand, and the boy had shivered and gone still beneath him. Not yet, then. There'd be time a-plenty to caress, to lick, to slick up his fingers and slide them into Jack's hole, following that with his cock...

He shivered as well, and used his hands to bring them both to completion.

Aster's semen splattered onto Jack's stomach and chest, and looked quite lovely there. Jack, as before in the shower, clearly orgasmed, but without the liquids.
He collapsed down onto the bed, half over Jack, half wrapped around him. "Well," he breathed, voice raspy. "That was really good."

"You're welcome." Jack smiled, and curled up so his face was pressed to Aster's chest. "I quite enjoyed it myself."

"Good. Good." Maybe once he got his breath back, he'd be able to do something other than just say 'good' over and over.

The ghost hummed agreement, and they stayed like that for a while, drifting in the quiet.

Jack, of course, was the one to break it.

"Your mother called."

His mother...? "Wait, what?" Aster cracked one eye open. "How'd you know that?"

"The ringing was annoying me, so I picked up the phone." Of course he did. "She knows about me?"

"Well, she knows I'm living with a ghost..."

Jack nodded. "Well, she wants a picture of me? Also, you are a horrible child and need to call her."

Aster sat up, to Jack's evident dissatisfaction. "When was this?"

"Early this morning?" Jack sat up as well, and his clothes appeared as he did. Shame, that. He'd looked quite lovely naked, and Aster said so. "Well, I appreciate you naked too, but you can't wander around without clothes all the time either. Anyways, she called before the shower."

Was it always going to be 'the shower' from this point on? The turning point in their relationship? Aster had no idea. He wasn't at all sure he minded the idea, either.

"Did she want anything else? And why're you answering the phone, anyways? I've got an answering machine."

"Apparently it's full." Jack shrugged. "That's what your mother said. I couldn't talk to her, I tried. Or at least, I tried with the telemarketers and they couldn't hear me either, so that's why you've got porn on your TV bill."

Wait, what?

It was late when he got home. Twilight, one of his most preferred times of the day, matched only by false dawn. Dinner had been laid out for him by the girl, while the youngest boy- why was it he remembered this boy's nickname, Nightlight, when he couldn't remember any of the others? Not that it mattered- had tomorrow's schedule waiting for him to review it.

The eldest boy, the cook, stood ready to serve the soup. He lifted one hand to direct the boy, but then paused. There was an odd stain on the front of the boy's trousers.

"What," he asked, "is that?"

The boy shrugged. "There was pleasure. There was liquid."

Pleasure. Liquid.
He clenched one fist against the tablecloth. Someone had found the boy's soul.

Something had gone very wrong with his spell. He turned to the second boy, Nightlight. "Clear my schedule for the next week. I need to do some research."

Chapter End Notes

Short chapter, but they do talk, the plot thickens, and Jack is responsible for the porn on Aster's cable bill.
Aster certainly had no problem with the new activity his life had taken on. Jack was a more than willing bedmate, having shown up in Aster's bed the first night after the shower - and yup, looked like the turning point would forever after be known as 'the shower' - and doing so constantly the rest of the week. Aster had no idea if Jack actually stayed in bed with him, after, since he was asleep, but the ghost-boy was there when he woke up for a bit of... morning athletics.

He managed a polite sketch of Jack for his mother, and sent it off by email. She'd probably share with Dad, who'd of course want to know where Aster had found such a pretty model. Aster would let his mother explain; she had more patience.

Tooth had called, sounding very smug the very next day. Aster had put up with the teasing; following Tooth's call had been North's, and an email from Sandy that was a nice mixture of supportive and gloating.

True friends didn't care if a bloke's boyfriend also happened to be a resident ghost.

Jack was far too amused by both the calls and the email, but he didn't say anything. Much. Instead he found new shows on the telly to obsess over, and spent a lot of time telling Aster about them. His voice made a nice soundtrack to work to. Aster got more done in a single day, with Jack chattering away at him, than he normally did in a week.

Mind, he paid for that with a sore hand and wrist after, but it was worth it. Two commissions done, except for a few final tweaks that was better done without Jack distracting him, and another started. And several ideas for a few personal works. He'd have to tuck those away where Jack wouldn't see them; it'd be a bit awkward to explain.

The rest of the week went much the same way. Aster spent time between art outside, doing some much needed gardening. If he let things get any worse, the neighbors would complain. Aster didn't much care for the creaky old gas motor he found in the garage, so he left it be and let the grass alone.

But the trees needed pruning - looked like several of them had been damaged, with dead branches hanging loose but not yet fallen - and the gardens needed weeding. It wasn't possible to do it all in one go, but a bit here and there, yeah. He managed.

Maybe he wouldn't hire a gardening service after all.

Jack kept him company during the gardening as well. Aster noticed something odd; inside the manor, inside the gatehouse, Jack looked just like a living person. A bit more beautiful than the norm, but still. Outside in the daylight, that changed. He became just a bit see through at the edges. Got himself just a touch of a glow. Became, more obviously, a ghost.

It was an interesting effect. Aster probably should have been turned off by it. But really, when had anything Jack did turned him off? His fingers itched to try to capture the effect in his art - he had an idea about filters and shading - while the rest of him itched to pin the boy down and get them both off as many times in a row as physically possible.

The neighbors would be a bit confused, if they caught sight at least. Probably better to hold off.
Jack seemed to know the direction of Aster's thoughts - that wasn't difficult - and tended to sprawl out on the couch after so Aster could pin him down for a bit of snogging and rooting.

Of course, by the end of the week he couldn't just leave well enough alone. No, he had to bring up feelings and the like.

Were they just going to stay like this for the rest of Aster's life, snogging and rooting and having sex whenever humanly possible? Aster was perfectly fine with that. He didn't need to go out on the town and parade his pretty boyfriend to everyone in sight. Though, there was something quite tempting about... never mind. He couldn't take Jack out on the town if he'd wanted to.

"Oy, Jack?"

Jack hummed, and wiggled into a more comfortable position on top of Aster. "Yeah?"

There was something unfair about how Jack never sweated, really. Oh, sometimes he seemed to, but that was generally melted frost. After a bout of rooting, Aster was dripping even without semen smeared across his stomach, while Jack was bone dry.

Not. Fair.

He ran his fingers through the ghost's hair, and smiled. Pity video cameras and ghosts didn't go together very well. He wanted to capture an image of Jack during sex, head thrown back in ecstasy, but during the main event he tended to be... distracted.

Right. Talking. Not thinking about cameras and possible exhibitionist tendencies.

"What... ah, bugger it." There was no way to ask the question without sounding like an idiot sap. "What're you after, with this relationship?"

jack looked at him as if he were crazy. "You."

"Good to know. But..." Now how did he elaborate without sounding like a crazy person? Ah, what the hell. Feelings. "Do you love me?"

Jack narrowed his eyes, the blue beginning to glow in the quasi-shadows of the room. "Are you suggesting I'd sleep with someone I don't?"

"That wasn't what I meant," he snapped. "And you know it."

Jack pressed his lips together, and then rolled off Aster. His clothes formed as he did. "What's the point? It's not like this can go anywhere."

"Excuse me? What was that?" Aster sat up. "Get back here, I'm not done talking to you!"

"What's the point, Aster?" Jack spread his hands. "I'm a ghost. You can't take me anywhere. I can't meet your family. Your friends - if they weren't mages too, they wouldn't be able to see me. And..." His face crumpled. "This is fun. But fun's not enough."

Aster's breath caught in his throat. Oh, well, good. Jack didn't want to leave him. He was just afraid Aster would want to leave Jack.

"Love is," he promised, and caught Jack by the wrist. "I don't want to leave you, Jackie. I... I'm not too good at emotions, you know that, but I love you."

"Right now," Jack said.
"Always." Aster tugged Jack back to his side, and kissed him slowly. Jack slowly melted into the contact, and moaned when Aster pulled back. "Always. Even when I'm old and wrinkled and can't remember my own name."

"That won't happen," Jack muttered. He pressed back into Aster, fingers tangled in the Australian's hair and renewed erection pressing against his stomach.

"You sure about that?" Aster grinned, and bit down on Jack's shoulder. The ghost didn't bruise. He still squeaked and moaned and urged Aster on.

"Ah - yes," Jack said, and then hissed. He banished his clothing, and slid, skin to skin, against Aster. Oh boy. He never got tired of that feeling.

"Fine." Aster licked at Jack's collar bone, and then bit down again. Jack squeaked and bucked up against him. "We'll see who's right in about sixty years."

"When I'm right..." Jack wrapped his legs around Aster's hips and squeezed. Aster growled, and pinched Jack's arse. "Hey!"

"Well, it's right there..."

Jack did a complicated twist and flip that ended with Aster pinned to the mattress and Jack happily perched on Aster's stomach. "As I was saying. When I'm proven right, what'll you get me?"

"What're you gonna want for a prize?"

Jack grinned, and pinched Aster's nipples. They immediately tightened and pebbled up. Aster hissed, and nodded. Jack did it again, and then rolled the tight buds between his fingers. Aster's eyes rolled up in his head.

"You," Jack said, once Aster had caught his breath back.

"I can manage that." He stroked up and down Jack's back, and smirked. "How about now?"

Jack pretended to look innocent. "But it hasn't been sixty years."

"Consider it a down payment..."

They didn't waste any more time on talking after that. Jack amused himself with Aster's chest, while the Australian played with Jack's hair and groped the boy's arse. His erection brushed against the curve of one buttock, but he clenched his teeth and controlled the urge to thrust up and against silken smooth skin. Not. Yet.

Soon, please god, but not yet.

Jack groaned, and pressed back into Aster's hands. "Ah, um..." He looked awkward, almost confused, and pressed back a little more.

"Want to try it?" Aster asked, and reached for his nightstand drawer.

Jack bit his lower lip. Aster couldn't help it; he propped himself up on one arm and kissed the boy, licking and nipping at that lower lip until Jack was gasping and shaking from the simple action. Only then did Aster pull back, and raise his eyebrows.

"Yes? Yes. I - try. Yes."
Good enough. Aster pulled the lube out, and slicked up two of his fingers. He left his own cock alone. Not quite to that point, he figured. Instead, he worked the tip of his finger into Jack's hole, and watched the boy's face.

Confusion. Pleasure. A bit of unease. He waited until the last faded, before pressing in more, a knuckle at a time, until his finger was all the way in and Jack didn't look uncomfortable. Confused still, but in a good way.

"Yeah, there's a reason blokes- even some straight blokes- like getting something up the rear."

"Okay," Jack said, and muscles clenched around Aster's finger. "So, now what?"

Aster grinned. "Hang on, Frostbite, and I'll show you."

"Frostbite?"

Aster crooked his finger, and then began thrusting in and out of Jack. The boy gasped and clutched Aster's shoulders. After a bit of that, Aster eased in his second finger, to no complaints. Jack looked a touch confused again, but that melted away under Aster's ministrations.

Jack came with a shout, and slumped over against Aster's chest. "Okay," he mumbled. "I get it."

"Yeah?" Aster gripped his neglected cock. Jack swatted at his hand, and shuffled down Aster's body until he was sitting on the Australian's knees. "What're you up to?"

Jack grinned at him. "Paying you back for that."

Then he bent forward and took Aster's cock into his mouth. He only managed to get about half in his mouth, but that half was a very happy half, and Aster's eyes rolled back in his head without further encouragement.

Jack did things with his tongue and lips that should have been billed as very, very illegal, and then swallowed down as much as he could when Aster came. He looked smug, with drops of semen on his lips and rolling down his chin.

"Brat."

"You love me." Jack licked his lips, and frowned at Aster. "Right?"

"Haven't I said so?" Aster folded his arms behind his head. If not for the emotional talk, everything would have been near right with his world.

"Well. Yes. But I mean you really love me." Jack finished licking his lips clean, and smiled. "That makes me happy."

"Good. I'd druther you were happy all the time."

"Go to sleep, kangaroo."

Aster arched one eyebrow, so Jack elaborated. "If you're calling me nicknames, it's only fair I return the favor."

True enough. "Come here, Frostbite."

Jack's grin was only a touch wicked. "Whatever you say, Bunny."
"Bunny?"

Jack just snuggled down on Aster's shoulder, closed his eyes, and pretended to sleep.

"Aster?" Jack walked over, and waited until the last scoop of earth was patted over the fragile bulb. "There's something weird."

"Weird?" Aster straightened up, lower back complaining something awful. "Weird how?"

"Dunno, that's why I'm telling you."

Aster brushed his hands off, and stood up. "Lead the way, then."

He paused at the sound of the front gate opening. He and Jack both turned, and grinned. North and Sandy got out of the car, and headed over to where they were standing.

"Long time no see, ya bastards," Aster called. "What's with the visit?"

North laughed. "Is needing reason to see friends? How have you been?"

"Active," Aster deadpanned. North looked a bit confused, and glanced at the garden. Sandy poked the much larger man in the side, and signed a few quick words.

At that, North burst into laughter. "Ah, I see! That kind of active!"

Jack blushed, but chuckled along with them. "Can you talk and walk at the same time?" he asked. He looked over at Aster. "It's really, really weird."

"Alright, alright, hold your horses." Aster gestured at Jack, who took that as encouragement to hop, skip, and jump towards whatever it was that had gotten him fussed. "Coming, Sandy, North?"

"Sure, why not? Is good day for walking with friends."

The two of them made sure not to walk faster than Sandy could easily keep up with, old habit for North but still something Aster had to think about now and then. They gossiped easily while they followed Jack; Tooth, Tooth's work, Tooth's little sister- news to Aster, who hadn't realized how many sisters Tooth had, or that she'd had any siblings at all- North's company and Sandy's volunteer teaching at the local school for the deaf.

Mind, being grown men with at the very least a passing claim to 'manliness', they didn't call it gossip.

But, Aster thought, amused at himself, it was gossip. Ah, well, it wasn't like grunting and scratching the family jewels got much information across.

Jack acted much like a puppy, running ahead, circling around, and coming in close to make sure they were following. It would have been annoying if Aster wasn't so besotted; as it was, he thought it was cute.

"Ghost boy has too much energy," North grumbled.

Aster grinned at him. "I like it."

"Of course you like it, energy goes to bedroom."

Sandy finger-signed something rather lewd that made North burst into laughter again. Aster hadn't
been looking, and he didn't want to know.

Jack led them to the back of the manor, looking frustrated. There, he stopped, and seemed to cast about, looking for something. He 'circled' a rough oblong, about six feet long and four feet wide, several times, before looking up at the mages.

"Here," he said. "Something here is calling to me."

"Has it always called?" North asked, translating for Sandy. His accent vanished when he did.

"Maybe?" Jack shrugged his shoulders, and peered at the unassuming patch of sod. There was a line of rock, most of them the size of Aster's fist or a little smaller, barely visible beneath the grass. Aster touched the rocks with his mage senses, and felt the outline of a vegetable garden, a kitchen garden. The rocks remembered what they'd been for, even if they'd almost vanished into the earth by now.

"Odd," North murmured, and knelt down to study the patch Jack seemed obsessed with. "Calling how?"

Jack shook his head. "I don't... There aren't... I don't have the words," he said, and frosted the grass underfoot. "It's like I should have something, and I don't. And... I don't know if it's called like this before."

Aster raised his eyebrows. "How do you mean, you don't know?"

Jack glared at him, but seemed to think the question over. "It's like an itchy nose," he said, sounding grumpy. "It didn't itch before, but it does now."

That... made about as much sense as everything else Jack had said so far. "Alright," Aster said. He knelt down beside North, and put one hand on the ground. "Let me look."

He felt uneasy a moment- he could just as easily be searching for Jack's remains as anything- but sent his mage senses down into the ground. The rocks, marking the border between garden and what had once been covered in gravel. Below that... good earth, fertile and clean. Insect bodies, worms alive and dead, but nothing human.

There was something, though... an odd bit that didn't belong. It took a bit of mental looking before he realized that whatever it was, it was made of wood. That led to figuring out a bit- a staff, almost six feet high, with an odd, crooked bit at one end- but there was something odd that made the staff... not a staff.

"Alright. There is something there... Not sure what, but I'll get it out. Just give me a tic."

"A..." Jack paused, and then asked, "You don't mean the insect, do you?"

"No."

Moving the staff up through the earth was different than using his mage senses. One was barely any more draining than using his eyes, while the other... If he wasn't digging down through the earth with his bare hands, he was still expending as much energy.

At first the staff seemed reluctant to move, but Aster's coaxing was more to the earth, anyways. The soil began to shift, rising up beneath the wood, and away from above and the sides. There was a pounding in his temples that promised a massive headache later; he really wasn't much good with this sort of thing. Encouraging plants to grow, yes. A bit of healing, he could manage. Making the earth itself move? That was a challenge.
A minute passed for every inch up through the soil, it felt like, but it'd been only five minutes when the staff began to poke out of the dirt. It was crusted with dirt and wrapped about with a few rootlets. When enough of it was out of the dirt to grab, North caught hold and pulled it the rest of the way out, in a shower of dirt and displaced grass chunks.

"Oy, no need for that." Aster patted the grass back into place, and looked up.

Jack stared at the staff with a look in his eyes, one that was normally there only during sex. Possessive, territorial, desirous... Bit odd to see it directed at a piece of wood rather than Aster himself.

"That's mine," Jack said. "My staff. My father gave it to me." He paused, and his eyes began to glow. "Someone hid it from me, all these years."

Aster looked back at the staff. "Jack," he said, and paused. "How many years?"

"Three hundred," the boy hissed, sounding angrier than he looked. Considering he was starting to edge towards 'do an exorcism now' territory...

Three hundred years. The wood should have long since rotted away. And, now that it was up in the air and not shrouded by earth and sod, the wrongness was more apparent.

Sandy stomped his foot, getting their attention. He signed, slow and careful, so that even Aster understood what he was saying.

*This staff has been touched by dark magic.* Sandy paused, and added, *Magic to tear a soul from its rightful home.*

Aster translated for Jack. But Sandy wasn't quite finished. He looked directly at Jack, then at Aster, and added one last thing.

*Death magic.*

Chapter End Notes

So, in this chapter, we had Serious Emotional Talk (tm), Plot Thickening, and the staff is found! Wheee!

in other news, my manuscript got rejected, so editing, editing, editing. High ho Silver, away!
Tooth dropped her purse on the floor, and joined the cluster at the kitchen table. "Somebody needs to learn how to send proper texts. I got a message about Voldemort and the Death Eaters setting Dementeds - and it's Dementors - on Jack's soul." She paused, and didn't quite glare at the men. "That was less than useful information. For the record."

Aster turned to Jack. "You can text, now?"

Jack raised his eyebrows, and shook his head. "Wasn't me." He paused, and added, "What's a text?"

"Text as in the electronic message or text as in-"

"I know what writing is. Electronic message? More demon-box stuff?"

"You have got to stop calling it all demon boxes!"

"Boys!" Tooth clapped her hands. "Focus. What's going on?"

North cleared his throat. "I was one to send the text. I decided better to go round the bush in case someone else saw it."

"Someone did," Tooth muttered. "And I got treated to an hour long rant about how Harry Potter celebrates child abuse, horrible puns, and why Dumbledore was the real bad guy all along because you thought to be creative."

"I am sorry?"

She glared at North. "I should hit you now."

"Yes," he agreed. "But please do not."

Sandy rapped his fist against the table. Waiting for Tooth had given him plenty of time to write out his explanations. He gave the stack of papers to North, signed a warning against reading everything in the atrocious accent, and went back to staring at the staff like it held demonic secrets.

"Yes, yes, so demanding," North muttered. He cleared his throat, held up the papers, and then paused. After a bit of rummaging in one coat pocket, he pulled out a small pair of gold-rimmed, half-moon glasses. Once they were suitably settled on his face, he held the papers up again.

"So," he said, "Sandy has written the following:

"Death magic is one of the most insidious and unpleasant practices currently known. Unlike our own magic, both elemental and powered by our personal power and external belief, death magic is powered by the suffering of others. The Mansnoozie family has stood at guard against such practitioners for generations, going back to the mist of lost history. Yet there will always be those who prefer to cheat to get what they want, or sadistic monsters for whom causing pain is the true prize, and the power a mere bauble to play with.

"Without study of Jack's staff, I cannot determine what exactly was cast upon him. I can determine that the staff is a focus. A focus for what, however, is the question." North paused, and flipped
through the rest of the papers. "All of these are diagrams. To study the magic, I assume."

Jack looked down at his hands. "So. Someone killed me with magic?"

Sandy nodded, and patted the boy's arm, as high up as he could reach. He signed, quick enough Aster had trouble with it. North translated.

"Sandy says that you must hold to hope. We will solve this. And..." North trailed off, and looked between Aster, to Jack, and back again. "And we will see what can be done."

Jack shifted sideways, until his arm pressed up against Aster's. "What, ah...?"

Tooth cleared her throat. "Sandy? Why bring us in? Support, or...?"

Sandy's smile was more than a little grim. I cannot defend myself while I study the magics. And I certainly cannot cry out if there is danger.

North muttered something under his breath. Aster and Tooth didn't hear exactly what he'd said, but Jack twitched, like a startled cat.

"You... you chose to be mute?" he asked, looking at Sandy.

The grim smile turned sad; Sandy nodded, and signed, Speak no evil. It was one of several choices.

Hear no evil, speak no evil, see no evil, do no evil... Aster shivered. How old had Sandy been? Probably not very; he was fairly certain he'd been told that Sandy'd been mute in kindergarten.

Jack shivered as well, and turned away. "What does all this mean for me? I mean, don't get me wrong, it's very nice to know I was murdered by a mage, really, it answers so many questions..."

"Jack." Aster caught the boy by the elbow, and tugged him close. "We don't know yet. But... we've got to look."

"Why?" Jack looked down and away. "It's been three hundred years. Whoever did it is long dead by now." Just like me, he didn't say.

Sandy shook his head. "What do you mean?" Tooth asked.

There are rumors that a mage can extend his life, if he does not mind stealing years from others. Sandy gestured at the staff. At any rate, I will not know for sure until after I have looked it over.

"So the person who killed me might still be alive," Jack murmured, once the signing had been translated for him.

"Looks like," Aster said.

"You will let me talk to him." Jack's eyes glowed, bright enough to serve as reading lamps, for three seconds too long. "Swear to me you will!"

"Closure?" North asked. Jack nodded. North and Sandy both nodded. Tooth stared at Jack, before inclining her head in agreement as well.

"Bunny?"

Aster took a deep breath, and then nodded. "I don't like the thought," he said. "Don't want to see you hurt. But... I'd want to talk to the rat-bastard who'd hurt me, too." He paused, and added, "Or punch
him in the throat, at least. He'd be a mage, so he'll be able to see you. And you'll be able to touch him."

Jack nodded, and leaned forward against Aster's chest. "That's what I'm afraid of," he murmured, quiet enough Aster was the only one to hear him. The others were deep in discussion over the best way to study the staff, and whether or not it would be better to move it or keep it at the manor. It left Aster free to cuddle Jack, and wonder at what the ghost had meant.

"People are exhausting," Jack muttered. He leaned forward, and wrapped his arms around Aster's waist from behind. "Why do you like them so much?"

Aster stroked Jack's wrists, where they crossed over his stomach. "You like them too. Just not when we gotta talk about your death."

Aster shivered when slightly cool fingers dipped under his jeans' waistband. "Really? Right here, against the door, in full view of the world and anyone walking by?"

"People don't walk in this neighborhood," Jack muttered. "Too plebeian. And, what, you're not interested?"

"Plebeian?" he repeated. He turned, and pressed Jack up against the still open door. "Wanna neck?"

Jack shook his head, and stood up on his toes. He pressed a kiss to Aster's lips, and worked the liplock until Aster would have happily said he'd forgotten his own name. He hadn't, but it was a good kiss all the same.

"Make love to me," Jack said. "I want to forget... Just for a little."

Aster returned Jack's kiss, with interest. "Your wish is my command."

They moved up to the bedroom, not hurrying but not dawdling either. Aster left a trail of discarded clothes behind him, to Jack's clear, faint amusement.

"Have you never learned how to pick up after yourself?" Jack asked. He gestured vaguely with one hand, clothes melting away like mist in sunlight. He pressed his hands against Aster's chest, and closed his eyes. Very clearly he was a man savoring a favorite sensation, living in the moment and enjoying every second of it.

For his part, Aster very much enjoyed Jack's touches, every firm press of palm to skin, the light, almost ticklish brush of fingertips over the contours of muscles, and the shy kisses Jack would press to his shoulders and chest during their quieter bouts of mutual pleasure.

Touching Jack was just as good as being touched. Aster knew the exact spot where the skin behind Jack's ear turned silken-soft. He knew the ghost-boy was ticklish behind the knee, but also knew that nothing could get him hard quite as fast as being licked and nuzzled right there. He knew that Jack had monkey feet; Jack would grab onto the sheets under him with hands and feet both, and he would curl his toes around Aster's calves the same way he'd wrap his fingers around the artist's forearms.

Aster hummed his appreciation when Jack's hands slid lower down his chest, to his sternum and below that to his stomach. His groin tightened, cock stiffening, and Jack laughed at the inevitable reaction.

"Oh, and you're not?" Aster looked pointedly at Jack's on erection, flushed a more pale shade but no less hard.
"Just touch me," Jack said, and fell back onto the bed.

With such a fine invitation, how could he refuse?

He didn't, quite, fall on Jack like a starving wolf on a lamb. And to be fair, Jack responded to Aster's enthusiasm with an equal amount of intensity. The touching grew more heated, gentle nips to shoulders and neck as frequent as soft kisses. Jack nudged and pushed and pulled until Aster was on his back, the ghost on all fours over him, eyes glowing and brilliant white hair dishevelled in a most becoming manner.

"Aster," Jack said, and paused in his touching. He braced his hands on Aster's shoulders. "I, ah."

"Yes?" Aster followed Jack's cue, and left his hands were they were, one on Jack's pert little arse and the other higher up, between the boy's shoulder blades. "What?"

Jack took a deep breath, that shuddered halfway through. "I saw- you were- and you don't mind being, I mean, having a, in you-"

Oh, that. Aster smirked, and tugged Jack closer. "You wanna fuck me, mate?"

Jack shivered, eyes glowing even brighter. "Is that an option?"

"Oh, believe me," Aster murmured. He reached over to the side, and fumbled the lube out of the bedside drawer. "It's very much an option."

Jack grinned, and began slicking up his cock. Aster directed him to slick up his fingers, as well. "Been quite a bit since I've been fucked proper," he said. "You'll have to do a bit of stretching first, or it'll be a touch uncomfortable for the both of us."

Jack nodded, and slid his first finger in. Aster groaned, and dropped his head back against the pillow. "Yeah," he breathed, as Jack slid his finger in and out. "Just like that."

The boy was certainly a quick learner. Aster needed only to say he was ready for a second finger to work its way in, and then a third. He could feel the tight muscles in his arse stretching and relaxing just enough that, when he asked and Jack switched fingers for cock, there wasn't even a hint of pain. Just the delicious burn of a good stretch as Jack slid his cock home.

Aster wrapped one leg around Jack's hips, and grinned up at him. "This's good," he said, and pulled the boy down for a kiss. "Now, get working. I wanna limp after."

Jack blinked. He looked a bit hazy, not unexpected, but the brain was still working in that pretty little head. "You want to limp?"

"Yes. Now get started with that." Aster waggled his eyebrows.

Jack grinned back, and pulled out slowly, until only the tip of his cock was still there, in Aster's arse. He slid back in, deliberately slow, the bastard, grinning the entire time.

Aster swallowed down a curse, and glared. "Faster!"

Jack swatted him on the hip. "Relax. Sit back, enjoy."

"This isn't gonna make me limp!" He tried to pull Jack in with the leg around the boy's hips, but Jack was stronger than he looked. A ghost thing, he supposed. And still, that relentless, slow in and out, so much more than the pounding he'd thought he'd wanted.
It felt like he was being wound tighter and tighter, and the source of that tension was the dick up his arse and Jack's fingers digging into his biceps, and after a minute he realized he was swearing at Jack, all but begging him to go faster.

Well. It'd been a while since he'd had his pipes properly snaked. When he was capable of thinking clearly again, that'd be his excuse.

"Jack!" Aster let go of the blankets, and grabbed the boy's shoulders. "More, damn it!"

"More?" Jack paused, cock only half in, and grinned. His eyes were glowing like something very bright, fuck, how was he supposed to think when he felt so goddamn ready to come and yet wasn't being given that last push he fucking needed?

"Yes!"

"Okay." Jack pulled back out, even though he'd been going in, and then he slammed his hips forward.

Yup. Prostrate just got introduced to Jack's cock. Very good first meeting. And second meeting. And third. And- and then words melted out of Aster's brain and he couldn't focus on anything except the very good feelings.

Jack was panting. His nails dug into Aster's skin, and there would be bruises. Glorious, beautiful bruises wrapped around his biceps like sexy tattoos. Aster struggled to arch his back, but he had no idea if he managed it, and then Jack thrust in again, and there were sparks and screaming and he couldn't see for several long, beautiful seconds.

When higher cognitive function returned, more or less, Aster realized Jack was still thrusting into him. Short, uneven thrusts, that ended when the boy gasped and tensed.

It was a bit weird not to feel a rush of liquid, or have to peel a used condom off his lover, but Aster didn't much care for the one, and not having Jack's seed inside him wasn't a deal breaker. He drew the ghost down against him, and straightened his legs.

Well, that was definitely a twinge in one hip. "Huh," he said, voice down to a low rasp. "I think I just might limp after all."

He felt Jack's smirk against his skin. "You're welcome," the ghost muttered. "Now go to sleep."

Well, a nap wouldn't do any harm. Aster nodded, and let himself drift off for a bit of shut eye.

Chapter End Notes

For the record, sending encoded messages about magic to your fellow mages is harder than it sounds.

Look, more smut!

Also, working on two more stories, both looking to be short - one might even stay a SINGLE CHAPTER LONG, what is this, alternate world? - and the other probably about five to ten chapters. Whee!
Aster sat down at the kitchen table, and smiled at the breakfast laid out for him. "You can cook now?"

"North can cook." Jack rubbed the back of his neck, and then went back to scrubbing the frying pan. Soapy water slid down over the knobs and bumps of his spine, and wet down the collar of his shirt. Or should have; soapy water or not, the shirt stayed dry.

It was still a nice image.

"Wait. North cooked?" He looked down at his omelet. "Alright, what'd he put in this thing?"

"No meat," Jack promised. He rubbed his neck again, and turned around. "I think I have a muscle strain."

Aster put his fork down, though he gave the omelet a second dubious look. "Muscle strain? How would that even work?"

The ghost-boy shrugged. "Not sure. But my neck's kind of sore?"

"When's the last time that happened?"

"Three hundred years ago," Jack deadpanned. "Y'know, when I was alive?" He rubbed his neck a third time, and made a face. "I mean, I don't think it hurts? But it's kind of weird."

Yeah, it sounded like it. "The magic of sex," Aster murmured, only half joking. "Can give even a ghost muscle spasms... Right then. Let me look."

He moved over to Jack, who obliged him by turning his back. Aster studied Jack's neck, never an unpleasant task, and ran his fingers down the smooth line to the shirt collar. It shifted at his touch, which for some reason he hadn't quite expected, and he moved it aside to get a better look at Jack's shoulder.

There was a handprint there.

Aster frowned, and looked away and back. Nope, still a handprint. It looked for all the world like a bruise, faded until it was only barely visible and only because he was looking close. It wasn't his; for one thing, it wasn't big enough, and for another he'd never grabbed Jack like that.

"You're bruised."

Jack twisted his head, trying to look at his own shoulder. "Can't be. No blood."

Which didn't explain how Jack got aroused, but that was one mystery Aster didn't want to solve. "Well, it's a bruise. Maybe it's something to do with your staff getting found."

Jack stopped twisting his neck into knots, and rubbed his shoulder. "I don't think I was grabbed there, before dying, but I don't really remember." Aster shivered at the casual mention of Jack's death. "It's alright, I've... adjusted. Mostly."
"Let's just go talk to Sandy about it."

"Sure." Jack pushed up one sleeve, stared at his wrist, and then held up his hand. "Look. Another one."

Aster clenched a fist at the sight of the faded handprint, and followed along behind Jack.

Sandy and North had set up their studies in the manor proper. Sandy had gone on about echoes and reverberations, while North had pointed out the stone floored conservatory, with the large windows—no glass, but that just let in fresh air, perfect for whatever magic Sandy was doing. And it was one of the most solid parts of the building, perfectly defensible, and accessible from outside.

North signaled them to keep their distance while Sandy worked; Aster didn't bother looking too closely. He'd tried helping out, but his magic wasn't the right type for this stuff. Growing plants, yes. Healing, he could do some stuff. Looking back through time and space to decipher spells cast on a body that wasn't here, through the medium of a dead chunk of wood?

Yeah, that was a bit beyond him.

At least, whatever Sandy was doing, was both colorful and visually interesting. Creating light was one of the easier things a mage could do, even considering all the disbelief in magic, but making that light into streamers that danced about... that was a challenge, but Sandy made it an art form. Rather like a ballerina turning damn challenging dance moves into something that looked effortless, the closest a human could come to flying.

Art came in many forms, and Aster tended to admire most of them.

Except those impressionist nutters. Oh, sure, there was the occasional exception to the 'these blokes are fucked in the head' rule, but Aster didn't like those paintings. Too many of them looked like splatters of paint on canvas, without so much as a hint about the 'subject matter'.

Jack looked amused when he explained his opinion, but promised to agree if Aster ever allowed impressionist artwork in the house. That was highly unlikely to happen, but it was always possible there'd be something on TV.

Of course, there was only so long any one person could watch someone else squint at a stick of wood while glowing lights whirled about his head. Aster was the first to get bored, strangely; Jack seemed to have gone into a trance.

"Oy. Wanker." Aster nudged Jack's shoulder. "Wanta make out?"

Jack blinked several times. "You think we can keep it tolerable for North?" he asked, sounding amused and looking innocent. "I mean, he's right there..."

"North! You mind if Jackie and I swap spit?"

North frowned at them, and then held up the tablet he was working on. "Go ahead. Keep quiet. There will be no problems then, yes?"

"Sounds fair." Aster looked back at Jack, and grinned. "Now where were we...?"

Jack grinned back, and plastered himself to Aster's front. It was fairly easy to lose himself in the feeling of Jack's mouth against his. Jack's lips were just a touch chapped, and a bit cooler than Aster felt was normal, but his tongue was slick and warm against Aster's, and the slight chill just made every little shift, lick, and nibble feel so very good...
The ghost-boy groaned, and pressed a growing erection against Aster's thigh. Then he flinched, pulling back.

"Ouch," he muttered, and reached up to touch his cheek.

Even as Aster watched, Jack's eye began to swell and darken, into...

Well. The only term that came to mind was 'a ghost of a black eye'...

"Jack?"

"It just... happened," Jack said, and rubbed at his eye. "What the heck?"

Sandy finished his work not long after, a bare minute before Aster would have interrupted and dragged him over to look at Jack. He studied the bruises, looked grim, and wouldn't speculate. At least, not to Aster; he did sign a few things to North, keeping his back to both the artist and the ghost. North looked grim at whatever Sandy had said, but began going on about withstanding torture when Aster ventured a question.

Really, listening to vows about flaming bamboo splinters under the nails, heads in blenders, and alligators eating his shoes, and all in that atrocious fake accent, was a bit much for a simple question. Far too much.

The two visitors left not long after that. Whatever Sandy had been doing had exhausted him, to the point that he was limping as he walked with North to the car. Aster wondered why Sandy limped, and then mentally dismissed it. Not his business. If he had to hazard a guess- he didn't really want to- he'd probably aim his speculations towards common medical conditions for midgets. Or possibly an old sports' injury; it was Sandy, after all.

He and Jack walked back to the house. Aster didn't know about Jack, but he was rather leery of starting anything. Not that he was sure of a co-relation, but Jack had gotten a black eye while they'd been making out.

The resolution to keep his hands off lasted until evening, when Jack climbed into his bed, deliciously naked.

The rather enjoyable proceedings were cut off when Jack was hit in the groin. Aster had no idea what could have done that, but it'd clearly hurt. Jack had jerked, screamed, and vanished.

Aster spent the rest of the night awake and pacing the hallway, unable to settle down.

Jack showed up halfway through the next morning, looking miserable and worried. "I don't know where I went," he admitted. "But this morning I was in the manor, up on the second floor. Lots of ice, the floor might collapse now."

"But you're alright?"

"I can walk." Jack shrugged, and huddled up against Aster. "It's definitely improvement."

Aster told Sandy the moment the man arrived. Sandy looked concerned, and went back to his studies with an almost worrying intensity.

"He knows something," Aster muttered. He put his pencil down, and leaned back from his light table.
"Of course he does." Jack flinched a little when a new bruise appeared on his jaw - fingerprints - and continued flipping through one of Aster's old sketchbooks. "Or he suspects. He's not saying anything until he knows for sure."

Aster sighed, and picked up his pencil again. He put it down after several minutes of not doing anything.

"Huh."

He didn't turn around at Jack's comment; it was one he'd made before when he'd looked over something he'd particularly liked. He had a fondness for Tooth's "Queen Toothiana" character, it seemed, and he'd spent a full fifteen minutes mocking North for commissioning artwork with North as Santa.

"A giant rabbit... fucking... yup, that's me."

Aster froze, and spun around on the backless stool. "Jack?" Oh. Loose papers. Right, he'd put those sketches in one of... his old sketchbooks... Damn it. "Ah, Jack? I can explain."

"Explain?" Jack moved one page to the side, and looked at the next. "Explain what, that you like drawing furry porn? Who is this guy, anyways? And why did you give me pointed ears?"

Aster mourned for the days when Jack didn't know what 'furry porn' was, and wondered if he'd fit under the floorboards. He very badly wanted to hide under them.

"Aster?" Jack looked up, and grinned. It was horribly wicked. "Well?"

"Ah, well. Ah. I'm not going to do pictures of myself," he mumbled. "Not when I'm putting this up on my page."

"Other people are going to see this?" Jack looked down at the papers again, apparently ignoring Aster's blush. "Do they like it?"

"Been asking for more, yeah."

Jack nodded, and raised his eyebrows at another picture. "I don't think I can bend like that," he said. "Wanna try?"

"Jack!"

The damn ghost smirked at him. "Did you think I'd be upset, Bunny-butt? You made me look pretty. And rabbit fits you. Now go do arts. I'm going to enjoy myself."

Why had he thought Jack would be embarrassed or upset, again?

"Oh, we'll have to try this position later..."

"Please tell me you're not taking notes."

"Why would I take notes? You drew it out."

North couldn't get the scrambled eggs onto Aster's plate fast enough. "How can you eat it without bacon?" he asked, but not as though he was looking for an answer.

"Why do you have to contaminate my fridge with meat?"
Jack snorted, and hopped up onto the window sill. He had to go halfway through the glass to stay there, but he managed it.

"Contaminating the ice box with meat is better than contaminating it with melted tomatoes," Jack pointed out. "How have you survived this long?"

Aster ignored him. "And why do you have to slaughter a pig every morning, North? What'd the poor animal ever do to you?"

North dropped bacon into the pan. Aster would never admit it, but it actually smelt good. He wouldn't touch it, but there was nothing against smelling the air, was there? "Pigs were born tasty."

"You are a sick, sick man."

North grinned at him. "I am not one with necrophilia."

"Necrophilia?" Jack asked. Aster ignored him again.

"Doesn't count. Mage. Different rules apply."

"Oh, is very nice way of saying you don't want to admit fetish."

"Fetish?" Jack asked, ignored yet again. "What does a magic leather bag have to do with anything?"

"Ignore them," Tooth told him. "I am."

"No one's answering my questions, and they're going to regret it," Jack muttered.

Aster pointed his fork at North. "Jack's the best boyfriend I've ever had." He paused, and added, "And that says so many sad things about my dating history, actually, that the dead guy's the best one."

"Hey! Somebody stop and explain what you're all talking about!"

Sandy twisted around in his seat and started signing at Jack. The ghost huffed, and folded his arms.

"That's not exactly helping."

Tooth smirked down at her tablet, and did the flicky-hand gesture that turned the page. "Oh, that's interesting. 'Tsar Lunanoff' is finally making the stocks public. Now what do they do...?"

Jack dropped down off the window sill, and moved to stand in the middle of the table. "Alright. I've got questions and I... Did you just slide a plate through my stomach?" he asked, turning to North.

"Is not like it hurt you," North replied.

Aster scowled, and opened his mouth to object, and then... stopped.

There was something, just on the edge of hearing, of sight, an odd smell he couldn't place...

Magic. Unfamiliar and odd, with an oily texture to it. It seemed to creep in from the shadows, circling the five of them at the table. Aster couldn't see anything, but he had a distinct reluctance to go anywhere near that... nasty feeling. Which meant no going out through the door or any of the windows, damn it.

Jack looked around, his already pale face somehow going paler. Aster had the feeling he could see
"Aster?" Jack said, and reached for the Australian's hand.

Aster reached out to take it, just as the magic struck.

One moment, he'd been sitting at his breakfast table, with dark nastiness holding the five of them in place. The next, the nastiness went for Jack with unbelievable speed, hitting him and making the ghost-boy stagger. And vanish.

"Jack?" Aster stood up, and looked around. "Jack!"

Jack staggered, and fell to his knees. It hurt, it-

It hurt.

He took a deep breath, which felt necessary in the way breathing hadn't been, for three hundred years. Then he pressed two fingers to the side of his neck, where the big vein was.

There was a pulse.

A very fast pulse, going at speeds that suggested he was maybe panicking a little bit.

He shoved back up onto his feet, and took an instant inventory. Clothed, but not in his clothes. Some kind of odd slacks and a white, collared shirt. Shiny black shoes, and presumably he was wearing socks. The slacks didn't have pockets, neither did the shirt, and he had to breathe and he had a pulse. His knees hurt where he'd slammed them into the floor, which was covered with a throw rug.

The rug had odd symbols, some of which looked familiar from Sandy's work over the last few days, woven into it.

"You are... back."

Jack stiffened, and lifted his head. Very slowly, he turned around.

"You," he said. The tall, thin man smiled. "So I wasn't dead after all?"

"You are of no use to me dead," the man said. "Now then, I have a few things to take care of. I will be back in a few hours to begin the ritual. It will be done right this time, and then there will be none of that nonsense with physical reactions."

The man left the room, and turned the light out as he did.

Jack tried to step off the carpet, and couldn't. The symbols woven into it glowed faintly when he tried, and he felt an odd, electrical tingle against his hand when he tried to push his way out.

Stuck and alone, he realized. It'd be a miracle if Aster knew what had happened, and another one if his boyfriend was able to arrive in time to prevent... whatever was going to happen.

Jack fell to his knees again, and had a proper fit of hysterics.

It seemed the appropriate thing to do.
Well, *someone* had to term it necrophilia!
Chapter Nineteen

Tooth grabbed him by the shoulder, wrenched him around, and slapped him across the face. "Hysterics won't help anyone! You need to calm down if we're going to find Jack!"

Aster shut his mouth and forced air in and out of his lungs at a steady rate. "But - he's a ghost! What could have - and how - and why?"

Sandy signed something; Aster saw the movement of the man's hands, out of the corner of his eye, but he didn't look away from Tooth.

"Sandy would know," North said, presumably to Tooth. He certainly wasn't talking to Aster. "Magic is very near to same as on staff."

"What?" Aster near about gave himself whiplash, he turned to look at Sandy so fast. "What do you mean, the same?"

_Nearly_, Sandy signed, looking annoyed. _It will take further investigation to be sure._

"Well? What're you waiting on, a message from the moon? Let's go investigate!"

Sandy frowned at him. _Have you any idea how dangerous this magic is? We must go slowly and carefully-

"Whoever it is has Jack _now_," Aster protested. "You've got an hour to set up whatever safety precautions you want, and then I'm taking over if you won't look!"

The mute mage scowled, but nodded his agreement. Aster nodded back, and then headed for his bedroom. He had a few supplies to gather up, if he was going to contribute anything to the investigation.

Jack straightened up out of his huddle, though he didn't move much beyond simply lifting his head.
His sense of time, never very sure to begin with, was further distorted by the dark, changeless room. His heartbeat was too unfamiliar a sensation for him to use it to measure time, and besides, he kept getting, well, panicky and away his heartbeat would go.

Damn it! If only he knew more!

Maybe if he hadn't spent so much time - what was the term, rooting? - with Aster, and spent more time asking questions about magic and all, he might have had a clue about what to do! But no, he'd had to give in to temptation, and touch that warm, smooth skin with the interesting tattoos, and feel the way those hard muscles flexed under his hand...

Jack blushed to the roots of his hair when he felt his penis stir. It was a - a very different feeling from the same thing happening as a ghost. Very different. Mostly because, wow, imagined blood flow and real blood flow were quite... different.

As evidenced by how difficult it apparently was to think.

Jack shifted, which - oh-kay that felt different - put pressure on his groin, which only made him even more aware of how... stiff, things were.

Yes. Stiff. And sensitive! Jack wished the pants weren't so tight, but even when he stood up they pressed against... parts... in a way that made things very uncomfortable.

He pressed one hand to his groin, which seemed to help. Jack groaned at the sensation, one that was familiar but also so much more intense than what he was used to. And he'd thought being aroused as a ghost was enough to make him fly apart into pieces! No wonder Aster was always so enthusiastic for the slightest touch, because God only knew how good Jack felt right now, and apart from the hand to his groin and the tight pants, that was it for touch.

He shivered, and managed to fumble the button on his pants open. Then he pulled the zipper down, very carefully.

... Why wasn't he wearing any underwear?

Jack frowned down at himself for all of half a second, and then grabbed his cock in one hand and began to stroke himself. This part was the same, though he fell to his knees from the intensity of... everything.

What would it feel like when he touched Aster like this? And was touched?

Jack almost bit through his bottom lip when he came, needing to yell and needing to keep quiet.

He wiped his hand off on his trousers, before doing his pants back up. Well, that had felt good. And...

Huh. His semen had landed on the rug. More specifically, it had landed on one of the symbols, which was now glowing a pale gray color. And spitting sparks.

Jack touched the tips of his fingers to his bleeding lip, and considered the glowing symbol.

It was worth a try.

Aster ignored the others' expressions when he walked into the conservatory. Well, they could rack right off, because like hell he was going to do this any other way.
He'd switched out his clothes for a leather wrap about his loins, one that'd been gifted to the first Bunnymund in Australia by one of the local shamans. There were marks, ink or charring, which matched Aster's shoulder and back tattoos. He wore bracers on his arms, with similar patterning though of a much newer make, and a fully modern bandolier just so he had something to hold his boomerangs.

The last time he'd done a magic ritual with these yobbos, he'd done it as a 'tank would, and look where that'd ended up!

... Okay, so Jack had ended up sane from the botched ritual, and Aster had gotten a boyfriend out of the deal, but that wasn't the point.

"Bunny," North said, stammering only a little. "Why are you naked?"

"And where did you get all those muscles?" Tooth added, looking him over appreciatively.

Sandy just shook his head, looking resigned and amused both.

"This is traditional gear for a magical undertaking in Australia," he said, and then coughed. "Well, with a few modern touches." Aboriginal shamans hadn't worn the bracers, for instance, or the bandolier, but there was enough European influence to him that he needed the touch of armor and the weapons.

"It's a pity you're too bulky for me," Tooth murmured. "And gay. That's also a shame. Why are all the good ones taken?"

Aster didn't roll his eyes, but he wanted to. "Focus, Tooth!"

"You come in here wearing a little scrap of leather and nothing else, and you expect me to focus?"

"Please?"

Tooth blinked, straightened up, and smiled. "Focus. Is me. Shall we get started?"

The other two nodded, and Sandy directed them all to the circle he'd set into the floor. Just where he'd gotten yellow sand, that glowed, he didn't say and Aster didn't ask.

"You realize if that doesn't come out of the floorboards," Aster said, even as he stepped over the circle.

"I was watching, and still no idea how sand became imbedded in wood," North muttered to Tooth.

Sandy looked innocent, and then he set the staff in the middle of the circle. The curved end pointed north-east, while the other end marked south-west. Aster was pointed to the south, no doubt because that was where Australia was. Tooth went to the west, Sandy went to the north, and North took the default of East.

Perhaps not the traditional layout, but they weren't a traditional group.

Aster hoped that it worked better this time than it had last time. At least they weren't setting their selves out according to the elements they used.

North readied himself with two handfuls of flame. The floorboards around Aster began to sprout tiny twigs with even tinier leaves. The air around Tooth began to swirl.

Sandy looked at them, making sure to meet everyone's eyes, and nodded. He lifted his hands, and
began to weave light around them.

Aster followed what Sandy was doing as best he could, but it looked like the light-weaver was using a ritual that belonged to his family. And of course, it wasn't an exorcism, which was rarely taught and even more rarely recorded - correctly. Unless you belonged to a Church or Chapel, in which case the ritual only worked if you were a priest of the religion in question...

He dragged his attention back to the spell Sandy was crafting. He recognized a very few of the symbols formed in light, only to twist into new symbols. Even then, he was guessing. Surely that was a stylized flame - but what was that odd, twisting shape that looked like it was moving even though it remained perfectly still? At least half of the symbols looked like the picture puzzles, with the stairs always going down and the faces in the cup.

He never had liked those things.

Aster fed energy to Sandy, who used it in his spell. He was aware, in a distant sort of way, of North and Tooth doing the same thing; a sensation of warmth and a breeze, without their actually being either, funneling towards Sandy who took it, transmuted it, and added it to his spell work.

For the longest time, he was aware only of the steady drain on his own energy, and the slow passage of time. Sandy continued to work, the lights he was weaving augmented by an increase in sunlight as the day moved towards noon. It got to the point where, frankly, Aster went into something of a trance, aware distantly of what was going on but mainly about how much his feet hurt.

And then the staff began to glow.

Aster blinked, and looked closer. The wood - it was strange, it looked as though the core was glowing through the wood, or - no, that wasn't quite right.

There was a shadow over the staff, very like the magic that had attacked and stolen Jack from his kitchen. The staff itself was glowing through the shadow, a bright silvery blue, in contrast to the gold-white light of Sandy's magic. The silvery light grew brighter, until it appeared the shadow was beginning to crack, letting even more radiance shine through.

Sandy grinned, if his expression could be called that - there were teeth - and gestured with his hands. It wasn't sign language, or not American Sign Language.

It was effective.

The shadow on the staff broke, vanishing in an instant. The silver glow flared bright like a camera flash, for a full second bright enough that their shadows stretched out behind them, even with the bright noon-tide sun and Sandy's light-weaving.

When the glow faded, the staff looked normal. It had stopped glowing, completely, though the wood sparkled oddly all the same. Aster stared at it, and wondered just what would happen next.

Spinning. Spinning happened next.

It was the creepiest thing he'd ever seen. Sandy had drawn the light streamers back from the staff, and no one touched it. Yet the wood began to scrape against the old floorboards, as it began to turn. It picked up speed, until it looked like, for all the world, a compass with a magnet stuck to the back.

Tooth gasped, but Aster couldn't look away from the staff. It was beginning to slow, until it finally came to a stop. The curved top pointed towards one of Burgess' suburbs, or possibly further.
"Is it pointing to where Jack is?" he asked.

Sandy nodded, and then paused. He quickly signed, *It points to the nearest magic similar to what took Jack.*

Like calling to like... "For that to work, wouldn't the magic on the staff also be similar?" Aster asked.

Sandy nodded again.

Aster frowned. "So you're telling me that whoever took Jack is either the same person who cast the death magic, or... what, related? From the same teaching line?"

Most likely related. *My cousin had a student, not a relative, and though they used the same methods their magic was very different.*

Well, there was that, but Aster wasn't going to discount possible teacher-student descendents either. One example did not make a law.

"Is it safe to touch the staff?"

North moved before Sandy could reply, and picked the staff up by the crook. "Ah! It is *cold!*" He let go, and it wobbled and fell towards Aster.

He caught it on automatic, and felt... wood. Ordinary wood, perhaps smoother than the weathered appearance would have suggested, but nothing more. Certainly nothing worse. "Feels right to me," he said, and tapped the butt against the floor. "Now how are we going to tell which way to..." He paused, and turned in a slow circle. "Huh."

"What is it?" Tooth asked. She moved from her spot in the circle, but only after Sandy gave the nod. The ritual must have been over, then.

"I can sort of get a feel?" He put the staff down, which shifted just enough to go back pointing in the right direction. "Not anymore."

"Skin contact," North suggested, and rubbed his hand. "But I cannot touch it!"

Tooth pressed a finger to the staff, and made a face. "Me either. It's like touching ice!"

"But I can," Aster said, even as Sandy made his own test. And apparently failed, if the grimace meant anything.

"So it seems." North gestured to the staff again. "So! Take up the weapon and let us go hunting for dark mages!"

Aster turned. "I'll just get my bike."

"Actually, Bunny. Perhaps you should put clothes on first?"

It was an odd house, for the area. Older, for one thing; it had clearly been built back before suburbs. It was a two story, stone-brick building, with dark windows and ragged lawn, and hemmed in on all sides by single story, ranch-style dwellings with tan or beige siding. The house next to their target had a fancy, new-looking car in the driveway; the house to the other side had children's toys scattered on the front lawn.

" Seems a bit obvious," Aster said.
"But we've circled the block five times. We're being led here." Tooth rolled up the cuffs of her sleeves. "I'm going in."

"Wait!"

Tooth marched across the road, all the way up to the front door. With nothing else for it, the three men followed, aware of the occasional look they were getting from the neighborhood residents, but unable to do much about it.

Tooth knocked on the door, and then switched to pounding when there wasn't an immediate answer.

"We don't even know if anyone's home!" North caught Tooth by the arm, and tugged gently. "We should-"

The front door opened at that moment.

Aster looked the man over. He looked like the cliché of a dark mage; tall, thin, with short black hair, glowing yellow eyes, gray skin of all things, and black robes.

Tooth pulled free of North and punched the man in the mouth. He fell back, blood leaking from the split lip.

"Alright you," she hissed, looking more like Queen Toothiana than Aster had ever seen her. "What have you done with Jack?"

Chapter End Notes

Yes, Aster put clothes on. Such a shame, considering...
The dark mage gawked up at Tooth, and then made a belated effort at scrambling backwards. She stepped on the hem of his robes - which, strangely, looked more like a nightgown than robes - pinning him in place.

"Oh no," she hissed. "You're not going anywhere until you tell us-"

There was a blur of white, and Aster blinked and did a double take. The boy standing over the mage was all of nine or ten years old, with white hair and blue eyes. If Jack had been turned into a school boy, he'd have looked like this child.

The child stamped his foot, and made shoving gestures at Tooth.

The boy was a ghost.

"Nightlight!" the dark mage yelped. "Get back inside!"

The boy shook his head, and glowered up at the four of them.

"Nightlight!" Another ghost, this one a girl halfway between the child's age and Jack's, ran into the small entryway. "Pitch! You lot - what're you doing to Pitch? You leave him alone, you bullies!"

Aster's jaw, very slowly, dropped towards the floor. He wasn't alone; he was somewhat satisfied to see North was just as dumbfounded as he was, while Tooth had left off her threatening to look from the dark mage - Pitch? - to the boy, to the girl, and back again.

Sandy looked thoughtful. That was never a good thing.

The light-weaver stepped forward, gently nudging Tooth to the side and, not incidentally, of the hem of the man's robes. Sandy bowed his head, and then signed a quick request.

North yelped. "Sandy! We can't just talk with dark mage!"

Sandy looked back at North over his shoulder, and raised one eyebrow. North shut his mouth.

"And why would I want to talk with you?" The dark mage asked. He wiped at his mouth.

Sandy signed a few more things. The dark man scowled, but nodded.

"Very well. Come in, then. We will have tea," he announced. "Earl gray, hot."

Aster frowned at that. "Did you just make a Star Trek reference?"

Everyone turned to look at him, with varying degrees of surprise and confusion. He blushed. "Jack's a bit rabid about that show, but only the, what's it, one with the French captain?"

"And just as obviously," the dark mage said, "you have no interest. Stop standing there and come in. The neighborhood watch is going to be by anyways, there's no need to escalate matters with you lot drawing attention."
They shuffled in and stood awkwardly in place while he closed the front door, dabbed at his mouth again, and led the way into an old fashioned parlour. It was an eclectic mix of styles, Edwardian, Victorian, and one of the earlier Georges. The two ghosts each took a chair, glared warnings when North went to take the third chair, leaving the four of them the two uncomfortable looking couches.

Aster sat down first. Surprisingly, the couch wasn't that uncomfortable. Nothing a bloke would want to lounge on, or spend the night on, but it wouldn't make his arse go numb either. He nodded at the others, who each took their seats. North and Sandy sat together on one couch, and Tooth sat down beside him.

It took several long, discomfited minutes before their putative host returned. He was wheeling a tea trolley, and for some reason Aster couldn't look away from it.

Perhaps it was the doilies. He was pretty sure doilies were supposed to be white. Not electric pink, yellow, and green.

The china was more what he'd expected; the fragile bone china that had been so expensive before factories and now cost about fifty dollars a pop. This stuff looked older, and when he felt the bottom of his cup, there was a maker's mark he didn't recognize.

"There is sugar in the bowl if you want it," their host said. He sat down on the remaining chair, a mug of tea in his hands. Aster considered the man, and decided that if he hadn't been such an obvious dark mage, he might have made a good model. Not like Jack, but a good model all the same. He had good bone structure.

"Thank you," Tooth said. She disdained the sugar bowl, but North made up for it; he dumped nearly half the bowl of sugar into his tea.

Their host winced, but didn't comment. "So. Who is this Jack, and why do you think I've had something to do with him?"

Sandy began signing. The dark mage - though he wasn't acting very dark, was he? - watched with every appearance of understanding.

"I see," he said, when Sandy finished. They both took a moment to sip their tea. "Well, fortunately I can both explain and help. It seems that you have run up against someone I have... I'll be honest, a vendetta against."

Tooth scowled at him. "How can we trust anything you say?"

The mage paused, and frowned at her. "The man that has abducted your friend's spirit..." He looked over at the young boy. "This is my son, Nathanael, called Nightlight. What was done to your friend was done to Nightlight, and to Katherine here."

"He tried to turn us into zombies!" the girl blurted. The mage turned a parental look on her - Aster recognized it from his own Dad - and she hid the lower half of her face behind her hands.

"Yes, well. I was getting to that, Katherine."

"Zombies?" North asked.

The doorbell rang before anyone could reply. Their host looked, briefly, like a man facing the gallows, before he straightened his shoulders.

"I'll see to that. Drink your tea, I shan't be long."
Aster leaned over to the side and shamelessly eavesdropped.

"Kozmotis, dear, you wouldn't believe what Lizzy just told me - oh, your poor lip, look at that. You'd better get some ice on it, dear, or you'll swell like you wouldn't believe."

"Hello again, Mrs. Smith-Rhodes. I'll be sure to do that."

"Good, good. Now what's this about some punk girl punching you in the mouth?"

"Punk girl?" Tooth muttered, beside him.

Aster hushed her.

"A misunderstanding," their host said smoothly. "I'm afraid one of my work colleagues happened to... stretch the truth..."

"Oh! Well, I hope you've explained matters."

"We've just been talking. Thank you for your concern, ma'am."

"Ma'am! How many times have I told you to call me Judy, Kozzy?"

Aster began to grin. Kozzy?

He heard... Kozzy... sigh. "Is that everything, Mrs. Smith-Rhodes? Only I've been leaving my guests alone..."

"Oh, dear me, yes. If you need any help, just give a holler, I'll be along in a jiff. Oh, and be sure to put some roses into your front garden, won't you dear? Roses are one of my favorite flowers, and can you imagine the sight of them climbing up the side of your house? No, no, I can let myself out, you go back to your guests, dear."

Aster heard the sound of the door opening and closing, and then the lock being thrown. He did his best to tamp down on his mad grin before... Kozzy... came back into the room, but figured he wasn't too successful, if the man's expression said anything.

"Right," the man growled, and then tossed his tea back as though it was a shot of vodka. "Never," he said, pointing the empty mug at the room in general. "Never get shanghaied into a neighborhood association. If I could afford to move, I'd do so just to get away from her." He shuddered, and poured himself another cup of tea.

"No," the girl, Katherine said. "You'd pay her to move and stay here."

The boy Nightlight signed at their host - ah, that was how he'd followed along with Sandy. Aster caught something about a haunted house and a - a booger man? Boogieman, surely.

"Perhaps. Perhaps." Their host sat down, and eyed them. "Very well. I am Pitch Black, also known as Kosmotis Pitchner - though really, Pitch is preferable. It's the name on all my legal paperwork at the moment."

There was a quick round of introductions after that. Aster wondered about that one phrase - "at the moment" - but didn't ask.

"So." Pitch set the teacup aside. "Tell me first about your friend, I don't want to prejudice you with my story."
North pointed at Aster. "You are best to tell story, he is your boyfriend."

"Boyfriend?" Pitch raised an eyebrow. "Tell me, is Jack a... ghost?"

"Oy!" He was blushing. He was actually blushing. "It's not - yeah, he is, but it's not like that!"

"No? And how old is Jack? And how old are you?"

"He's over three hundred years old," Aster shot back. "And my age is none of your business!"

Pitch sniffed. "Nightlight is almost five hundred years old, but I wouldn't let him date."

Aster blanched. "Ah, no. Jack's more... physically adult..."

"Good. That's something, at least. Continue, then."

Aster frowned, but recounted the last several months, from moving in and meeting Jack, to the botched exorcism and Jack's resulting sanity, to the morning's disappearance. "An' then the staff pointed here," he said.

"Following the law of similarity... of course it would, I have two more of his ghosts." Pitch stared into his cup of tea, and sighed. "I believe it is my turn to talk, then."

"To start with, my name used to be Kozmotis Pitchner of the Mansnoozie clan, to translate everything into English."

"What would it be before translation?" Tooth asked.

"Hm?" He looked up from the teacup. "Oh, ah, something like... Mhanainn codlata? It's been long enough I don't quite remember," he admitted.

"The Mansnoozie clan," Aster repeated. He looked over at Sandy, who looked like the proverbial detective who had solved the impossible mystery.

"Yes, quite." Pitch sat back in his chair. "We were guardians of the Isles. Puck, or the one who inspired Shakespeare's Puck, was one of our family... Well, I digress. To make a long story short, one of my cousins went... off."

"Off," North said.

Sandy began signing. *Embraced what we had always fought?*

"Necromancy," Pitch agreed. "Or something enough like it to make no difference. He wanted to live forever, and didn't much care what it would take."

Sandy frowned at that. Pitch nodded. Sandy then looked horrified.

"I first became involved when it came clear that there was someone, well... murdering people in their beds." Katherine reached over and patted Pitch on the arm. Nightlight hopped down off his chair, and climbed up into Pitch's lap. "I was sent to investigate. I wasn't the only one, mind, but..." He paused, and stroked the boy's hair.

"When I was away, my wife, my daughter, and my son were..."

"What?" Aster breathed. He looked down at the ghost child, who stared back.
Discounting his coloring, the boy looked a great deal like Pitch, now that he was looking.

"My wife and daughter were killed only," Pitch said. "It would seem that this magic he uses works only upon the virginal and mages. My wife, quite obviously, wasn't the one, and my daughter wasn't the other. My son, Nightlight," he nodded to the boy in his lap, "was both. And on him, the spell worked."

"What spell?" North asked.

"The individual's soul is torn from the body, made a living ghost, if you will. All the attributes of a ghost, but an exorcism," he looked over at Aster, "won't work, as the tie to the body remains. And from what you told me, that wasn't even a real exorcism." He sniffed again. "Improvising is all well and good for some things, but when it comes to spirits... never mind, that was my specialty. Urging the lingering ghosts on and banishing the unquiet dead."

"I thought we did rather well," Tooth muttered.

"So far as jolting your friend back into reality, yes," Pitch said. He smiled faintly at Tooth. "It would not have been needed if I'd known about him; I would have taken him back here at once, the way I did for Katherine."

"How did you find out about this?" North asked.

"Oh, Nightlight came and told me. He was bound to the place of his 'death', but I had come home after all. He explained everything. He could talk, then."

"What happened?"

Pitch pressed his lips together before replying. "It seems, from what I've managed to find out, that what happens to the body happens to the spirit. The inverse was also true. When Nightlight explained what he knew to have happened, his body was talking as well. There are two nerves, one to either side of the neck." Pitch touched his own neck. "Sever them, and... it is a more effective way of rendering someone mute then merely cutting their tongue out."

Aster wasn't the only one to blanch.

"Once he'd muted Nightlight, the mage came after me. During the fight..." Pitch sighed. "I am not too clear on what happened. Our magic, style and element, were quite similar. Somehow it all got tangled. And I haven't aged a day since then."

"And he...?" Tooth asked.

"Still alive. He created Katherine next. I was able to find out when the effects rippled through the place our magic was fused. Unfortunately, when I showed up to confront him again, he discovered I could sense him that way, and he managed to create a block. I was unaware he had made any further servants."

Aster shook his head. "I don't understand why'd he'd do this. Not that I know much about necromancy, but if he wants servants, couldn't he just... dig someone up from a graveyard? And how's this made it possible for him to live so long?"

"'Any old body' will not work. And if you don't mind, I won't explain further about that. Simply take my word as met that, had he undertaken traditional necromancy and the traditional creation of servants, he would have been found out from the blighted land and wide-scale death. He would never have been able to hide. Secondly, it is my belief that in using virginal mages for his magic, he
need not steal years from many lives cut short, but can use the magic siphoned off from the bodies to fight the aging process.

"I had been under the assumption that he had two mages, but having three to draw on answers many questions I've had about his abilities."


Pitch frowned at him. "Then if Manny has done what I expect, repeating the spell will kill your friend. Time is of the essence."

They all sat bolt upright. "Kill?" Aster asked. "How long do we have?"

"It will be the dark of the moon tomorrow," Pitch said.

"The spell always takes place on the dark of the moon," Katherine said. "I don't know why."

North stood up, and then paused. "Wait. Manny?"

"Ah, yes." Pitch cleared his throat. "About that. Manfred Lunanoff. He was also one of the Mansnoozie clan. A close cousin of mine. Had a clever little trick with using the moon to scry..."

"And is a necromancer," Tooth whispered. "Isn't he?"

Pitch nodded. "I rather fear so. Fortunately, one good thing is with this."

"Oh?" Aster asked. "The oldest, most respected mage in North America also happens to be a necromancer who's, what, five hundred years old? M' de facto will die if we don't stop one of the richest men in the world from enacting a necromantic spell tomorrow night. Just what about this scenario is good?"

The man stood up, and set his son on the chair. "Quite simply this. We know where he is. It gives us time to plan, instead of searching blindly."

Chapter End Notes

Who called it?
Jack huddled back down in the center of the circle, this time balanced on the balls of his feet. It should have felt awkward, all unbalanced, but it didn't. And the circle... He'd wiped the semen away, or at least into, the carpet. He'd been able to touch the sigil he'd accidentally splattered. And though he couldn't cross the circle, it didn't seem to repulse his hand quite so much.

He heard the door open, and peeked over his folded arms. The tall man was backlit, and after the darkness of the room, the light out in the hallway was blinding. He blinked, and squinted, but otherwise didn't react.

The man tossed a plastic bottle of water into the circle, and then a bag of what Jack knew would be very salty pretzels.

And then the man shut the door, locking Jack in the darkness again.

He picked up the bottle of water by feel, and tested the lid. It had already been opened once. According to the shows he'd watched, on the demon-box, that meant that something had likely been added. Like a slow poison, or just something that'd make him sleep.

"I don't think so," he whispered, and set the bottle down beside him. The bag of pretzels wasn't even an option, and short of grinding them all to a fine powder, useless.

Even then, what would he use the powder for?

Wait. Salt.

There was salt on the pretzels. Therefore, any pretzel powder would also have salt mixed in.

What had Aster said about salt? That it clogged the arteries? No, that wasn't it. Something else. He thumped the side of his head, but that didn't seem to help. He grimaced, but opened the bag. He could start grinding now. Maybe whatever it was would come to him if he didn't think.

Grinding the pretzels didn't require much thought. And since he was trying not to think about why the salt was important...

Jack clenched his teeth. He was alive again. Or... he'd always been alive, but separated from his body? He didn't know. It wasn't like people could be dead for three hundred years, then come back to a perfectly preserved body.

At least, not outside science fiction.

Or fantasy, he supposed. Although there were so many questions with fantasy! How did the magic work? Where did the power come from? A lot of that stuff the mage or witch or wizard did, if the power came from them, they'd keel over dead. And the so-called mythical creatures! No way could a dragon breathe fire, it'd blow up its own head!

And salt could disrupt magical energies.

Jack paused in his work, and stared into the darkness. Salt could be used to support magic, he
remembered, especially earth magic, whatever that meant. It could also disrupt something that had already been set up, like...

Like the circle he was trapped in?

Jack got a pinch of pretzel dust, and threw it at the already weakened rune. There was an odd flicker of what seemed almost like sparks, and the smell of smoke.

And the rune seemed to be gone.

Jack felt at the carpet. There was a burned spot, which smelt exactly like charred pretzel. And the circle was definitely weakened.

He grinned, and went back to grinding the pretzels up. He'd need a lot more than a few pinches, that was for sure.

"So, ah." Tooth rubbed the back of her neck. "Sorry about punching you in the mouth."

Pitch sighed, and looked half a second away from patting her atop the head. "I've already forgiven you for that."

"No, that was for storming in and then you gave us tea." She looked mournful.

Aster watched in a fair level of astonishment, and he wasn't the only one. It wasn't that Tooth was apologizing - unlike some people, she did acknowledge her mistakes - but it was that she was doing so badly. Quite possibly on purpose.

"Tooth," he said. She frowned at him. "If ya really want to apologize, take him out to dinner once we're done with Manny."

"Oh!" She brightened, and looked hopefully over at Pitch. "If that's alright with you."

Pitch looked back at his son and - what was Katherine to him, adopted daughter? - and sighed. "That seems perfectly acceptable. Though perhaps not right away? The children..." He gestured vaguely at them.

Nightlight scowled, and began signing. Katherine touched his shoulder, and whispered something Aster didn't catch. Pitch had, if his expression of resigned amusement meant anything.

"Right," North said, and clapped his hands. "We need to make plan, yes? We need to... you are sure it is Manny?" he asked, plaintively.

"No," Katherine snapped. "We made it up. It's not like we saw him face to face or anything," she added, gesturing at Nightlight. "Of course we're sure!"

"Of course, of course, I... oh..." North's shoulders slumped.

Perhaps it was only that he was new to America, and had never heard of this Manny before that botched exorcism. Aster was having a much easier time believing Pitch's story, though the two children helped with that.

"How old's Manny?" he asked. "Do you even know?"

"Old," Tooth said, and sighed. "Not that we've ever investigated him, but... he's in the society pages, now and again. Tall, silver hair, pale gray eyes. Always dresses in white. No age is ever mentioned,
at least not outside of tabloids."

"Why are you reading tabloids?" North asked, just as Sandy signed the same question.

She shrugged. "It's different reading for my waiting room. Better than the women's magazines that are obsessed about weight loss and orgasms."

"This is as lovely as fog in a graveyard," Pitch drawled, "but it's not planning our assault."

"Fog in a graveyard?" Aster muttered.

"A point, yes," North said. "So. What do we know of Manny's home?"

Pitch stood up. "I will get my files." He patted Nightlight on the head, and moved to the doorway. He paused, and turned to look at them. "Don't break anything."

"Files?" Tooth asked, and shook her head. "Of course he would have files. He's been against Manny for ages."

"A bit less in the past... fifty years or so," Katherine said. She looked apologetic. "That was when Manny solidified his public persona. Pitch wasn't able to make any overt gestures, and he'd been injured after the last confrontation. He's... not doing so well," she admitted.

Aster thought about Pitch's gray skin tone. "He's ill?"

"He's... something." She sighed, and looked over at Nightlight. "You know it's true!"

The boy scowled, but finally nodded. He signed too quickly for Aster to follow, except for something about a healer...?

"Right, he won't go to the doctor. He should. But he won't." Katherine spread her hands. "And we can't make him."

Aster rubbed his chin. "We know about him now," he offered. "Might be we can strong arm him where you can't."

"That would be lovely," she said, and looked over at Nightlight. The boy had lifted his head, expression intent. "He's coming back!"

Tooth nodded, and poured herself another cup of tea. "What would be the best approach to get to Manny?" she asked aloud, just in time. Pitch entered the room, a small stack of manila file folders in his arms.

"Let us take a look," he said, and set the folders down. Aster eyed the other mage warily. Was Pitch breathing heavily? Looked like, and he was trying to hide it too.

Whatever plan they made, they'd have to count Pitch out of it. He didn't look in any shape for any kind of confrontation.

Decision made, Aster leaned forward and began flipping through the top-most folder. They had a rescue to plan, and the sooner the better.

Chapter End Notes
Look guys, they have a plan! (Sorry for not updating yesterday, I got distracted by family drama. You'd think my brother would stop being so oversensitive and annoying.)
"Manny, my friend!" North made heads turn with his entrance, and they stayed turned as everyone in the - rather posh - restaurant took in the toy mogul and his companions.

North had put on an odd getup that made him look like Santa Claus. Maybe. If you tilted your head and squinted. His billowing pants - he'd called them 'sharovary', whatever that meant - were dyed red. Aster doubted he was the only one reminded of blood thanks to the particular shade. He'd bemoaned the summertime weather, because he wasn't able to wear... a bunch of unpronounceable names, presumably types of jackets. Instead, he wore a white linen shirt embroidered with black and red geometric designs at the collar and cuffs. His boots were just a bit taller than his ankles, and a shiny black. The topper of the entire outfit was the black sash, embroidered at the ends with white and red patterns that echoed the ones on his shirt.

As if the crazed would-be Russian man wasn't show stopping enough, Sandy had on a white shirt, yellow smoking jacket - in this weather! - and equally yellow pants. The jacket might have glittered, very faintly. He was smirking, and sauntering along beside North as though he, and not the giant idiot, was the real attraction of this crazed circus.

Aster stood out because of how plebeian he'd dressed, instead of fancy like North and Sandy. He had his biker jacket on, since so far the temperatures hadn't come close to Australia's worst - or maybe that was best. His shirt was splattered with paint, torn a bit at the hems, and his jeans were also paint splattered with holes in the knees. His boots, big heavy things for the bike, were heavily worn.

They were also a size too big, but they'd been the best choice from the available options. It wasn't like the second hand stores had a lot of selection.

In the atmosphere of Kashmir, the three of them stuck out - for different reasons - like several sore thumbs. Or maybe like a trio saguaro cactuses in an herb garden. Everyone else in the place was dressed nicely, mostly in three piece suits that were, at most, half a year behind the current fashion trend for 'stuck up arseholes with cushy jobs'.

Mind, Aster knew not every rich bloke was a stuck up arsehole, but the group in this place certainly was. The kind of bloke who'd focus on cutting edge fashions for business suits... well, not necessarily an arsehole, but the good ones wouldn't have been shocked by North or Sandy. Maybe by Aster, but that was still a maybe.

The head waiter of this place, probably called a maître de or something, scuttled after them, too well mannered - or well paid - to blither at them, but frantic about the impression they were making.

North ignored him, and charged ahead. "Manny! How long has it been, old friend?" He stopped by at their target's table, and beamed. "You are looking превосходный!"

Manny did not impress Aster, it had to be said. Or thought. He was a tall, spare-looking man, of thin white hair and a vaguely rounded face that possessed neither a discernible set of cheekbones nor chin, and a seemingly plain silver jacket. And he looked, Aster thought, like someone who'd just smelt something bad and was holding back a sneer.
"Ah, St. North. Mansnoozie. It has been a while, has it not?" Manny's voice was just like the rest of him; bland, spare, and with very little to make it seem interesting.

A good cover, Aster decided. Who'd be interested in someone so... ordinary?

"And who is... this?" Manny asked, looking at Aster.

"Ah!" North reached back and slung one arm over Aster's shoulders. "This is my friend, E. Aster Bunnymund! Perhaps you have heard of him, yes? The Australian multi-billionaire?"

What, he was up to multi-billions now? Fuck.

Maybe he should start looking into contractors, get the old manor house rehabilitated...

Manny's eyes flickered in realization. "Ah, yes. I do believe I had."

Aster took a quick look around the room, and smirked as he went from 'scruffy beast' to 'eccentric and richer than everyone else here'. He turned his attention back to Manny, and shook the man's hand. It was a rather poor handshake; Manny left his hand limp, not even trying to get a grip on Aster's.

"Are you eating alone, Manny?" North asked. When the man cautiously agreed, North shook his head and tsked. "No, no, this will not do. You will join us, yes? Hah, and I will pay for your meal and we will have a most entertaining time of it! Come, come, I will not take no for an answer!"

In short order, North had managed to overwhelm Manny's objections through sheer volume, and the four of them were seated in a corner booth that somehow managed to put Manny on display, while at the same time partially hiding the other three from the room.

The waiter brought them their menus. Noticeably, there were no prices next to the food. Always a sign that the cost would be ridiculous.

At least there were vegetarian options. Aster made his order when the waiter came around again, as did the rest of the table, and they were left in quiet for a bit when the man left.

"So, Aster," Manny said, looking over at the Australian. "What do you do?"

"Art. Play the stock market." Aster shrugged one shoulder. "You?"

"Ah, technology. Though I think I'll be retiring as CEO soon. I don't have the energy to go in every day the way I used to."

Hah. Yeah right. Aster nodded as though he believed it and sympathized.

Sandy signed a few words, and North chuckled. "Yes, Sandy is right. You will have more time for your hobbies!" He ducked his head and raised his eyebrows meaningfully.

Manny paused, and then gave North a chilly little smile. "Quite."

Aster sighed. Dinner was going to take forever. Polite social chit-chat, and with the enemy no less. Whose idea had that been?

He almost wished he was helping Tooth and Pitch. Almost. The hormones Tooth was giving off would be in poisonous concentrations, at this point.
Jack frowned at his bag of pretzel dust. It wasn't very effective; he'd scattered pinches all around the circumference of the circle. Too much pretzel, not enough salt? He just didn't know. And he certainly wasn't going to masturbate to try and cover every sigil in... well. That was hardly reasonable!

He set the bag aside, and fumbled around for the water bottle. He wasn't going to drink from it - though he was getting very thirsty, now - but maybe wetting some of the sigils would make the salt more effective. It was worth a try, at least.

It was possible, even quite probable, that if he dumped all of the pretzel dust in one spot, it would take down the barrier.

But would it alert his captor? Even if it didn’t, it wasn’t as though he knew where he was. He could leave the room, only to find himself… he wasn’t sure what possibilities existed, but the shows he’d watched on the demon-box suggested guns would be involved at some point. A lot of guns.

Jack shook his head, and opened the water bottle. He poured a little dribble out onto the still glowing sigil, and stared.

No effect.

He poked the wet carpet, and sighed.

The carpet immediately frosted over.

He yelped, and managed to jump backward, until he hit the other side of the circle. The sigils all flared and began to spark, but his experimentation so far must have weakened them enough that spark was all they did.

“That - that’s ice,” Jack stammered. He winced, and looked warily at the door. Well, it seemed no one had heard him.

But still. He’d touched the water, and it had turned into ice.

He had touched the water… and it had turned into ice.

In the faint shadow of light cast by the sparking sigils, Jack looked down at the water bottle, and began to smile.

Jack watched from under his lashes when the door creaked open. He was curled up on his side, facing the door, eyes ‘closed’ and breathing even. To all appearances, he looked asleep, or should. The water bottle was empty, and so was the pretzel bag.

Most of the water was frozen into a kind of belt around Jack’s waist, hollow in the middle, and filled with the salty pretzel dust.

He even had a knife, tucked into the back of the ice belt. He’d made it with the last of the water, and it was barely as long as his little finger from end of the hilt to the sharp, pointy tip.

His captor made several odd hand gestures, and the sigils around the circle flared and died.

“Disgusting,” his captor muttered. Either he’d noticed the pretzel dust, or he’d noticed the dried semen. Or maybe both.

Jack considered, for all of a second, jumping to his feet and running for the open door. Then he
decided against it. He didn’t know where he was, after all. He didn’t know what kind of magic his captor could do to him.

“Rise,” the man said.

Jack felt an odd sensation on his joints. It felt a little like strings tied around his wrists, elbows, knees, and ankles, and someone was tugging on the ends. He followed the tugging, until he was standing up, swaying on his feet.

Ah. That was one of the things his captor could do, then. Turn his body into a marionette.

Not a very good one. He thought he could break the ‘strings’, if he put forth a little effort, but… that would be telling, wouldn’t it?

No. Better to go along with his captor’s orders, for the moment.

“Follow me,” his captor said, and walked out of the room.

Jack followed, and kept his eyes open for escape.

Chapter End Notes

Hey. This is actually the last pre-written chapter I've got for... the moment. No change to updating schedule, just change to how frazzled and bug-eyed I look for the next week. Also, big fight and then closure and then it'll be done. Sads. But then Kitty Jack, so happy!
Chapter Twenty-Three

Mr. White drove his car rather carefully, something Jack was more than thankful for. Watching the demonic vehicles on the television - which wasn't demonic, especially compared to this thing - was nothing like riding in one. Less frightening, for one thing.

Jack had decided to call his captor 'Mr. White', for the color of his hair. It was better than calling him 'tall man' or 'the captor' or even 'the old guy'.

They were heading out of town.

He took several deep breaths, and clung to the straps attached to the seat. He'd been told to 'buckle in', and the feeling of being controlled had tugged on his arms, but not enough to tell him how.

And they were going very fast.

Actually, they were speeding up, now that there were fewer people about.

Jack frowned, and stared at the scenery whipping by just outside the windows.

Where were they going?

And more importantly, what did Mr. White have planned?

Aster threw his jacket to one side, under an unremarkable bush, and half-jogged over to the duo of Pitch and Tooth. "Everything's ready?" he asked, immediately turning to Pitch. "You're sure this is the spot?"

"He has used this place for the last century," Pitch said. He looked grayer than before the three men had gone off to study Manny, and Tooth was hovering nearby. "There is no reason for him to change his habits. Unless any of you warned him off?"

"Arseholes made me out to be a bloody poofter," Aster said, almost proudly. "The kind that's oblivious to everything."

Tooth frowned at him. "I thought 'poofter' meant - I mean, what I've heard... you and Jack..."

Aster rolled his eyes. "Not the point. Manny's feelings were pretty obvious about homosexuality."

"He is quite old," Pitch offered. "So am I, but the children make sure I stay current."

North and Sandy caught up at that point. "So, we are ready?" North asked. He pulled a set of brass knuckles out of his fancy jacket's pocket.

Aster opened his mouth. Then shut his mouth. And finally shook his head. "I don't want to know," he said. "Are we?"

Tooth nodded, and looked proudly back at their work. Where Aster assumed their work was. "Once Manny steps into the circle, we'll be able to close it and trap him."
"At which point I will be quite useless," Pitch said, finishing with a sigh.

Probably for the best. He was looking like a strong wind would knock him right over. It'd be worse once he started using his magic to hold the circle against Manny.

"We got a plan of attack?" Aster asked.

"Of course," North said. Sandy nodded, and punched his hand. "We attack. You get Jack out of danger. Fire," North held up the hand not wearing the brass knuckles, and a flame sprang into life on his palm, "Is best for fighting. Tooth will guard Pitch, and Sandy will aid me."

Pretty bare bones for a plan, but good enough, he supposed.

Besides, plans didn't survive the first engagement with the enemy anyways. Might as well start with something that could be adjusted.

Aster shrugged off his shirt, as well, and took the bandolier Tooth handed to him. "Are you going to take off your pants, too?" she asked, smiling. Pitch did a double take, and then looked between Aster and Tooth like he was being confronted by aliens.

"No, I'm not. But," Aster took the bracers from her as well. "I am ready for a fight."

"Yes," she agreed. "You are. Go hide behind the lilac bush there. Best place for you."

Aster nodded, and went to his assigned place. All that was left was the waiting.

And then... He'd have to make sure to punch Manny in the face. At least once.

He owed it for Jack.

_Roughly an hour or so later, Aster caught sight of a faint, far off light bobbing through the trees. He came alert all at once, but didn't move. He'd gone hunting in the Outback enough to know how, and one of the first lessons was in how to not give away one's position. Across the small clearing, he heard a few rustles of leaves and twigs, but otherwise his friends and fellow fighters were as still as he was. Clearly, they'd done their own hunting before._

Aster began a quick, mental catalogue of his weapons, while watching that dim light get closer and closer. His 'grenades', created with a bit of flash powder for ignition and a smoking element that provided a quick smoke screen at need. He'd used eggshells for it, like the ninja black eggs of old. His, at least, didn't have ground glass in them.

He had his two boomerangs, and a bush knife. A coil of rope, a handful of nails in one pouch, and a few rocks he'd taken with him after his last trip into the Australian wilderness. There were probably a few other things in the pouches, but he couldn't remember what. He didn't even have a water bottle, something that would've been unthinkable back in Oz.

And since when had Australia gone from being home, to being somewhere he'd come from?

Probably, Aster thought, the same time he'd gone and fallen for a ghost.

It felt like forever, watching that dim light get closer and closer. Then, two people stepped forward from behind a small evergreen, and Aster narrowed his eyes.
A witch orb hovered over Manny's head, the source of light he'd been watching. Manny looked just as he'd done in the restaurant, though he'd switched his shoes out for something more practical.

And beside him...

A Jack that was unfamiliar to Aster, strange. Dressed nicely, in pressed trousers and a white collared shirt, expression blank and moving with an odd stiffness to the limbs.

It was disturbing enough to curb Aster's initial reaction, which was to lunge forward and yank Jack away from the dark mage. If he'd done that, it would've given everything away, they wouldn't have been able to pin Manny down, and he probably would've gotten away.

Manny approached the center of the clearing, where the trap should have been set up, and then paused.

"Go on ahead," he told Jack, and the boy continued walking to the center of the circle. Manny, however, began working the air with his hands, glowing light following the gestures.

First one, then another, and then a full dozen creatures began to form out of the light. They didn't look nice. The tamest one seemed to have six horns on its head, forming a crown of sorts, while another one looked like a cross between a toad and a gilamonster. Others fanned wings, stomped hooves, and snapped their fangs.

"Guard me," Manny told the constructs. They fanned out around the clearing, and he crossed into the center.

Aster caught his breath. The constructs hadn't factored into their plan, but this had.

He felt the first stirring of energy, and then it hit like a sledgehammer.

Manny whirled, and made a throwing gesture at the shield that now enclosed him.

"That won't work," Pitch said, and stepped forward into view. He was joined by Tooth, and then North and Sandy at opposite ends of the clearing.

Aster ducked under a branch, and folded his arms. "Give up," he said. "Release Jack and the others."

"Or what?" Manny snarled, and gestured. "Take them!" he yelled, and the constructs immediately leapt for the mages.

Aster drew both boomerangs, and met his attackers head on.

"Aster!" Jack spun to face Mr. White, shrugging the controlling threads off with about as much effort as brushing away cobwebs. "Stop it!"

Mr. White looked away from the fight, and scowled. It made him look almost... demonic. "You? You cannot be-" He stopped talking, and made a gesture at Jack.

Jack couldn't see what the old man had thrown at him, but he felt it coming. He batted it away. His hand went numb and unresponsive, but better that then getting hit in the chest!

"Aren't you going to gloat?" Jack asked.

"There is no point." Mr. White smiled, politely, and it was worse than the scowl. "In a way, I regret
Then he started throwing more stuff.

Jack didn't bother knocking the invisible stuff away; he ducked and rolled, and fetched up against another circle barrier thing. He looked out, extremely briefly, but saw his friends - and one strange guy he didn't know - fighting the light monsters.

He was on his own.

Jack reached behind him, and concentrated. The pretzel dust came free of the ice, and made a satisfactory handful. His other hand was starting to get that pins-and-needles feeling he vaguely remembered, 'waking up'.

"What?" Mr. White asked, staring at the handful of dust.

"Catch!"

Jack threw the dust as hard as he could at Mr. White. He hadn't expected it to go very far, but it made a satisfying puff - and outlined several odd things.

Cords, mainly. Jack's eyes widened. The cords reached him. And now that he could see them, he could feel them, wrapping around his chest and through his ribs to his heart... and it hurt.

He fell to his knees. The dust stayed on the cords, outlining them. The salt crystals... Jack squinted, trying to see through the tears pain brought to his eyes. The salt rested on the cords, and he was pretty sure that the intangible ropes were beginning to weaken, but that hardly made any difference at the moment!

"Well," Mr. White said, sounding annoyed. "At least this part works." And he pulled on the cords.

Jack screamed. Aster was nearly decapitated. And when he dispatched the monster he was fighting, he realized that Manny was trying to rip Jack's soul out.

Or - something like that, anyways.

Another monster jumped at him, and he met it with both 'rangs at the ready. It recoiled, bits dropping off, and he threw a boomerang to finish it. Having the enchanted wood whirl through its chest going out, and head coming back, was more than the construct could survive, and it fell apart.

For just a second, he was free of the fighting, able to look towards Manny and Jack.

His mate was on the ground, clutching at something that looked like rope imbedded in his chest, rope that led back to Manny, fading out halfway there.

The magic that Manny had used?

Why was it visible now? And more importantly, how could Aster get Jack free of it?

Another of Manny's monsters charged at him. Aster snarled, and hacked at its face with the 'rangs, cutting two of the horns off. It shied away, circling him.

His Jack was in trouble, and there was nothing Aster could do. Nothing!

"I'm not going to just watch," he muttered, and put one boomerang away. He was a mage, wasn't
he? He could do magic, couldn't he?

About bloody time he did!

He fished one of his rocks out of the bandolier pouch, and smirked. Genuine Australia dirt. Just what he'd grown up with. Learnt to use. *Knew*, as only an Australian could know.

"Here, beastie," he crooned, and began charging the rock with magic. "Catch!"

It made a very satisfying explosion.

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Mr. White turned to look at the fighting, and Jack seized his chance. The little dagger was still there, and he pulled it free. He slashed at the cords, not expecting anything to happen, but hoping it would anyways.

The dagger shimmered blue, and sliced through the insubstantial cords like they were real.

The pain stopped. Mr. White staggered away, looking shocked.

"But you - how -" He stared down at his hands, and then looked up at Jack. "I think," he said, "That this is happening none too soon."

"No kidding," Jack said, and scrambled to his feet. He fumbled at his ice belt, until it began to flow, very slowly, into his hand.

"A water mage," Mr. White murmured. "It explains much."

Jack raised his eyebrows, and added the lump of ice to the dagger, which began to lengthen. "You're an asshole," he said, blushing a little at the swear word. "It explains everything." He began to edge around the circle. "You're the one that killed me, aren't you? Why?"

"Must you insist on conversation?" Mr. White gathered up one of the cords, and tossed it at Jack.

Jack slashed it out of the air, with his dagger that was nearing short-sword size. "Yeah, I must," he said, and smirked. "It distracts you from that!"

The strange guy, the one with gray skin, touched the circle wall, and it vanished.

He held a familiar staff in one hand, and a cavalry sword in the other. It had a black blade, Jack noticed in the corner of his mind, and then he caught the staff when the guy tossed it at him.

"Manfred Lunanoff, I charge you betrayer of our family, our Guardianship, and our creed," the man said. "Stand and be judged."

"You always did like your drama," Mr. White - Manfred? - said. He twitched one hand, and one of the half-visible cords still on the ground spun around the other guy's leg, and yanked him off his feet. The sword was knocked out of his grasp, and the cord knocked it out of reach.

"And now," Mr. White said, lifting his hands. The cords lifted into the air as well. "I think I'll end it."

At that point, he was hit in the head with a boomerang.

Jack tossed the other guy his ice sword, and gripped his staff in both hands. "Or not," he quipped, and began spinning and striking with the staff, using it like a quarterstaff.
And then everyone else was there. Tooth and Sandy were knocking down cords and making them vanish, while North was throwing handfuls of fire at Mr. White. Aster was there, tossing red rocks at attacking monsters, while grass and weeds attacked Mr. White's ankles.

Jack stepped back, and checked on the other guy, the one who'd been helping. "Hey," he said, and held out one hand. "You okay?"

"I will, unfortunately, live." The guy took his hand, and Jack pulled him up onto his feet. "Thank - he's getting away!"

Jack spun, and yelled wordlessly. Mr. White had done - something - and left his friends rubbing their eyes, apparently unable to see.

And Mr. White was running away.

"No!" Jack ran past his friends, and chased after Mr. White. For an old guy he had quite the turn of speed, but Jack was faster. And angrier. And -

And he knew this path, he realized.

More importantly, he knew a shortcut.

He dove into the underbrush, and then ran down the faint track he found a few steps in. It hadn't been used in a while - three centuries, probably - but it felt like just yesterday since he'd taken the path. There weren't any tree branches in the way, and no tree roots to trip over, or creeping vines.

Magic, he decided. So much of his life already involved magic. What was a little more?

He reached the edge of the lake before Mr. White did. Jack paused for a moment, struck by the beauty of the scene. The water was still, dark, and as reflective as a mirror; the open space was lit adequately by the moonlight above, while the shadows under the trees were dark as velvet.

Mr. White stumbled out into the light, and Jack stared at him. Then, he reached out to the lake, the gesture catching the other man's attention.

"What are you doing?" Mr. White asked. He started to back away.

Jack shrugged, and grinned. "Stopping you."

And then he did something he couldn't have explained if he'd tried a thousand years, and the water reached up from the lake and grabbed Mr. White. It pulled him down into the water, and the surface froze over.

Jack fell to one knee, and breathed deeply. It was over. And he felt... Well. He felt quite alive.

Chapter End Notes

Yes, that means Jack is free! Free and... erm, wait, after effects of magic yet to be sorted. No worries, next chapter. Pitch will earn his salary. (He's being paid nothing, unless you count Tooth scaring him somewhat.)
"Jack!" Aster skipped around a young tree, ignored the mud, and caught his boyfriend up in a rough hug. "Are you - crikey, you didn't half do it, did you?" he asked, turning to look at the frozen lake. Without putting the boy down.

Said boy chuckled, and rested his head against Aster's shoulder. "I'm fine," he said, slurring a little from exhaustion.

"Of course you are," Aster murmured. He smiled, and looked down at Jack. If the former ghost's return smile was a little hazy, well, he'd frozen an entire lake in midsummer. It was completely understandable.

The others showed up at that point, before Aster could quite make up his mind about kissing. On the one hand, he'd done that - and a lot more - with Jack not even three days ago. On the other, Jack was in a seventeen-year-old-body, no matter how old he chronologically was. And the age law said seventeen. He wasn't too sure how it'd be handled if someone accused him of statutory rape. Did it even count in this situation?

And - Jack didn't have any of the paperwork needed in this day and age. No birth certificate, social security number, no history. To the world at large, he was still a ghost, a non-entity.

He tightened his grip. Jack grunted, but didn't protest. "What's wrong?"

"Just thinking," Aster said, and then the mob engulfed them.

"You did it!" North caught them first, and hoisted the two - still locked in their own hug - up into his arms. And squeezed. "We did it! Hah!" And then he spun, first one way, then the other, until Aster was ready to blacken both of North's eyes for him.

"Put me down! Strewth, but if you don't cut it out I'll chuck on you, see if I don't!"

"Put him down, North," Tooth said. She stayed near Pitch, which was sensible enough. The man looked ready to pitch forward onto his face. Aster eyed him sidelong, more than a bit worried himself, though obviously nowhere near the levels Tooth had reached.

Sandy punched North on the back of one thigh. North put the two of them down. Message received.

"I should buy you something as thanks," Aster told Sandy. The diminutive man waved it off.

"We're not finished," Pitch said. He gestured at Jack. "If we don't reconnect the tie between his spirit and body, and soon..."

Aster looked down at Jack, and bit back a curse. "You're right," he said, and smoothed Jack's hair back from his face. "You're burning up, Frostbite."

"Tha's funny," Jack said, slurring a little. He shifted, leaning forward until he could press his face against Aster's shoulder. "I feel so cold."
In the end, getting the bodies of the two children was harder than 'reuniting flesh and soul'. Aster was almost surprised; but then, Pitch had been perfecting the spell to restore his children to life for many centuries, while getting the kids' bodies out involved getting past security guards, keypads, and magical wards.

Jack managed to get them in, though he had a little difficulty with the wards. Apparently, since he was the oldest of Manny's victims, the mage had used Jack to go out and do the annoying little things about town. His control must have been astounding. Now, of course, it meant that when Jack told the guard at the security booth that they were there to talk to Manny about business, they were let in without fuss. Jack also knew the codes for all the keypads, though he seemed disturbed by it.

The wards were taken down with pure, brute force; Aster and North took care of it, with Sandy and Tooth supporting them against backlash.

They were able to get the kids' bodies after that. Pitch's teeth made an audible grinding sound when he saw the uniforms they were wearing.

"At least he couldn't touch them," he told Tooth as they rummaged through Manny's closet for something to steal. "It was part of the spell."

"And I thought my clothes were weird," was Jack's opinion.

Once the kids were covered, they took them back out of the apartment - and left through the back door.

Jack sighed with relief. "I feel better," he said, and flexed his fingers. He didn't want to think about the past few hours, where he'd got colder and colder and it'd been harder to focus. He was alright now. And - he snuggled against Aster's side, all but purring - he'd stay alright. Unless and until Aster showed him what sex was like with a body.

Then he'd be great.

"That's good," Aster said, and wrapped his arm over Jack's shoulders. "I was worried about you."

Jack nodded. And then subtly sniffed Aster's shirt. How had he not noticed the lack of scent as a ghost? He had a working nose now, and he wanted to memorize Aster's smell.

"What're you doing?"

"You hush and ignore me, I am being subtle and sneaky."

"You're really not."

North cleared his throat. "So! All is finished, yes? Manny..." He sobered, and looked down. "Manny has been defeated. Jack, Katherine, and Nightlight are whole once more. All is good, yes?"

"Not quite," Tooth snapped. She patted Pitch on the shoulder, and urged him down onto the chair.

They had returned to Pitch's home, if only because the other two ghosts were there, and it was where he had everything ready for the embodiment spell. The two children, now properly alive, watched Pitch somewhat nervously.

"What's up?" Jack asked Tooth.

Sandy repeated the question, in sign language.
"He's still sick," she said, and gestured to Pitch.

"I am not," he snapped.

"You really are," Katherine pointed out, and Nightlight nodded. The two children looked exasperated.

"I don't think any of us could do anything medical," North said. He looked over at Aster, and raised his eyebrows. "Can you?"

Could he? Jack looked up at Aster, and then - since he could - nuzzled the underside of Aster's chin.

"Oy! Can't think with you doing that," Aster snapped. "And I might. Got enough juice left to take a look, anyways."

Pitch folded his arms, looking mutinous. "What makes you think I'll let you?" he asked. Or demanded, rather.

Jack sat back on the couch - although the style all but demanded he call it a chaise lounge - and watched in interest. "You're gray," he pointed out.

Pitch looked disgusted. "I have been gray for several centuries and it has not killed me."

Sandy signed something, and looked sternly at Pitch. Who glared back, until Nightlight started signing along with Sandy, looking annoyed.

"They're right, you know," Katherine pointed out.

"Fine!" Pitch spat, and threw his hands up in the air. "Fine! Go ahead and look. You won't see anything wrong."

He slumped back in his chair, and glowered up at Aster. Fortunately, Aster ignored him.

Jack leaned forward. Were Aster's hands glowing? They were, very faintly; a rich green, so intense that Jack just wanted to take handfuls of the light and eat it like candy.

The Australian pressed one hand to Pitch's forehead, and his other hand to Pitch's chest, and stayed like that for several minutes. Then he snorted, and flexed his fingers once.

"There," he said. "It should clear up in a few days."

Pitch rubbed his chest. "What should?" he demanded.

"Seems like getting your magic tangled with Manny's had bad side effects," Aster said, and returned to the spot beside Jack. "Couple of days and you'll be right."

"Good," Tooth said. "Just enough time to plan that dinner I owe you." She smiled down at Pitch.

Pitch, for his part, began to shake his head almost frantically. "Ah, no, I cannot leave the children -"

"We'll stay with North," Katherine said. "Him and Sandy can watch us while you and Ms. Tooth have dinner."

Pitch glared at her. "Do I get a choice in this?"

Nightlight shook his head. Katherine smirked, and said, "No. If left to yourself you'd hide away for
the rest of eternity. In your basement. You're going to dinner with Tooth, and North and Mr. Sandy will take us clothes shopping." She paused, and added, "Have you seen the new fashions out today?"

North looked like he was pouting. "Why are you a mister?" he asked Sandy.

Sandy smirked at him.

Jack covered his mouth with one hand when he yawned. "This is nice and all," he said, and yawned again. "But I'm tired. I'm surprised you're not all falling asleep where you are." He looked up at Aster. "Can we go home now?"

Aster nodded, and they stood up. "We can always continue this visit later on," he pointed out.

"What makes you think I'll let any of you people back in my house?" Pitch asked.

"Because," North said. "You will have to help us with getting Jack's paperwork in order."

"Eh?" Aster asked. Maybe asked. Confused grunts might not be actual questions, Jack decided.

"Who else? He is as old as Manny, but owns this house, and to do that you must have legal identity. And he will do the same for the children." North gestured to Katherine and Nightlight, both of whom nodded and smiled. "So. He will help us with Jack."

Pitch glared first at North, then at Aster. And then he started to smile. "For a fee," he said.

Aster waved one hand in dismissal. "Whatever. My people will talk to your people. After we catch up on our sleep."

Chapter End Notes

I'm sorry this is short but apart from the Epilogue (hint: Jack starts school. Private school. Very inclusive, so guys can wear skirts if they feel like it.) it's done.

This thing exhausted me. Last time I start anything without a concrete plot of A to Z and all the random inbetween stops at G-A-I-B. Okay? Done. Gah.
Epilogue

Aster made an apologetic face in the direction of the doorway, but didn't stop talking into the phone. "I know. But being rude isn't grounds for an investigation Pitch - well, that's not my fault. Or yours. Or his, either." Aster doodled something on his sketchpad, and sighed loudly. "Because maybe, just maybe, being in college, on scholarship dependent on being in the top ten percent of all his classes, unable to work to help with the bills, is making him a little stressed out?"

Jack backed away from Aster's study, and headed for the bedroom. His Bunnymund continued to talk, but at least he couldn't hear the words.

Some days he just wanted to smack Pitch upside the head. None of the 'Guardians' - and what a name - were the type to enjoy being administrative or investigative. They were good at it, even Sandy had to admit it, but they didn't like it. They were artists and dreamers and toy makers and psychologists.

Jack wasn't sure what he was going to do, once he finished school. Maybe he'd go into classes for, oh, he didn't know... police? Social work? Something like that would probably get Pitch's approval, but he wasn't sure he'd be able to manage it for long. Too much stress, he supposed.

He had another year to go, he reminded himself. He'd opted for the fifth year of high school - heavy duty tutoring from some of the mages Pitch had rustled up had gotten him up to speed in some subjects, though not all, and he was still getting tutoring for the other stuff - but he'd need that fifth year. Even if it made Aster highly uncomfortable to be living and sleeping with, to all intents and purposes, an undergraduate student.

_Only for another month_, Jack reminded himself. That was about when they'd figured out his birthday would be. Besides, he was three hundred years old. He was pretty sure the law didn't count in his case... and he sure wasn't about to go crying child abuse or statutory rape to anyone.

Especially not since he was usually the one with the higher sex drive than Bunny.

He grinned a little to himself, and reached up for his tie. And then paused, said sex drive giving him a gentle reminder that they'd skipped their morning activity in favor of rushing off to school - Jack - and looking into the latest mage Pitch had issues with - Aster. Well... what was the harm in seducing his own husband-to-be? Once, you know, Jack was old enough to not get eyeballed, that is.

Aster didn't know about the vague wedding plans Jack had been forming with Tooth, but he'd go along with it. Even if it was shaping up to be fancier than the Australian would probably like.

Too bad for him, Jack wanted to be married in a church. And the in-laws would _kill_ if they weren't invited.

They lived in Australia and had access to all sorts of poisonous creepy-crawlies. They would, too.

At least he'd met them, which had been plenty nerve wracking. First the plane flight - well, first he'd gotten his official identity, including passport - which had been utterly unnatural. Planes were too big and heavy to fly, he'd spent the entire trip certain they'd fall out of the sky.

Then had come meeting the future in-laws, which had been... weird, but nice. They'd spent a month
with the Bunnymunds, and Jack had been shown all of Aster's favorites from home; favorite coffee shop, favorite store, favorite spot to go camping in the outback...

There'd been the odd run-in with an ex-boyfriend too, but Jack had refrained to mere icing of the shoes as revenge.

And then back to America in time to start classes at the highly expensive private school Aster had found. Jack had argued about the cost, and Aster had ignored him.

Considering Aster's reaction to the uniforms, Jack no longer thought it was too much of an expense. The tie and slacks weren't the most comfortable of clothes, but the way Aster's gaze lingered on his ass and neck was quite... gratifying. Even more so when Jack wore one of his skirts.

The school was quite inclusive. If a boy wanted to wear the skirt uniform, then so be it. If a girl wanted to be referred to in the male pronoun, that was fine, so long as she was willing to change in one of the attached bathrooms to keep from tempting any of the other boys.

To be fair, the boys that wanted to be referred to as women were given the same consideration. They weren't always the ones dressing in skirts, either.

Jack had decided to pick up a skirt, for home instead of school. There was only one person he wanted ogling his knees, and for that person he wouldn't wear underwear, either.

Jack skimmed the slacks down, and folded them up neatly. It was funny; he supposed the neat-freak habits must have come from his body's centuries of servitude to Manny, but it was so useful he couldn't get upset about it.

Besides, he was living with Aster. If one of them wasn't a neat freak, they'd both die of food poisoning or something.

He hung the slacks up in the closet, and pulled out the skirt. He grinned, and got everything pulled on, tucked in, and adjusted to satisfaction. There. Okay, so his calves were a little hairy and kind of pale - he was kind of pale, and no amount of sun changed that - but the skirt pleats changed the whole shape of his lower half. Not exactly more feminine, but... yeah, okay, maybe more feminine.

Whatever, he wasn't wearing the skirt for his own enjoyment.

Mostly not his own enjoyment.

Two percent his own enjoyment.

Jack huffed, and closed the closet door. Time to seduce a boyfriend.

He sauntered over to the study, and stood in the doorway. Aster wasn't looking at him - he was doodling again, probably something unpleasant happening to Pitch. Poor Bunny-rabbit; stuck on the phone until he had a reason to hang up.

Jack was more than happy to give him that reason.

He cleared his throat, and smirked when Aster looked over and nearly dropped the phone.

"I'll call ya back, Pitch," Aster said, obviously lying. He hung up the phone.

"I'm home," Jack said, and did his best to look innocent. "Do I get a welcome kiss?"

Aster looked pained. "Please tell me you didn't wear that skirt to school. Lie if you have to."
"Please." Jack wrinkled his nose. "Kiss or no kiss?"

"Get your skinny arse over here, Frostbite."

"Yay!" Jack all but pounced on Aster. Fortunately, the chair was on wheels, so instead of tipping over backwards, they rolled until they hit the wall. "I like kisses," Jack said, and then attached his mouth to Aster's.

The kiss went on a satisfying length of time, with enough tongue to make Jack ready to shove Aster to the floor, now.

Fortunately - or unfortunately, it was hard to tell - Aster was big and strong enough to scoop Jack up over one shoulder and carry him back to the bedroom. No floor required.

Jack grinned, and pinched one tight ass cheek, since it was there and practically under his nose. Aster barely twitched; it was one of Jack's favorite things to do, after all.

He was dropped onto the bed, where he bounced twice before reclining back, legs partially spread.

"Hi," he said, and grinned up at Aster.

"Hello, mate," Aster said, and gripped his ankles. "Don't you know not to wear your shoes on the bed?"

Jack looked down at his feet, and shrugged. "Whoops? Y'know, you put all this fuss into me wearing them in the first place, and then you insist I take them off..."

"Yes," Aster said, and pulled one shoe off. He peeled the sock off next. "I do."

Jack wiggled his toes, and smirked. "Thanks," he said, and sighed as the other shoe and sock was removed. "Don't just toss them, put them..." Aster's hands began to stroke upwards along his calves. "Oh, never mind. Continue."

"Don't mind if I do," Aster said. He cupped one hand under Jack's knee, and urged him to lift his leg. Jack did, and started unbuttoning his shirt.

"If y' don't take that tie off," Aster warned, "I'll probably tear it by accident."

"Three ties in a month? Yeah..." Forget the buttons. Jack quickly pulled his tie off, managing to not strangle himself in the process... unlike most other times.

"Okay," he said, tossing the length of cotton at the end table. "Tie's off. Continue."

Aster snickered, and pressed a kiss to the inside of Jack's knee. Then his hands continued their journey up Jack's thighs, until he was rucking up the skirt and proving that Jack had left his underwear off.

And that the former ghost was aroused by the activity, but that part was a no-brainer. Jack sucked in a deep breath when Aster blew on his cock, and got a double fistful of the bedspread to hang onto.

As compared to, say, yanking on handfuls of his boyfriend's hair. He'd done that, and it generally cut the sex short for a few minutes while Aster grumbled about the pain.

"Going to do something, or just looking?" Jack asked.

Aster frowned at him. "What're you in mind for?"
"Duh. What're you in mind for?"

"Topping."

Jack grinned. "Okay! I should probably take the skirt off, though..."

"Nah." Aster grinned, and shifted so he was holding onto Jack's hips. "Leave it on."

"You're only saying that because you don't do laundry."

"And?" Aster reached over and pulled the tube of lube out of the bedside drawer. "What's your point?"

"One of these days," Jack said, spreading his legs and angling his hips, "I will chain you to the washing machine and you'll be stuck in there. Trying to get stains out of the sheets. I will lau-oooh..."

Aster smirked, and crooked his finger. Jack's eyes promptly rolled back in his head.

Six months was not nearly enough time to get used to how mind-blowing sex was with a body.

And it'd been pretty good without a body, too.

Jack sucked in a deep breath, and tried to push down onto the finger stuck up his ass. A strong, solid arm across his stomach kept him from twitching overmuch. "Jerk," he muttered, and hissed when Aster added a second finger.

"You love it."

"Yeah, and?" Oh, oh, oh... Jack raised one foot, toes curling, and whined. "A-Aster... C'mon already!"

"I am not coming already." Aster pulled his fingers out - God damn him - and slapped Jack on the hip. "Fer crying out loud, Frostbite!"

"Bunny!" He opened his eyes and glared at Aster. "Get those fingers back in there!"

Aster looked deadpan. "Thought you'd rather something else was up there?"

"Yeah, once it doesn't hu-ah! Warning! Warning next time!"

His boyfriend laughed at him. Meanie.

Meanie who'd just slid a third finger in, oh God fuck yes. Jack gasped, and switched his grip from the sheets to Aster's arm. Warm, solid arm with muscles, good for digging his nails in and straining against.

"If you draw blood, I'm stopping."

He opened his eyes again. "Bunny...!"

"Nope, that's my line," Aster said. He pulled his fingers out - jerk - and began slicking up his cock. Not a jerk. When had he taken off his pants?

"I am feeling very overdressed."
"Keep it on."

"Pervert." Jack settled back against the pillows as Aster pulled back long enough to get rid of his shirt. Oooh, so many muscles. And all his, to lick and stroke and nuzzle and bite...

"You look good like this."

"Uh huh," Jack said, with perfectly reasonable doubt. Sure he did. Hairy legs, skirt rucked up about his waist, white collared shirt half-undone without a tie, hair all flyaway. Good. Sure he did.

Aster paused, all gloriously tanned skin stretched tight over his muscles, his cock curving up towards his stomach. "You'd kill me if I got a sketchbook right now, wouldn't you?"

"No jury would convict me," Jack agreed. "Why would you want a sketchbook?"

He grunted when Aster flopped down on top of him. "So many reasons," the artist mumbled, before kissing Jack.

Jack tried to reply, but it was kind of hard to talk with Aster's tongue in his mouth.

Whatever. Talk was overrated.

Aster wrapped one hand around his thigh - and it was very nice, he thought, somewhere in the back of his mind, to have a boyfriend with hands big enough to wrap around his thigh - and urged him to lift his leg. For the angle or something. As long as it led somewhere nice. And it was Aster. It'd lead somewhere nice.

In fact, after a moment it led to Aster's cock pressing against his ass, warm and broad and Jack pressed his heels into Aster's butt, urging him on.

Aster pulled back from the kiss. "Do you have to be so bloody impatient?"

"Do you have to drag it out so long?" Jack arched up against him, and whined. "Please?"

Aster snickered, and slowly pushed in. Jack may or may not have had his vision go white.

"Hnnnnn."

"That's a good sound."

Jack gasped, and very carefully grabbed onto the sheets again. "You should know," he asked, as sight slowly returned. "You hear it often enough."

Aster groaned, and thrust in. Jack's vision went white again.

Sensation, sensation, sensation. At least he didn't go off like a rocket from the merest touch anymore. But it was all he could do to cling to Aster's shoulders and keep the top of his head on, as his lover thrust in and pulled out and thrust in again, all but immersing him in the pleasure.

It wasn't taking, it was sharing. It wasn't ravishing, it was enjoying, the two of them joining together in a way that felt almost sacred to Jack. They were living, loving, and what was more worshipful than that?

He couldn't get enough of it. He wanted to immerse himself in the feelings, the sensation, twenty-four hours a day and seven days a week. Aster thought he was obsessed. Jack simply thought that their lovemaking was the most beautiful thing he'd ever experienced.
He always wanted more, more, more, to feel and share and enjoy and give, but his body could only take so much sensation and Jack came, eyes rolling back and every muscle clenching around Aster's cock sliding in and out, until Aster stopped all the way in and yelled and then collapsed on top of Jack, so warm and lax it didn't matter he was heavy and crushing the younger (ghost meant older, right?) man into the bed.

Aster rolled off. Jack tried to drag him back.

"I have work," Aster said. "And you need a shower."

Jack grinned, and cracked one eye open. "Care to join me?"

The Australian stared at him, and shook his head. "Love you too, Frostbite."

Oh yeah. So getting a church wedding.

At some point, Jack thought, getting up, he'd have to decide whether he'd wear a dress or not. On the one hand... hairy legs. On the other... Aster really liked him in skirts.

"Hey, Aster?" he asked. "Would you rather I wear a dress?" He pulled the skirt off. "Or slacks, for our wedding?"

Aster blinked. And then again. He frowned. "... What?"

Chapter End Notes

Yes, guys, it's done - over and out, and all that jazz. I give you smuts, see? I am nice person. You like me.

This is also why I will do my best to have an actual END in mind, so I don't flail about the way I did with this here.

Edit: Finally, it was pointed out that Jack's explanation of how the school handles transgender does use the wrong language - but he's still adjusting. His understanding is still 'This is a girl, with all the girl parts, who wants to be referred to as a boy. And this is a boy, with all the boy parts, who wants to be referred to as a girl. Okay.' I suppose we're lucky he's not denying that it just can't be. Since it is his POV, though, language use stays. Sorry if anyone was insulted by this.

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