Eclipsing Daylight
by EarthboundJedi

Summary

Six months is a long time to spend lost in the Darklands. Now, on top of saving the world, Jim has to make up for lost time.

(AU where Jim is trapped in the Darklands for 6 months instead of 2 weeks. Angst and other Feelings ensue, along with (hopefully) some semblance of plot)

Notes

Because instead of working on any of my other projects in-progress, I decided I needed to start yet another thing I might never finish. Hahaha. But I felt a great need to put Jim and his friends through some angst and contribute to the newest fandom I've fallen in love with, so here we are.

I'm not really sure where this is going or how often I'll be posting updates, but despite all that let's go on a literary adventure, shall we? ;)

((if, along the way, I stumble into areas that require a change in rating or tags, I'll be sure to update them accordingly)
Chapter 1

After the first day, Blinky had crafted the glamour mask so that, between Toby and Claire, Dr. Barbara Lake would not suspect anything out of the ordinary had happened to her son.

After the third day, Claire realized they would need a crafty cover-up to explain why Jim was not at school. Coming down with a case of the rare “Jim Lake” disease seemed like it would do the trick.

After the first week, nothing had changed.

After two weeks, still nothing. But the amulet of Merlin had not chosen another. Jim had to still be alive.

After the first month, Barbara finally realized something was wrong when her “son” burnt his famous egg white manchego omelette recipe for the tenth time in a row. Unable to explain it away, the group introduced Dr. Lake to her son’s double-life as the Troll Hunter. She took it rather well, only fainting for a few hours when she met Blinky and Draal.

After the first month plus one day, Barbara Lake thought she had dreamt it all up and had to be retold everything. This time she only fainted for one hour and retained her memory after regaining consciousness.

After the second month, the school district became more concerned about Jim’s wellbeing. Even with all the work being sent home, there were growing concerns he would not pass 10th grade.

After the second month plus a week, Claire perfected forging Jim’s handwriting and the art of strategically missing enough questions so that no one questioned who had done his homework.

After the third month, the amulet still lay dormant as the school year in Arcadia came to a close. Jim had miraculously passed 10th grade along with the rest of his classmates.

After the fourth month, the amulet began to glow and reactivate Killahead Bridge. A single soul crossed over, Claire’s baby brother Enrique. They could hear Jim crying out as the portal closed, as if he were being dragged away by something on the other side.

After the fourth month plus a few days, the band of heroes attempted to rescue their friend. They failed, unable to open the gateway without the Trollhunter.

After another week, another attempt was made. It, too, failed. The bridge was disassembled by the council and sentenced to sink to the bottom of the ocean. Clair and NotEnrique made sure it never arrived at its destination.

After nearly five months, they were running out of ideas. The bridge was reassembled in the Arcadia forest, but still the amulet lay dormant. Occasionally it would pulse with a dim light as if keeping a vigil for its missing master.

More attempts were made. More failed. Blinky’s mantra of “even the word ‘hopeless’ is not devoid of hope” was getting on everyone’s nerves.

Then, finally, as the six month mark drew near, the amulet of Merlin helped reanimate AAARRRGGGH!! and illuminate their path to rescue Jim from the Darklands…
Claire took a moment to revel in her surroundings, eyes squeezed shut while she clutched the damp forest grass as if it could anchor her to this world. The soft chirping of crickets and distant sound of running water soothed her, instantly washing away the uneasy silence that hung in the air from the Darklands.

*And to think, I was only there for a few hours. But Jim…*

Pushing herself up from where she had landed face-first on the grass, Claire opened her eyes and took inventory of her companions. Blinky and AAARRRGGHH!!! had landed off to her left, and Toby had already crawled over to their location to lean contently against his reanimated wingman. Draal and Nomura were already on their feet, pacing about the remains of Killahead Bridge despite their bruises and broken bones. And the little gnome Chompsky was… well, somewhere. Probably already speeding back towards his home at Toby’s place.

Claire turned to her right to the unconscious boy a few feet away. She was painfully aware of her heart skipping a beat.

Jim’s months spent in the Darklands had not been kind to him. The pale moonlight highlighted gaunt lines on his face. His signature blue sweater and jeans were tattered, torn, and ragged around the edges. It was almost guaranteed he was malnourished, but any further details regarding his physical health were hard to tell under the blanket of the night sky. And one could only guess at the state of his mental health.

But Jim was finally home.

And they had escaped the Darklands without unleashing the evil within.

Or at least, that’s what she told herself.

“Master Jim!” Blinky exclaimed as all six of his eyes came into focus. The troll hastily shuffled over to where he lay, blocking Jim’s face from her line of sight. Her sense of urgency renewed, Claire crawled over and settled on the other side of the Trollhunter as Blinky tried to poke and prod him awake. “Oh sweet Bismuth, he isn’t waking up!”

She shifted so that she could cradle Jim’s head in her lap. Gently, she ran her thumb over the edge of a scar that spanned half his face. “He’s just unconscious, Blinky,” she reassured for everyone’s sake, aware of the concerned glances coming from around the clearing. Noticing Merlin’s amulet unattended at Jim’s side, she picked it up and carefully pressed it into the hand of its owner. Though the amulet pulsed with a faint heartbeat, Jim didn't react to the contact. “The best thing for him right now is to get him home to his mother. She can take care of him from there.”

Claire bent over and gingerly kissed Jim’s forehead, relief flooding through her as she felt him take a ragged breath. A couple tears escaped her and landed on his skin. She attempted to wipe the droplets away, only succeeding in smearing some of the dirt on his face.

*That boy is long overdue for a shower.*
Chapter 2

Chapter Summary

Jim's survived the Darklands, but can he survive the trappings of modern plumbing? I swear this is a serious piece. I just happen to be a goofy dork.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Jim woke with a start. The last thing he remembered was darkness. Living in darkness. Surrounded by darkness. Mazes and prisons of darkness. Way too much darkness.

The darkest deeds thrive in darkness...

But he remembered something else, too. A falling sensation, a flash of light. Friendly faces long unseen but not forgotten.

The chattering of a squirrel entered his dazed thoughts. Wait... Squirrel?? Jim blinked deliberately as he tried to concentrate, his surroundings slowly coming into focus.

He was in his room. It seemed like it had been an eternity since he was last here, cocooned in his bedsheets while sunlight softly streamed through the window.

A realization finally dawned on Jim, quite literally:

I'm not in the Darklands. Not anymore.

A thrill of excitement coursed through his veins, but as he tried to swing out of bed his exhaustion got the better of him. He sat on the edge of his bed, impatiently waiting for enough of his strength to return so he could stand up. The Trollhunter took a deep breath in through his nose, followed by slowly exhaling out through his mouth. Inhale. Exhale. Repeat. Jim watched as his bedside clock read 10:06, followed by 10:07, 10:08, and so on and so forth until it reached 10:17.

He couldn't remember a day in his life when he had still been in bed at 10:17am.

Slowly getting to his feet, Jim did his best to cross the floor of his room quickly on his jello-like legs. The call of nature waits for no man, no matter how exhausted or unbalanced.

After relieving himself, Jim took some time to examine his reflection in the bathroom mirror (after washing his hands, of course). He nearly didn't recognize the face staring back at him. His blue eyes were still slightly sunken from sleep deprivation, his cheekbones more pronounced than they should be. His jawline had become more angular, which had the potential to be quite dashing once his body fully recovered from near-starvation. He was also in desperate need of a haircut.

And, for the first time, he studied the scar that spanned from his right eyebrow, crossed the bridge of his nose, and ended just below his left eye. It didn't exactly look the way a scar usually looks after a typical wound heals, like severely scraping your knee or accidentally stabbing yourself with a pencil. No, this scar looked almost as if a narrow wedge of skin had been carved off his face, like a deep scratch on a statue.
Considering the damage the Decimaar Blade could have done, he had gotten off pretty easy.

CRASH!

When he heard the sound of shattering china out in the hall, Jim's first instinct was to step back into a defensive stance as he flung open the door. He instantly softened when he saw the would-be “intruder.”

Dr. Lake stood paralyzed at the top of the staircase, clinging to the banister for support. The dishes she had been carrying were scattered in pieces on the floor, along with what looked like oatmeal and a small puddle of juice. Tears were streaming down her face; judging from the way she was looking at him, they were tears of relief.

“Oh, Jim…” she choked out before rushing to embrace him. “I've missed you so much,” she said, barely above a whisper, as she held him tightly.

“Mom…”

After a few moments, she held him out at arm's length to study him. “Now that you're up, I think we need to talk. All of us.”

All of us? Who's “us”? Toby? Claire? Does she know about Draal and Blinky and AAARRRGGHH!!? Does she know about the Trollhunting?

Though his mind was starting to race, the only response Jim could muster was a single nod.

“But first, you really need a shower now that you're back in the land of the living,” she chuckled and raised an eyebrow at him. “Can you manage that? I can help you if you need me, do you need me to help? I could -”

“Mom,” he cut her off and gave her a pleading look, still unwilling to speak in complete sentences.

“Ok. Right. Well, I'll just be out here cleaning up my mess. And washing your sheets,” she smiled tenderly at him as she backed out into the hallway. “If you need me, just holler. But if I hear any loud thuds or crashes, I'm coming in. I'll be waiting for you downstairs when you're done.”

“Sure thing.” Two syllables this time. Progress. Jim did his best to smile reassuringly at his mom as he closed the bathroom door.

While in the shower, Jim gradually felt his balance return. He cranked the temperature up as high as he could stand, letting the hot water wash over his aching muscles. It felt like he had been running and fighting for his life for an eternity. It had to be equally as long since he last showered.

How long was I actually in the Darklands, anyway?

It didn't take him long to scrub away the dirt and grime caked on his skin. But the running water felt so good that he spent at least an extra ten minutes simply standing there, letting his mind go blank as he watched the water continuously swirl down the drain.

I will never take modern plumbing for granted again.

After his fingers started getting pruney, Jim figured it was time to get on with the rest of the day. Whatever day it was. He turned off the water and stepped out of the shower, taking extra care to not slip or trip over the edge. He quickly toweled off and, realizing he hadn’t brought a change of clothes in with him, secured the towel around his hips. It gave him a chance to take in all the
bruises and scratches he’d collected on his torso. None looked like the scar that now decorated his face, but these ones hurt, throbbed, and stung. Jim hissed as he poked at one of the larger bruises on his side that had turned a mottled green, vaguely remembering being thrown against a wall. Or was it a punch from one of Gunmar’s minions? It was all blurring together in his head.

Jim gathered his dirty clothes from the corner and walked out into the hall. He was about to head into his room when a whiff from his clothes nearly gagged him.

*Nope, these are going straight in the wash. Or the furnace.*

Holding the clothes as far from his body as he could, he used his other free hand to help stabilize his descent down the stairs. Making it down without incident, he rounded the corner and saw his mom working on something in the kitchen. “Mom,” he called out, growing reaccustomed to his voice, “I’ve got more stuff for the wash –”

Jim stopped in his tracks.

They had company gathered around their dining room table.

And he was suddenly very aware of the fact that all he was wearing at the moment was a towel.

“Uh…” he stammered, blood quickly rushing to his face.

“Master Jim! You are walking! ‘Tis a joyous occasion, indeed!” There was a creaking sound as Blinky pushed back his chair to stand up.

Wait… Blinky? In my house? Looking all troll-like? With my mom standing right there, being perfectly cool about it?

They must have told her, then.

*How long was I gone?*

Blinky was making a beeline for Jim, as if planning to embrace him, with Toby and Claire following close at his heels. “Eeeaaaaagh!” Jim cried out, holding his wad of dirty clothes in front of him like a shield.

“Woah! Sit back down, all of you!” his mom scolded from the kitchen. “Give him some space!”

“Yes, Dr. Lake…” the trio mumbled in unison, returning to the dining room. *Oh, thank god.*

Barbara put down a pot she had been drying and walked over to her son, holding out her hands. “I’ll take those. You should get back upstairs and put something more appropriate on,” she winked. “And later we’ll see what we can do about some of those contusions.”

Jim gladly handed over the clothes, happy to use both hands to make sure his towel didn't go anywhere without him.

His mom took a tentative sniff to decide the fate of the dirty laundry. “Phew, you know what? These are going straight outside in the trash - they’re not worth trying to save. You’ve got plenty more in your closet.”

The two exchanged a chuckle. With relief, Jim turned to go back up the stairs, taking one last look at the company that would be waiting for him when he returned. From what he could tell, it was just Blinky, Toby, and Claire.
I wonder where the others are? Probably Trollmarket.

He made the mistake of making eye contact with Claire before completely turning away. His heart pounded in his chest and his face felt like it was on fire.

Great, I survived the Darklands only to die of embarrassment in my own home.

He could hear the conversation at the table pick back up as he hastily re-entered the safety of the second floor. “Ahh, Claire, your face appears to be taking on a different hue than normal,” said a voice that could only be Blinky’s. “Tell me, are you feeling alright?”

Jim closed his bedroom door to the sound of Toby snorting with laughter and something (probably Claire’s forehead) forcefully hitting the table.

He took a minute to lean against the back of his door as he caught his breath - the stairs had taken more energy than he had bargained on. Steadying himself, he crossed the floor to his closet to grab a clean pair of clothes. After shrugging them on - er, more like mildly struggling to get them on - Jim took a look at himself in the full-length mirror on his wall.

Huh. That’s… odd. These ones must have shrunk in the wash.

The jeans he had grabbed were showing off around three to four inches of his very pale ankles, and the hem of his signature blue sweater barely came past his belly button. It felt more restricting than usual in the shoulders, too. At least his corresponding undershirt had been somewhat oversized to begin with, so now it fit him like a tight t-shirt worn by all those cool guys in motorcycle ads.

Jim peeled off the jeans and sweater and draped them on the back of his desk chair. Going back into the closet, he tried on another pair only to come out with the same result. Lucky coincidence, he thought as he added them to the chair. It was a good thing he had a set of clothes for each day of the week.

After trying on a third jeans-and-sweater combo, he gave a deep sigh as his ankles still attempted to blind him. That’s it. It’s statistically relevant now. Either the laundry got really screwed up or I’m outgrowing my clothes.

He didn’t really feel like he’d had a growth spurt, though. His line of sight relative to his surroundings didn’t seem any different. But then again, he had been gone for a while. Stranger things have happened. Shrugging, he ditched the sweater (it seemed warm enough outside, anyway) and resigned himself to the high-wader jeans and just his undershirt. … Er, now his outershirt. Which, in reality, is just a shirt.

Come on, Jim, get a grip.

Looking at his reflection, the thin material of his undershirt did little to hide the dark bruises underneath. His gaze settled once again on the scar on his face. From an aesthetic standpoint, it really didn't look that bad. But as he delicately explored the portion of the scar that crossed his nose, he was met with a flashback.

A sword glowing with unnatural light. His own Eclipse blade not quite quick enough to meet it. A brief moment in time when he had felt the presence of someone else inside his thoughts.

Gunmar…

When Jim came to, he found himself on the floor of his room. There was an urgent knocking on his bedroom door.
“Jim? Jim, honey, are you alright?”

“Yeah… yeah, Mom, I'm okay,” he stated loudly, hoping he sounded convincing enough.

“Are you sure? I heard a thud. Do you need me to come in?”

“No, I'm… I'm fine, really. Just having trouble getting dressed, that's all.”

He could hear his mother's sigh of exasperation. “Jim…”

“Trust me, I'm -” he tried getting to his feet, only to be met with a wave of dizziness. “Uh… actually, could you -”

He didn't even get a chance to finish his sentence before his mom was in his room and at his side. “Oh, Jim…” she murmured lovingly, holding the back of his head with one hand while she whipped out a pocket flashlight with the other to check for signs of a concussion. Perks of having a physician for a mom. “Are you alright? Does anything hurt?”

“Well, everything hurts,” he chuckled lowly. “But right now I feel super dizzy.”

“Could be dehydration. Or the fact that you're long overdue for a proper meal. Or both.” She helped pull him to his feet. “How about we get you back downstairs?”

“That'd be great,” Jim answered with a smile, suddenly realizing just how hungry he was.

About to lead him out of the room, Barbara spied the pile of discarded clothes on his chair. “Uh, Jim…?”

“Oh, uh… I'm afraid my clothes don't exactly fit me anymore,” he replied sheepishly.

His mom gave him a once-over, snickering at the amount of ankle his jeans were revealing. “Well then, I guess I'll have to take you shopping for some new clothes. Once you're fit to leave the house, that is.” She looked back up to make eye contact with him, tilting her chin slightly upwards to do so.

_Huh. Guess I had a growth spurt after all._

She softly caressed his cheek. It looked like she was holding back tears. “Promise me you won't grow up too fast, okay?”

“I think it's a little late for that, Mom.”

Chapter End Notes

Don't get used to an update being posted this quickly - I just happened to have the day off of work today and decided to stay inside and write instead of going grocery shopping. You all benefit from my refrigerator's current state of emptiness. ;)
Chapter 3

Chapter Summary

Jim finds out just how long he's been gone.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Jim settled into an open chair at the head of the table, feeling five sets of eyes watching him expectantly.

Toby was the first to speak up. “Soooooo, Jimbo…” he paused to twiddle his thumbs while Dr. Lake came in from the kitchen and placed a large glass of water, a smaller glass of orange juice, and pile of pancakes in front of Jim. “When you were in the Darkands -”

“Tobes, can we hold off on the Spanish Inquisition ‘til after breakfast?” Jim interrupted, meeting the glances from his friends with a pleading look. “I’m literally starving over here.”

As if to emphasize his point, Jim’s stomach growled loud and clear for all to hear.

“Most definitely, Master Jim. We’ve waited six months for your return, we certainly can wait a few moments more,” Blinky said matter-of-factly.

Jim nearly spit out his swig of water. “Woooaaaah, hold up. Six months?”

“Indubitably.”

Jim tried not to choke as he gulped down some of the orange juice, all the while working through things in his head.

_Six months. Six. Months. I thought it would have only been, like, 6 weeks tops._

_I left for the Darklands right after the Spring Fling dance. That was… the beginning of March, right? So that means it’s, what, September now? I missed all of spring and summer?_

_Merlin’s beard. Six months. I’ve missed so much time._

“Really? Six months?” he said aloud, surveying his friends in desperation.

Claire reached over and gently clasped his wrist. “Don’t worry, Jim,” she encouraged, “you didn’t miss much. Just the last couple months of school - which we made sure you passed, by the way. And summer was pretty boring,” she paused as a blush crept up her cheeks, “Especially without you around.”

Jim tried to ignore the sight of Blinky and Toby nudging each other with their elbows, turning his full attention to his almost-sort-of-maybe-kind-of-girlfriend. If she still even wanted him after all this. “So what, does that mean school is starting again soon?”

“In three days, to be exact.”
“But not if you’re not ready, Jim,” his mom chimed in, bringing over the container of maple syrup to accompany his pancakes. She gave him a motherly pat on the back before heading back to the kitchen to brew a pot of coffee.

Jim experimentally poked at his pancakes. After determining they had a normal spongy consistency, he took a bite, not sure what to expect. They actually tasted kind of like pancakes instead of cardboard.

_Either I really have missed a lot and Mom’s cooking has improved, or I’m so hungry I don’t care._

He decided he didn’t care enough to worry about it further, zealously drenching the stack in syrup and shoveling more forkfuls into his mouth. The more calories, the better.

“Woah there, kiddo, I know you’re hungry, but don’t hurt yourself!”

“Your mother is right, Master Jim,” Blinky added. “Since you have gone for many months without a proper meal, there’s no telling how your human digestive system will react to —”

“Hey, I’m growing teenager. I’ll be fine!” As soon as he declared it, though, he immediately regretted it. Maybe eating half a stack of pancakes in just a couple minutes wasn’t the best idea after all. Taking a deep breath and another gulp of water, he drastically slowed his pace so his stomach could keep up. But an upset stomach wasn’t about to stop him from eating.

_Food. Glorious food. So much better than the occasional monster egg or vaguely edible mineral._

_I’m never taking food for granted again, either. Or kitchen appliances._

The coffee finished, Dr. Lake joined the rest of them at the table, pouring herself a mug before placing the rest of the pot within arm’s reach on the counter behind her. After taking another mouthful of pancake, Jim brandished his fork in his mother’s direction.

“So Mom...,” he started, but was quickly silenced by one of her piercing looks. _Oh, right. Mouth full. No talking._ Taking a moment to finish chewing so he could swallow, he then continued, “They told…? How long…?” He pointed his fork between Blinky and his mom, unable to completely form his question.

“Oh, so Jim can ask questions, but I can’t?” Toby whined. He was met with a swift kick under the table from Claire. “Yeowch, fine!” he huffed as he crossed his arms.

“If one can even categorize those as questions,” Blinky muttered. The troll resumed after clearing his throat, “Approximately one month after your disappearance, we were forced to inform your mother about… well, everything.”

“Wait, a month? Why didn’t...?”

“She notice sooner? Simple, I fabricated a glamor mask that allowed Claire and Tobias to masquerade as you, so to speak. Eventually Barbara caught on that something was amiss.”

“Toby had trouble recreating your famous omelettes,” his mom smiled. “He gave it a valiant effort, though.” Toby seemed quite pleased with himself when Dr. Lake playfully ruffled his hair. “When they told me everything you had been going through - being the Trollhunter, fighting demons and monsters - suddenly it made your strange behavior make a lot more sense. It’s crazy. It’s insane. But it makes sense.” She shifted in her chair to face Jim more directly. “Honey, please know that you can talk to me. About anything. Especially if you’re in trouble. As your mother I’ll always be worried for you, anyway, so it makes life a lot easier if you just tell me instead of letting my
imagination run wild. Got it?”

“Got it,” Jim affirmed. His set his fork down on his now empty plate, looking expectantly at his mom. “Could I…?”

“You need some protein instead of more carbs. Hang on, I think we’ve got some yogurt cups in the fridge.” She picked up his plate and took it with her into the kitchen. If felt nice to have his mother, well, *mother* him.

Jim drank more of his water and turned his attention to his best friend. “Okay, Tobes, I’m ready for the Spanish Inquisition now.”

“One does not simply expect the Spanish Inquisition,” Toby retorted in mock aloofness.

“Tobes.”

“Okay, fine, you know I can’t stay mad at you.”

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After what seemed like hours of questions and answers, Jim finally finished recounting the abridged version of his time in the Darklands to his friends. How he had slowly and methodically tried to map out the dark labyrinth. How he was able to forage for food. How he was able to locate and stage his rescue of baby Enrique. How he got caught and captured by Gunmar, and was forced to fight for his life time and time again in an attempt to break his spirit. His failed escape attempts. The duel with Gunmar that had given him his scar.

But he left out a lot of details, too. Like how he’d sensed Gunmar inside his head when the Decimaar Blade landed its strike. No need to unnecessarily worry them. From their expressions, they were already concerned enough as it was.

He had them fill him in on what they had been up to while he was away. Their (somewhat comical) efforts to cover his disappearance, and the extra cash they had accumulated for “Jim Lake disease research” (they had since declared it their “taco fund”). The full account of his mom’s reaction to finding out he was the Trollhunter. Their many attempts to cross the Killahead Bridge and come after him. How they managed to reanimate AAARRRGHHH!!! Claire increasing her mastery of the Shadow Staff, and Toby his warhammer. And a retelling of their successful rescue mission, since he had pretty much no recollection of any of it.

They filled him in on some of the more mundane things, too. Like Toby slowly getting Darci to warm up to him. The school soccer team going to the state playoffs (they didn’t win, though). Track and field practice starting back up. Going with a bunch of their classmates out to the beach for a weekend to camp underneath the stars. How happy Claire was that she didn’t have to change a Changeling’s diaper anymore, even though now she had to change the real Enrique constantly.

*A lot has happened in six months.*

Jim sat back in his chair, eyeing the small pile of trash in front of him on the table - three empty yogurt cups, an apple core, and the plastic from a small bag of baby carrots he had polished off. Concerning his stomach, he at least felt a little satiated (though still generally ravenous). His mood, on the other hand, was starting to turn melancholic.

Forcing a yawn, he shakily stood up from his chair and stretched. “I could go for a nap right about now,” he declared.

Blinky stood up, too. “I should be heading back to Trollmarket, myself. AAARRRGHH!!! will need my help wrapping up the maintenance of Hero’s Forge. It must be in tip-top shape for our legendary Trollhunter, after all,” he winked at Jim with half of his eyes. “Tobias, Claire, care to assist?”

“Yeah!” Toby exclaimed.

“An excuse to not change a dirty diaper for a few more hours? Count me in!”

Jim genuinely smiled at his friends. It was almost as if he’d never left in the first place. Almost. But a life of almost is a life of never, and he was never going to be able to get that lost time back.

Six whole months. Half a year. And life had just kept on going on without him.

He felt the smile fall from his face.

Stop it, Jim. You’re just tired and cranky. Your friends missed you. And Mom must’ve been worried sick. Be happy. If not for your sake, but for theirs...

A feat easier said than done.

The trio made their exit through the secret tunnel in the basement (for Blinky’s sake - there was daylight outside, after all) and Jim was left with only the sound of his mother doing the dishes. The soft clinking of plates in the sink was mundanely normal. It was kind of nice.

He had turned to head upstairs when he was stopped by his mom. “Hold up just a second, Jim.” A few seconds later, she walked over towards him with a tape measure in hand. Wordlessly, she started measuring the length of his legs and inseam.

“Mom!” Jim said, mildly irritated and very grateful Claire was no longer in the room.

“I was going to go shopping while you napped - you know, to thoroughly stock up on food before you eat us out of house and home - and I figured I would at least pick up some pants that will actually fit you while I’m out,” she explained. Her measurements done, she experimentally extended the tape measure further to estimate his height. “Wow, Jim, no wonder none of your clothes fit - I think you’re over six feet tall now! Talk about a growth spurt!”

“Wait, you’re going out? I’ll be… alone?” He felt a pit form in his stomach as her words registered, and it wasn’t from all the food he had just eaten.

“I won’t go too far, and I’ll only be a phone call away if something happens.”

“But… I don’t… there’s…” he stammered, unable to fully explain the terror rising in his chest.

“Oh, Jim.” His mom embraced him, rubbing soothing circles across his back. “Don’t worry, you’ll be perfectly safe,” she reassured. Pulling out her smartphone, she opened up an app to show him something. On her screen were a dozen different security camera feeds around the perimeter of their house, including the tunnel in the basement. “I had this security system installed after Blinky got me up to speed on everything,” she explained. “Whenever I activate this feature,” she pointed at one of the buttons on her screen, “I get a notification if anything bigger than a squirrel so much as enters one of the camera views. And it’s set up so that Toby and Claire also get the alerts. When I get back, we can install the app on your phone, too.
“You may be the Trollhunter, Jim. I've accepted that's something I can't change. But under this roof, it's my job to protect you.”

Jim stared in wonder at his mom’s screen. Wow. *It's gonna be a lot harder to sneak out of the house now, but the trade-off for peace of mind could be worth it.* He examined the camera views and, aside from the one in the basement, it didn’t look like any of them were inside the house. Only outside.

Which meant anything that could teleport, like Claire’s staff, could still infiltrate the premises.

But the only being he knew of in any world who held that power was Claire.

*I’ll be fine*, he tried to convince himself.

The phone buzzed as something triggered the alert. Jim’s breath caught in his chest until he realized that it was just Draal, returning to the basement. He instantly felt better.

*Huh, I wonder what he’s been up to today? I'll have to catch up with him. Eventually. Just not right now.*

“And see? Perfect timing! Draal’s back, so you definitely won’t be alone,” his mom stood on tiptoe to kiss his forehead, noticing the relief on his son’s face. “The biggest danger to you right now is falling down the stairs. Or up them. Now go get some rest.”

Jim didn’t hear the front door close until he had made it back up to his bedroom. Exhaustion overcoming him, he collapsed onto his bed, breathing in the scent of his freshly washed sheets. A full water bottle was already on the corner of his desk, well within arm’s reach. Also within reach was Merlin’s amulet, resting beside him on the extra pillow. He felt himself quickly drifting off to sleep, blissfully ignoring the throbbing in his side and the aches in his muscles that had returned.

His fingers curled around the amulet as the darkness of sleep enveloped him.

Chapter End Notes

For my own purposes (and since the timeline in the show is hard to pin down, anyway), I decided that the Spring Fling happened in early March so that 6 months later would means school is starting again.

Also, back when the gang explained Jim’s disappearance and all the Trollhunting stuff to his mom, they conveniently left out the part where she had already found out once but forgotten it all. If that were revealed to her, she might not be as chill about everything going on... ;)
Chapter 4

Chapter Summary

In which Claire is having doubts and shares a few choice words with Jim.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Jim stood in the center of an arena made of the darkest stone imaginable. Shadows, created not from a light source but from their own accord, stretched farther than his eye could see. The red engravings on his armor cast a dull glow on his immediate surroundings, like a lone candle battling a power outage, but was quickly swallowed by darkness mere feet away from where he stood.

A deep laugh filled the space, echoing off every surface. Surrounding him. Making him feel small.

“Champion of Merlin,” the voice called to him.

He heard the sound of chains rattling in the distance.

“Vanquisher of Angor Rot. Bane of Bular.”

The rattling of chains grew louder.

“You cannot escape me so easily, Trollhunter,” the voice taunted.

“You cannot escape your fate.”

Jim woke up in a cold sweat, gasping for breath. He groped for his amulet, panic settling in as his fingers found nothing but fabric by his pillow. Then, as quickly as the panic had come, it dissolved when he realized he had somehow activated the amulet in his sleep. The glow of his armor pulsed in time with his rapid heartbeat, tinting the walls of his room with shades of red.

Fumbling with the bottle of water by his bedside, he was aware of the door creaking open while he tried to drown out his anxieties.

“Jim? Honey, are you alright?” his mom peered through the doorway. Her eyes went wide when she saw the armor. “Jim, is everything alright?” she repeated with more urgency. “I heard shouting.”

“I’m fine, Mom, everything’s fine. Just a nightmare.” He downed the rest of his water, still struggling to control his breathing. Eventually his heart rate settled down and the Eclipse armor released, leaving him once again in his too-tight shirt and too-short pants.

Cautiously, his mom made her way to his bed and perched on the edge. She felt his forehead with the back of her hand. “Honey, I think you might have a fever,” her brow creasing with worry.
“Seriously, I’m fine.”

“Last I checked, I’m the one with the medical degree, not you,” she chided, cupping his cheek. She stood up, grabbing the water bottle. “I’ll get you some more water. Can I get you anything else?”

Jim felt his stomach rumble. “Uh, what time is it?”

“Almost 5:30. Did you want me to fix you some dinner? What are you in the mood for?”

“Ummm, could we order some pizza?”

Barbara planted her free hand on her hip. “James Lake Jr., I may not be a great cook, certainly not as good as you, but I feel like I’ve been improving over the past few months. So if you would just –”

“Woah, no, I didn’t mean it like that!” he cut her off, waving his hands to ward off her ire. “I just meant… I really want pizza. They don’t exactly deliver to the Darklands,” he added with a chuckle.

Her expression softened. “A lot of things aren’t in the Darklands. But alright. Anything else?”

He chewed on his lip as he formed a thought, trying to think of something to distract from his nightmares. “Actually, could we watch a movie? While we eat pizza? Maybe we could invite Toby and Claire over, if they don’t already have plans…”

“That sounds like a great idea, kiddo. You text your friends and let me know how many pizzas we should get when I come back with your water.” With a smile, she turned to head down the staircase.

Jim found his phone on his desk. He grabbed it and started a new group chat:

[hey guys, movie at my place tonight? mom’s ordering pizza for dinner *pizza emoji*]

[hell yeah, count me in!]

{language, TP. sure, just gotta check in with the parents}

[...TP?]

{toby pie}

[i told you, that won’t catch on]

[i agree… *toilet emoji*]

[and that's why]

{whatever. see you soon!}

He smiled as he set his phone back down, only to have it vibrate again a second later. It was a separate message from Toby:
With a sigh, he locked the screen of his phone, clutching at his bruised side. But Toby’s text, made in jest, had him wondering…

Where do I stand with Claire? I mean, we were sort of a thing before I went and got stuck in the Darklands for Six. Stupid. Months. But hell, we haven’t even had a real first kiss yet. The school play totally doesn’t count. Then again, I did rescue her little brother from the Darklands, the home of all unholy evils. That’s gotta get me some bonus points, right?

His train of thought was derailed when his mom re-entered the room. “So, how many pizzas do I need to order?”

“They both said yes, so… uh…” his stomach interrupted with another growl. “Three larges?”

“Fine, just promise me you won’t eat an entire pizza by yourself in one sitting,” she negotiated, handing him the refilled water bottle. When she noticed his hand clutching at his side, she hit her forehead with the heel of her hand. “Right. Your bruises. I should take a closer look at those. How about you meet me downstairs after you change out of those ridiculous pants,” she waved in the direction of the shopping bag she had set next to his door a couple hours ago, “and after I put in the pizza order, I’ll work on getting you all bandaged and iced-up. Deal?”

“Deal.” He flashed her a winning smile as she exited the room.

Swinging his legs out of bed, it was a lot easier to stand up than it had been that morning. Hey, maybe I’ll make a full, speedy recovery in time for school on Monday!

As if mocking him, his legs gave out and he fell backwards onto his mattress.

Just kidding.

He tried standing again, this time more carefully while he utilized his desk for support. Much better. He made his way over to the shopping bag and peered inside. Seven pairs of jeans were inside, all with the new measurements his mom had taken earlier. Hopefully those will hide his ankles better. He was about to pull a pair out when he spied a few pairs of flannel pajama pants pushed off to the side. Deciding those looked like a much comfier option, he grabbed a pair with a blue plaid design after stripping out of his too-short jeans. His ankles properly covered at last, he shoved his phone in one pocket and the amulet in the other before navigating down the stairs.

Claire took a nervous breath as she stood alone outside the Lake residence, the sun setting on the horizon while she eyed the doorbell. She had returned from Trollmarket sooner than Toby so that she could swing by her house and let her parents know she would be out the rest of the evening.

It’s just pizza and a movie. With Jim and Toby. A perfectly normal Friday evening.

It had been forever since any of them had had a normal Friday evening. And it had been forever since she and Jim had spent time together. Well… Six months. But that was practically forever.
And a person could change a lot in six months. Feelings could change.

_He barely even looked at me earlier today… Has he changed his mind about me? About us?_

_Or worse, does he resent me now? It was my fault he went into the Darklands in the first place. All because he promised he'd save Enrique._

If she were in Jim’s position, she knew for sure she'd be questioning her life decisions.

_Pizza and a movie. Let's see where things go from there._

Hesitantly, Claire rung the doorbell.

“_It's open!”_ she heard Dr. Lake call out. She opened the door, her eye catching on the tiny security camera nestled on top of the door frame.

_Crap, they probably knew I've been standing awkwardly outside. I must look like an idiot._

Claire entered the house, catching movement out of the corner of her eye as she closed the door behind her.

“_We're in the dining room,”_ Dr. Lake continued.

Claire dropped off her backpack in the entryway before venturing further into the house. As she rounded the corner to the dining room, she saw an array of medical supplies (mostly bandages, wraps, and compresses) spread out on the table. Jim was propped up in the same chair he’d been sitting in earlier, his back turned to her. His shirt was draped over the back of the chair, his hands gripping the seat on either side of him, while his mother knelt at his side and attended to the array of injuries on his upper body. Claire could hear Jim alternating between low whimpers and hissing sounds as his mom worked.

“_Claire, you have excellent timing! Could you pass me the roll of surgical tape? It's just out of my reach._”

Obligingly, Claire picked up the roll from the other side of the table and turned to hand it to the doctor. Barbara’s hands were preoccupied holding a swath of gauze in place on Jim's chest right around where his amulet usually rested. “_After I cleaned the abrasion it went deeper into the skin than anticipated, so now I'm trying to reduce the chances of further infection. I don't know what sort of diseases were lurking in the Darklands, and I'm not about to take any chances,”_ she declared matter-of-factly, switching from her parent voice to her doctor voice.

“_Mom…”_ Jim whined.

Ignoring her son's complaining, she tilted her head to look at Claire. “_Dear, would you mind helping me tape this down? I only have two hands, and my patient,”_ she pointedly stared at Jim, “_is being uncooperative._”

“_Sure thing, Dr. L.”_ Standing on the other side of Jim, Claire ripped pieces of tape from the roll and pressed them into place where Dr. Lake instructed. She tried not to let her fingers linger too long on his skin. Or let on how much she was enjoying the fleeting touches.

_Has Jim always been this… muscle-y?_

After securing the last section of gauze, Claire’s gaze wandered to Jim's face. He was determinedly staring straight ahead at the wall. But when he realized she was looking at him, he briefly made
eye contact before hurriedly looking away again.

Great. Now he can't even look at me.

Dr. Lake straightened out from the floor, studying her son. “Well, I think that's about all we can do. Scrapes and cuts are covered, and we'll get some ice on those bruises during movie time. Especially that one,” she lightly poked at the particularly green bruise on Jim's side. He winced in pain. “I'm pretty sure there's a cracked rib or two under that one, but there's not much we can do about it. I'll take you to the clinic tomorrow to make sure it's not too severe.”

At that moment, Claire craned her neck when she heard the front door latch open. Toby had finally arrived and was practically waltzing inside.

“Don't tell me you've started the party without me!”

“I'd hardly call this a party, Tobes,” Jim grumbled.

“I dunno, Jimbo,” he continued, ignoring the dour tone of Jim's voice. “There's people, there's party favors…” he gestured at the array of medical supplies on the table. Then, Toby whirled around and pointed finger guns at Jim. “And you, my friend, look like the piñata!”

Jim huffed and crossed his arms as the rest of the room broke into giggles. “Not. Funny,” he growled.

“Just trying to lighten the mood, Jimbo,” Toby brushed him off, turning to Barbara. “So, Dr. L., when’s the pizza getting here?”

“Should be any minute, now.” Jim's mom replied, helping Jim get his shirt back on with minimal wincing. “Toby, would you mind helping me clean up the table? Claire, you can help Jim get settled on the couch with these,” she grabbed a couple of cold compresses, already wrapped in a protective cloth layer, and handed them over. She gave Claire a knowing look.

She's trying to give me a couple minutes alone with him...

Claire wasn't sure if she was excited or nauseous. Maybe a little of both.

She stood back to give Jim space to maneuver. He muttered something under his breath as he got to his feet, clutching the back of the chair for support.

“What's that, kiddo?” Dr. Lake’s brow was creased with concern.

“I said, you don't need to coddle me,” he repeated lowly, staring intently at a spot on the floor. The knuckles on his hand turned whiter as his grip on the chair tightened.

“Jim,” Claire tried to reason with him. “We're just trying to help -”

She was interrupted when Jim slammed a fist on the edge of the table. “No! None of you are helping! You all keep talking and carrying on like everything is perfectly normal, like everything is going to be okay, but I see the glances you keep exchanging! I see the way you all flinch whenever I so much as move a muscle!”

“Jim, we're just concerned about you,” Dr. Lake responded, her calm demeanor starting to crack with a mix of desperation and fear. “You've been gone for so long, and -”

“Yeah, well, I survived on my own without help then. I sure as hell don't need it now!” He stormed
off to the living room. Claire heard his mom choke back a sob behind her.

“Aw man, Dr. L… He didn't… Jim didn't mean that, I'm sure of it. He's probably just tired still,” Toby said in an attempt to comfort her.

“I just… want my son back,” she said softly. “It’s like I don't even know him anymore.”

“I'm sure he'll come 'round. We just have to give him some time.”

Seeing that Toby was taking care of Dr. Lake, Claire turned towards the room where the other member of the Lake household had run off to (well, “hastily staggered” was a more accurate description).

_Doesn't want to be coddled? Alright then._

Claire marched over to the living room, finding Jim had settled himself in the farthest corner of the couch. He was sitting hunched over, his elbows on his knees and his head in his hands, but his posture stiffened when he heard her footsteps stop in front of him.

“Jim Lake, Jr.,” she began, “I don't give a flying goblin’s behind whether or not you think you need help. But you're the one who went into the Darklands without us, without your _team_, and didn't even give us the chance to help you then. The least you can do is let us help now, if not for your sake but for ours.”

Jim refused to look up at her when he replied. “I went alone to keep everyone safe. I couldn't let anything happen to you guys. Not after I watched helplessly as AAARRRGGHH!!! turned to stone.”

“I don't care! You promised we would _go_ together. Because we're stronger _together_. Or did you forget that while you were off playing hero?” By that point, Claire was practically shouting at Jim.

“Playing hero?! Claire, this isn't just some game!” Jim retorted, unfolding from his hunched position to meet her glare. “People have gotten hurt. People have _died_. I'm supposed to protect two entire worlds, but if I can't even use my magic Trollhunter powers to keep the people I care about safe…” Tears were welling up in Jim's eyes, threatening to spill over.

Claire couldn't recall ever seeing Jim this close to crying before.

“If anything had happened to Toby, or Blinky, or _you_…” Jim’s voice cracked, leaving the rest of his thought unspoken.

She sighed as she tentatively sat next to him on the couch, leaving enough space that a gnome or two could have sat between them. It might as well have been a chasm. “Jim… We’ve all known from the start that there would be risks. And we willingly accepted those risks, because just as much as you don’t want anything to happen to us, we don’t want anything to happen to _you_. So when you up and left us on your dumb hero’s journey, we were sad, upset, and worried sick about you. I don’t care how noble your reasoning is, friends don’t do that to each other.”

“Well, it all worked out in the end, didn’t it?” His tone of voice was definitively more sarcastic than apologetic.

“I don’t know, Jim, you tell me.” Claire promptly dropped the ice packs on his lap and briskly exited the room, not daring to look back as tears blurred her vision.

_Dr. Lake was right… it’s like I don’t even know him anymore._
There were originally cute emojis in the little text conversation, but ao3 decided it couldn't handle it *sigh*
Chapter 5

Chapter Summary

Jim learns that ice packs and pizza don't solve all his problems, but they do help.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Jim slumped further into the couch cushions as a cold pit settled in his stomach. The chill he felt could be a residual effect from his afternoon nightmare, it could be proof his mom was right and he actually did had a fever, or it was the aftermath from the cold shoulder he had just received from Claire. Probably a little bit of all three.

... or I'm an idiot and I'm cold because of these ice packs on my lap.

He slid a couple over to his side where his mom suspected he'd cracked his ribs. The cold instantly relieved some of the throbbing.

If only all my pain could be treated with ice...

Jim chose a spot on the wall to stare at as he focused on his breathing, trying to keep the frenzy rising in his chest at bay. He was vaguely aware of muffled voices talking on the other side of the wall in the kitchen. His mom. His friends. The three human beings he cares about most in this world. If anything happened to any one of them...

Am I right to push them away? I may be back from the Darklands, but the fight isn't over yet. Not by a long shot. If they end up hurt, or worse, because of me...

And yet, the very reason he'd returned from the Darklands was because of his friends. Because they had found a way to come in after him. Because his stupid ass had needed saving.

They could have been hurt. Because of me. I can't let that happen again. I have to protect them.

Jim flinched when the doorbell broke him from his internal monologuing. At the edge of his vision he saw his mom crossing the threshold, cash in hand to pay the pizza delivery guy. But he dared not look away from the spot on the wall for fear of the shadows he knew lurked just beyond his field of view.

“Great, thanks!” he distantly heard his mom respond as the door closed. The smell of pizza wafted into the living room, filling the air with notes of basil and oregano and making his stomach grumble again.

Surely this is what heaven smells like.

He turned his head to find the source of the smell, his need for food outweighing his uneasiness. His mom hadn't yet moved from her spot near the door, holding the stack of pizza boxes while she watched him with concern. “Jim…” she hesitated, “How are… is the ice helping?”

“Oh, uh… yeah, it's helping.”
Her shoulders visibly relaxed a fraction of an inch. “Good. Remember, in about fifteen minutes you should remove the ice… no need to cause unnecessary nerve damage, after all.”

“Of course, Mom.”

“Okay. Well, I’ll just go set these down and… uh, we can get started with the movie? That is, if you’re still feeling up for it.” She was studying Jim for an answer, looking him over like a bomb on a short fuse that could go off any second.

For whatever reason, the idea of being considered volatile made him want to explode. But he did his best to quell the outburst gathering somewhere in his throat, making his reply more curt than usual. “Of course I’m up for it.”

His mom nodded silently and walked off in the direction of the dining room table to deposit the pizza boxes. He heard the shuffling of cardboard and the soft clinking of plates in the other room as Dr. Lake came back to the living room. She knelt by their shelf of videos (their stash of VHSs had gotten dramatically smaller since he’d left for the Darklands) and started thumbing through the DVDs.

“So, what’ll it be, kiddo?” she asked over her shoulder.

“I don’t care. You pick.”

With a little sigh, she deftly grabbed one from the collection. “How about your favorite, then?” she asked, somewhat redundantly, as she held up a well-worn DVD case. But not so worn that one couldn’t make out the title: How To Train Your Dragon.

Jim had a lot of fond memories that revolved around that movie. Curling up next to his mom under a blanket during rainy nights. Distracting him from scratching when he had caught the chicken pox and had to stay home from school for a week and a half. Their go-to activity when one (or both) of them was really missing Jim’s dad and needed a pick-me-up.

He smiled genuinely at her. “That’d be great, Mom.”

He could tell she was relieved as she went about putting the disk into the DVD player. His friends must have detected the slight shift in atmosphere, too, for they finally rounded the corner with plates of pizza in hand. Toby claimed a spot on the other end of the couch, throwing Jim a wary look, while Claire approached him and held out the extra plate she was carrying.

“Claire -” he started.

“Just take your stupid pizza,” she pushed the plate into his free hand, reluctantly taking the open spot next to him on the couch after the saucy, cheesy plate of goodness was securely balanced on his lap.

Ignoring her still-icy demeanor, Jim immediately began on his first slice of pepperoni pizza in months. The burn he already felt on his tongue was worth it.

Ahhh, pizza… thy bounty is as boundless as the sea.

Dr. Lake finished getting the DVD player set up and pressed play, starting the opening sequence of the movie as she left to retrieve her pizza and a spare chair from the other room.

Jim sighed contently as he quickly polished off his second slice. This was definitely one of the most normal moments he’d had in months. Even before going into the Darklands, Jim and his
friends didn’t exactly have a lot of free time to just sit down and watch a movie together on a Friday night. You know, because of the whole “saving the world” thing.

The entire scene would have been perfect if it weren’t for the awkward tension that still hung in the air. Claire was purposefully keeping as much distance between them as possible despite sitting right next to him, and he kept catching Toby throwing him nervous glances.

It’s all good, though. I’m back from the Darklands, watching my favorite movie with my friends, eating pizza for the first time in months…

“Seriously, kiddo, you shouldn’t be scarfing down your food so fast!” his mom half-teased, half-scolded as she re-entered the room. With a resigned look on her face, she set down her plate, went back to the dining room, and came back with one of the pizza boxes. She put it on the end table nearest Jim. “If you throw up, I am not cleaning it up. But I’m already tired of getting up and down to get you food, so please exercise restraint, okay?”

“Okay, Mom…” he replied sheepishly. Their interaction was enough to elicit some snickers from Toby and Claire, cutting a little bit of the tension in the room. But only a little.

Well, it’s a start.

Jim settled into the cushions after replenishing his plate of pizza. He welcomed the slight numbness creeping into his side from the ice packs as the first scenes from Berk appeared on the TV screen. He let the movie whisk him away on Hiccup’s adventure, far away from his current stressors, like it had already done for him so many times in the past.

By the time of Hiccup’s first encounter with Toothless, Jim had already devoured four slices of pizza in total. He could still go for more, but he figured he’d heed his mother’s words and try to avoid making himself sick. Setting down his plate, Jim relaxed back on the couch, contently cradling the cold compresses as he felt his eyelids grow heavy with sleep.

…

Jim felt himself falling through the air. Everything around him was pitch black, as if he was plummeting through a deep chasm or a moonless night sky. But he felt very little resistance from the air around him, and the only sound he could hear was the sound of his own breathing.

The darkness didn’t seem to have an end.

“You think you can hide from me, Trollhunter?” a voice materialized in the void. “You’re only delaying the inevitable.”

Somewhere below him, a single blue pinprick of light appeared. It was enough to determine he was tumbling down some sort of deep tunnel, but any other details were still cloaked in darkness. Jim activated his armor in hopes that its glow would shed more light on the situation. The pulsing red only illuminated the air as far as he could reach.

He continued falling in silence, the external source of light remaining far-off in the distance. As vertigo started setting in, the disembodied voice spoke again.

“I will find you, Trollhunter. You cannot escape me.”

The blue orb of light grew large enough that Jim could make out a smaller, dark circle in the center.
It was an eye, and it was looking directly at Jim.

“And once I find you…”

As Jim fell closer and closer, he could tell that the eye wasn't located in the center of the pit. Rather, it shared the space with an empty eye socket that looked like it extended into eternity.

Jim's panic level rapidly rose. He summoned the Eclipse sword, desperate for anything that could stop his descent. But the voice spoke again, sealing his fate.

“...you will be mine.”

Jim screamed as he fell through the eye socket and all light disappeared.

“Jim… Jim, wake up… Jim!”

Jim was vaguely aware of someone calling his name. He opened his eyes, his surroundings slowly coming into focus. He was still on the couch. At some point he had curled into a fetal position, with his bruised side resting on the cushions and his head wedged into the corner where the back and arm of the couch meet. But he still couldn’t shake the feeling that he was falling to his doom.

“Jim…” In his current position he couldn’t see the person calling him back to reality. But there was no mistaking that the voice belonged to Claire.

He tried to even out his breathing, but every few breaths a sharp, ragged inhale sent an ache through his nerves. He tried to ground himself by focusing on the texture of the couch fabric. Instead, he came to the realization that he had once again donned the Eclipse armor in his sleep. Luckily, it seemed like the summoning of his blade had remained in the realm of nightmares, avoiding at least one disaster.

“Jim, are you okay?” Claire asked. Jim felt a weight depress the edge of the cushion as she moved closer to him.

His first instinct was to snap back a retort along the lines of ‘Does it look like I’m okay?’ but his rapidly beating pulse kept him completely paralyzed. For once, his anxieties were doing him a favor.

Jim felt a comforting hand on his forehead, first checking for a fever, followed by soothingly rearranging his bangs despite the sweat that clung to his brow. That could only be his mom, probably kneeling on the floor next to the couch. But he still couldn’t manage to move a muscle to look.

“Kiddo…” Dr. Lake started, “this is the second time today this has happened. It's not normal.”

He desperately wanted to cry out, ‘Nothing about this is normal! I spent six months in a completely different dimension in one of the scariest places imaginable, with only my wits and this damn armor to keep me alive! I’m only sixteen, my biggest battle right now is supposed to be puberty! Tell me, what part of this scenario is normal?!’

But again, the words got trapped somewhere in the back of his throat. His frustration building, Jim felt like he was on the verge of tears. And at this point, he didn’t care who saw. He just wanted to be left alone. But at the same time, he was terrified of being alone right now.
The floorboards creaked as his mom stood up. “I’ll be back with some water,” she stated in a worried tone. The sudden loss of his mom’s hand on his forehead was the catalyst for his tears to start spilling over, running across his face and dripping onto the couch cushion.

Then, almost immediately, a different hand positioned itself on the side of his face that wasn’t buried against the couch. Slowly, he finally had enough autonomy to turn his head towards the new source of comfort, craving more contact. He saw Claire’s face, wracked with concern as she looked down at him. She shifted her hands so they framed his face, her left hand calmly wiping away the tears as they fell down his right cheek.

She didn’t say a word. She didn’t try to prompt him for any responses. She simply knelt on the couch at his side, caressing his damp cheeks. Occasionally the pads of her thumbs would linger on the scar that spanned his face.

Feeling awkward staring up at her, Jim closed his eyes. But as much as he tried to call to mind an image of Claire, or his mom, or anything else pleasant, the terror of the dark kept creeping into his vision. *I guess awkward is a better alternative to an anxiety attack,* he thought as he quickly reopened his eyes, trying to find something to look at that wouldn’t make the blood rush to his face all at once. His gaze settled on the TV screen, which was paused on a scene of one of Hiccup’s training montages.

By then his mom had come back with a large glass of water and a small, damp towel. She gently placed the towel on his forehead, its coolness a relief against his scorching skin. She watched him with her certified Concerned Mom Look while Claire continued to rub soothing patterns around his cheekbones.

Part of him wanted to lash out at his caretakers just as he had earlier. He felt like he was being handled like a porcelain doll, getting more attention than warranted for having a nightmare. He didn’t need that. He was the Trollhunter. *If I can’t handle a bad dream, what good am I going to be against Gunmar?*

Part of him wanted to do the exact opposite and bury himself in their embraces and kind touches. He had been deprived of human contact for months. At this moment in time, his heart was aching for as much affection as he could get.

But the part of him that was still paralyzed from panic, although it was receding, prevented him from taking either course of action. So he lay there, still curled up on himself, counting his breaths as the two women in his life stood - er, knelt - watch over him.

After a few moments, his mom broke the silence, “Hey, kiddo, want to try sitting up?”

He nodded. Claire gave him some space to maneuver as he methodically unfurled his limbs and got himself back into an upright position. His mom passed him the glass of water, which he gratefully took large gulps from. As he drank, his mom tenderly combed through his matted hair with her fingers. It had been so long since he’d had a haircut that his ears could easily hide underneath the dark brown locks, something she was surely noticing right now.

After he had quickly drained the glass, his mom moved to refill it. Before she could fully stand up, however, Toby practically leapt up from his spot on the other end of couch. “Hold on, Dr. L, I got this. I’m not so great with the whole ‘physical affection’ stuff, but water patrol? That I can do.” She handed off the glass to Toby, who eagerly went to the kitchen to fill it.

And that’s when the Spanish Inquisition returned.
“So hold up,” Claire began, clasping her hands together in her lap, “this happened earlier, too?”

“When he woke up from his nap,” Barbara confirmed. “Jim, do you want to talk about it?”

He shook his head. “What’s there to talk about? It was just a bad dream.”

“Just a bad dream, my ass,” Claire retorted, earning her a slight disapproving glance from Dr. Lake for her choice of vocabulary. “Before you curled up into a ball, you were thrashing around, Jim. And yelling. And, you know, there’s all this going on,” she gestured at his armor, which hadn’t deactivated yet.

“I said there's nothing to talk about!” he fumed. The red of his armor intensified in response.

“Jim, honey, we're just concerned. Please talk to us.”

“I will. When there's something to talk about. Which isn't right now.” He crossed his arms against his chest, willing the Eclipse Armor to return to the amulet in a flash of light.

The two women exchanged a glance. “Fine,” Claire retorted as Toby returned with Jim’s water.

Sensing something had gone down during his short leave of absence, Toby tried to lighten the mood. “Well, water we waiting for? Shall we resume our movie-watching spectacular?” he chuckled at his own joke as he handed the glass to Jim.

“Are you up for finishing the movie, kiddo?” His mom repeated.

“Yes. Please.” Anything to distract me.

Somewhat reluctantly, Dr. Lake got up, unpaused the movie, and went back to her chair on the other side of the room. Claire settled back on the couch alongside Jim, closer than she had been at the start of the evening, but farther away than Jim was hoping for. He wished he could go back to just a few minutes ago when she was holding his head.

I guess this is as good as it's gonna get for now...

Chapter End Notes

#giveJimHugs2k18
Chapter 6

Chapter Summary

Dr. Lake is concerned about her son, and movie time continues. Also, there's a fluffy blanket.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Barbara Lake couldn’t even begin to put into words how worried she was about her son.

In her position at the hospital, she’d seen many patients with physical and emotional symptoms similar to Jim’s - usually the ones who had survived some sort of trauma. Some made full, speedy recoveries. Some took much longer on the road to full recovery. And some never complete the journey and get lost somewhere along the way. She fervently hoped Jim would fall in the first category.

But then again, none of her patients had ever been a Trollhunter before.

She was still coming to terms with this whole different life he led. Months ago, when Toby and Claire began explaining everything to her, she’d first thought that their imaginations had gotten the better of them. And when Blinky had shown up in her house (as his troll self, not as the human guidance counselor she vaguely remembered meeting before) she thought she was dreaming. She didn’t want to believe them, that her son was somehow chosen to be a magical-protector-knight-thing and had entered an alternate dimension to save Claire’s brother and try to take out the Big Bad Guy. But as more time passed with Jim nowhere to be found, she gradually accepted their explanations as truth. It made a lot of his strange behavior in the preceding months make more sense in hindsight.

Just because she accepted it as fact, though, didn’t mean she approved. Oh no, not in the slightest. The universe or Merlin or whatever should have picked a different human. Her little boy shouldn’t have to shoulder the weight of the world. He’s too kind. Too caring. Too good-intentioned. Too self-sacrificing…

Too perfect for the job.

She sighed internally as she glanced over at Jim, who was settled on the couch across the living room. His friends sat there with him, all silently engrossed in the movie. Toby had always been a good friend to Jim - the boy had moved into the house across the street at pretty much the same time Jim’s dad had left. The timing couldn’t have been more perfect, and the two had practically been inseparable ever since. Claire was a newer face on the scene - though she was pretty sure this was the same girl Jim had developed a secret crush on a couple years ago (he had assumed it was secret, but mothers have a knack for knowing things). She seemed like a very responsible young lady, and she clearly cared for Jim as more than just a friend. It warmed Barbara’s heart that her son had people he could depend on in his life.

But it bothered her that Jim had kept all this a secret from her, that it had taken until he was trapped in the so-called Darklands for her to find out. And even then, she’d only found out because his
partners in crime world-saving could no longer hide his absence. There used to be a time when he would tell her literally everything - apparently that time was now past.

_He’s growing up too fast._

Whatever inner changes he was going through had started manifesting physically during his six month disappearance. Obviously he’d gotten taller, and, despite his malnourished physique, she could tell he’d acquired some muscle tone and angles where there used to only be baby fat. Her little boy was morphing into a strapping young adult, something she wasn’t quite ready for yet.

_But no matter what, I’ll always be there for him. If, for now, that just means providing him a safe haven, then that’s what I’ll do. But I’m also more than willing to put my recently-earned green belt to use._

She watched as Jim visibly shivered for the fourth time in ten minutes.

_That’s it - blanket time._

Dr. Lake quietly got up from her seat to rummage for a blanket in the hallway cabinet. She successfully pulled out one of the larger ones made of soft microfleece and carried it back to the living room. Jim immediately noticed, a look of typical teenage embarrassment crossing his face.

“Mom…” he weakly protested. But the eager look in his eyes betrayed his true thoughts.

Smiling, she quickly passed in front of the TV and covered him in the blanket from his neck down to his toes. He frowned when she planted a kiss on his forehead (_yeah, he definitely has a fever_), eliciting little smiles from his friends. She scooped up the used ice packs from the floor, which had been abandoned for many minutes now, with the intent of returning them to the freezer to be used again later.

_I might as well do the dishes while I’m at it._

As Barbara moved to exit the room, she briefly glanced over her shoulder to watch Jim snuggling himself into the folds of the blanket. It was as if he was trying to physically bury whatever horrors kept haunting him when he closed his eyes, the horrors he refused to talk about with any of them.

_My little boy…_

Jim wasn’t about to admit that he felt chilled, but he was grateful nonetheless when his mom somehow took notice and draped one of their big, comfy blankets over him. He desperately wanted to cocoon himself safely inside it and hide from the world for a while, but with his friends still here and the movie still playing (even if he could practically recite it line-for-line, he still wanted to watch it to the end) he figured now wasn’t the best time for blanket barriers. Instead, he folded his legs up beside him so he could comfortably lean against the back of the couch and the armrest simultaneously, careful to avoid aggravating his side.

He reached with his left hand to reposition the fabric over his now-exposed feet when he collided with another hand moving to do the same. Claire’s hand.

_They both froze._

_Do it. Do it now._

...wait, do what now? Oh.
Before she could distance herself again, Jim cautiously wrapped his hand around hers. He intertwined their fingers, but his grip was loose enough that she still had the option of retreating.

As luck would have it, she didn’t shy away. At least, not yet.

Jim’s gaze shifted from their joined hands to Claire’s face. In the dim light, he could make out a faint blush gracing her cheeks - he could almost guarantee his own face was doing the same. He looked into her beautiful brown eyes, those eyes that could will him to do anything with just a glance. Years ago, before she even knew he existed, he had decided that was his favorite thing about her. But tonight those eyes were colored with hurt and concern as she returned his gaze.

“I’ve missed you,” Jim whispered, gently squeezing her hand in hopes of conveying his sincerity.

“I… I’ve missed you, too,” she murmured back. He could sense she was still holding back, but he didn’t want to pull on that thread at the moment. In the past, before the Darklands, her touch could make his heart feel like it was soaring above the clouds; now it was helping him stay grounded, keeping the shadows that pricked at his nerves at bay.

She examined how he had contorted himself on the couch. “Are you actually comfortable like that? Your side -”

“Hey, peanut gallery, pipe down!” Toby mockingly scolded. “Tryin’ to watch a movie, over here!” He flicked a piece of popcorn in their direction.

Wait, popcorn? Since when did Toby get… you know what, nevermind.

Claire tossed the kernel back over at Toby (who happily caught it in his mouth) and turned back to Jim. “Before you hurt yourself further, I have an idea.” She nervously chewed on a corner of her lip as she slid away from him, settling herself in the crook of the L-shaped couch. She let her hands rest on either side of her legs as she looked at Jim expectantly.

Confused and already missing the feel of her hand in his, Jim just sat there and stared.

She raised an eyebrow at him, but before either one of them could speak Toby interjected again, “For goodness sake, Jimbo, she’s offering up her lap as a pillow so you can lie down! I know you’ve been away for a while, but jeez!”

Jim’s face felt like it was on fire, and Claire’s complexion took on a noticeable rosy hue. “Oh,” he muttered sheepishly. He shifted so he could lie lengthwise along the couch, having to bend his legs so he would fit. After delaying briefly to readjust the blanket so he remained covered in its soft embrace, he slowly leaned backwards until his head found a different source of warmth and softness.

His heart skipped a beat as he felt a wave of awkwardness wash over him. After his long hiatus from the world, this seemed like a particularly intimate position to be in with another person. Especially when that person was Claire. The girl he really liked. The girl he hadn't properly kissed yet. And, if the pattern from this evening continued, the girl he might not get a second chance with.

Jim felt a new fear creep into his being, settling deep in his chest and his limbs, mixing with the other shadows swirling at the edge of his consciousness. His grip on the blanket tightened as he pulled it closer to his chest, attempting to smother the sensation. Closing his eyes wasn’t an option, so instead he fixated on the TV again.

He was only vaguely aware of what was going on in the movie - the shapes, colors, and sounds were familiar, but he wasn't concentrating enough on the film to register a coherent scene. Instead,
he was channeling all his willpower into fending off the creeping shadows.

Jim was so focused on his internal battle that he flinched when a pair of hands timidly combed through his hair. But he quickly melted into the touch when delicate fingers lightly scratched his scalp. Their movement grew more confident as he relaxed, deftly tracing soothing lines across the top of his head and occasionally massaging his temples.

It wasn't quite the human contact he'd been craving, but it was definitely helping him calm down.

At this point, Jim was no longer paying any attention to the movie. He continued staring at the screen, though, to avoid the awkwardness that would surely ensue if he tried looking at Claire. His eyelids grew heavier as her ministrations lulled him back towards the edge of sleep.

*Maybe if I just close my eyes for a minute…*

He tried to concentrate on the feeling of her fingers against his head in hopes that would help him cling to consciousness. But as he lay there, the sounds of Vikings and their dragons grew more distant while the darkness behind his eyelids deepened. Sleep was coming for him fast, and he felt like he was literally falling over the edge from consciousness into nightmares.

Jim jolted himself awake before fully entering the realm of sleep. His eyes opening wide, he found himself looking up at a very concerned Claire.

“Jim, what's wrong?” she worried in a hushed voice.

“Oh, uh, I don't want to miss the end of the movie,” he said half-truthfully. He weakly smiled up at her, but it didn't seem to convince her.

“Jim…” she started as if to pick another fight. But she bit her lower lip to stop herself from continuing her thought. Instead, she allowed her right hand to slide down towards his torso where his hands were still clutching the blanket to his chest. She coaxed one of his hands from its vice grip, intertwining her fingers with his. Her other hand continued to cradle his head, alternating between massaging his scalp and smoothing down his hair.

Jim eagerly soaked up the bits of physical affection, relaxing a little as he rested their joined hands over his heart on top of the blanket. His pulse still raced from his dance with sleep and the fear of what it would bring; with any luck, it would be enough to keep him awake through the rest of the movie.

*But what about after the movie? I can't avoid sleep forever. Hell, I can barely avoid it for thirty minutes.*

“Oh, how cute,” he heard his mom coo when she re-entered the room.

“Mom…” he groaned, hoping it gave off an ‘embarrassed moody teenager’ vibe rather than ‘injured and irritated hero.’

Once again, Toby interjected. “Shush! They’re about to fight the big dragon!”

*Huh, I guess the end of the movie is closer than I thought.*

The group sat in silence as the final scenes of the movie began to play out. Jim held onto Claire’s hand as tight as he dared, finding comfort in the way her body partially shielded him from the world as his head lay on her lap.
Was it right for me to go to the Darklands alone? Without them?

The TV flashed as Hiccup and Toothless took down the giant dragon and the story started to wrap up. When the scene came that revealed Hiccup’s missing foot, he felt Claire’s free hand wander over his face to gingerly trace the edges of his scar.

It’s best that they didn’t come. They would have gotten hurt, or worse, and I’d never be able to live with that.

Jim turned his attention to Claire, unable to decipher the expression she wore. Was she concerned? Confused? Hurt? … Something else?

The music turned triumphant as the movie came to its close. His mom got up, turned on the living room lights, and went to turn down the volume on the TV as the credits started to roll. Toby yawned audibly as he got up and stretched. “Aw man, I forgot how good that movie is,” he commented as he stretched from side to side. “I should get back home to check on Nana’s cats. AAARRRGGHH!! still hasn’t eaten one yet, but you never know. Need help cleaning anything up, Dr. L?”

“Nope, I’ve got it Toby. But feel free to take home some of the leftovers if you’d like - there’s pretty much a whole box left in the kitchen.”

Toby looked in Jim’s direction when he responded, “For once, I think I’ll pass. I think Jim needs as much leftover pizza as he can get.”

Jim felt Claire shake a little as she giggled along with the other two. He wanted to feel indignant, but he was mostly glad that he’d have plenty of pizza to snack on before bed. Or as a midnight snack. Or maybe even breakfast.

His stomach gurgled. Or right now. Man, coming back from near-starvation is hard work.

Toby finished his goodbyes and left to go home, the door clicking shut behind him. Shortly after, Jim felt Claire stiffen beneath him.

No, please no, please don’t go yet.

“I should probably be getting home, too.”

Jim tightened his grip on her hand in response. She looked down at him with a mix of surprise and… sadness? He hoped it was because she was sad to leave, and not something else.

“You can stay for a little longer if you want, Claire,” his mom said, picking up on their subtle interaction. “I have some paperwork I want to get squared away tonight, but I can switch the TV over to cable so you two can watch it for a bit.”

Toby has AAARRRGGHH!! for his wingman, I think my mom is mine.

“I, uh… no, I really should be going.”

Jim felt like gravity had suddenly decided to work ten times harder on him. But Claire still managed to extricate herself from his hold and slide out from under him, leaving his head to rest on the lifeless couch cushion. Before walking away, she bent over and hesitantly kissed him on the forehead, so light that he barely knew it was happening.

Jim felt cold, confused, and hungry.
It’s almost like the Darklands all over again, he tried to joke with himself. But his humor was not well-received.

He craned his neck to watch as Claire moved towards the door, picking up her backpack from the floor. Before leaving, she asked, “Dr. Lake, when would be a good time for Toby and I to come back tomorrow?”

“Oh, probably around lunchtime or so. I want to try and get Jim to the clinic first thing in the morning to get his side checked out, and he’s long overdue for a haircut.” As if to make her point, she walked over to him and ruffled his hair before propping his head up with a pillow.

Though Jim couldn’t see Claire anymore, he imagined that she smiled in response. “Cool! Well, uh, I’ll see you tomorrow then. Goodnight!”

His mom waved as Claire, too, left the building. She then turned to her son, “So, kiddo, what do you want to do now?”

“Um, could I have a couple more slices of pizza?” he questioned as his stomach grumbled again.

“Sure thing.”

As she walked off towards the kitchen, Jim found the remote and flipped over to a cooking show to have some background noise. His mom returned with a couple slices of pepperoni pizza, the cheese slightly solidified from cooling to room temperature.

“I wasn’t sure if you wanted them reheated, or -”

“This is fine, Mom. Thanks,” he smiled as he accepted the food, quickly setting to work.

She smiled back. “Good. I’ll be at the table getting some paperwork in order if you need me,” she stated as she turned to leave. “When you’re ready to head off to bed, just let me know so I can give you some painkillers. It might help you sleep better, what with your side and fever and all.”

He nodded in acknowledgement, his mouth stuffed full of pizza. He had no doubt whatever his mom had in her stash of painkillers would help with his bruises, aches, and fever.

But he doubted it would help with the real reason he struggled in his sleep.

Chapter End Notes

Here, have a little bit of fluff (laced with angst) before I try to drown us all in angst again :)

Chapter End Notes
Chapter 7

Chapter Summary

"Of all the things you choose in life, you don't get to choose what your nightmares are. You don't pick them; they pick you." ~John Irving

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Jim stared at his clock, watching the minutes slowly tick by. It was long past the time when reasonable people went to bed; he'd heard his mom close her door a while ago. Jim had been laying on his bed for a few hours now, trying to decide if he should actually go to sleep.

In truth, he was tired enough - exhausted, for the matter. And whatever concoction of painkillers his mom had given him were definitely adding to his drowsiness. His bed was as comfortable as ever (almost too comfortable after sleeping on cold stone floors for months), and he was snugly covered in a couple layers of blankets to help break his fever. If anyone was a perfect candidate for taking a trip to dreamland, it was Jim.

But the fear of what might be waiting for him when he got there was more than enough to keep him from going in the first place. Or, at least, that's what he was trying to do. But with the passing of each minute, his body and its need for sleep increased its efforts to overcome his willpower. *I can't avoid sleep forever...*

Jim clutched his sheets as he slowly gave in to the heaviness of his eyelids. He tried keeping his breathing steady, but the ache deep in his chest that sporadically made his pulse erratic kept causing his breath to hitch in his throat.

*Calm. Down.*

*Breathe.*

*They're just nightmares. They can't hurt you.*

*Besides, you might not even have one. You're so tired you might not have any dreams tonight.*

*Yeah. That would be good. No dreams.*

Jim loosened his grip on the sheets a little, his self-pep talk somewhat of a success. Not that he had any control over what happens in his head while unconscious, but the mere possibility of a dreamless sleep was… well, he didn't want to say hopeful, but at least it was something. Ideally he'd have sweet dreams about Claire or food or something. But nothing about his life was ideal, he'd come to accept that by now. Were there things he wished he could change? Hell yes. But that's not how the world works. You can't go back and change the past. And second chances are hard to come by.

*I just have to deal with it. Eventually this, too, shall pass. Hopefully. Maybe.*
Relaxing his grip on his sheets further, Jim gradually released his grip on consciousness.

You're home now. You're safe. The people you love are safe. There's nothing to be afraid of.

Jim’s senses became hazy as he finally let himself slip into sleep’s dark embrace.

…

Jim stood atop a single stone pillar in the middle of a dark void. The distant sound of grunts and groans, cackles and screeches, and all other noises that go bump in the night echoed in empty space. The air felt cold, clammy, and thick against his skin, making it harder than usual to breathe.

He surveyed his perch. The surface he stood on was maybe only ten feet in diameter, leaving little room to maneuver. The sides of the rock were rough, but smooth enough that there weren't any obvious footholds. The only escape would be to jump into the unknown.

The metallic clang of rattling chains quickened his pulse. He widened his stance and cautiously looked around, holding off on donning his armor. Still he saw nothing, only darkness.

“There’s nowhere to run, Trollhunter,” the voice taunted, unseen in the shadows.

“Then quit these games and face me!!” Jim bellowed into the void, hands clenching into fists.

The voice chuckled, “You fleshbags are just as reckless as trolls. No wonder the amulet chose you. Luckily for me, it also means you’re much more… breakable.”

“I’m not afraid of you!”

“Really?” the voice seemed amused. Jim could have sworn that something was starting to materialize in the patch of darkness in front of him. “Then you forget your teachings, young Trollhunter. For fear is what keeps you alive.”

The dark form in front of Jim started fully taking shape. Large, serrated horns that could shatter nearly any physical barrier. A single piercing blue eye that could batter the will. The Decimaar Blade held casually in one hand, glinting in the shadows as if eager to finish what it had started with Jim’s face.

Jim stared down the apparition. “I’m harder to kill than you think.”

At this the shadow laughed, a booming sound that nearly hurt Jim’s eardrums. “Then prove it, fleshbag!”

Strengthened by something deep inside him, Jim held out Merlin’s amulet. “For the doom of Gunmar, Eclipse is mine to command!!”

As Jim was enveloped in glowing red, his adversary chuckled again. “Interesting choice, young Trollhunter. Rather than banish me with Daylight, you would embrace the darker side of your power? I thought the children of your species were supposed to fear the dark.”

“I told you, I’m not afraid,” Jim responded through clenched teeth. He summoned his sword, feeling strength flood through him as he felt the weight of it in his hands. “And I’m not a child.”
“Ah, but you should be afraid, young Trollhunter. If not for your sake, but for theirs.”

Another stone platform materialized from the shadows, close enough to see but just outside of his jumping range. Two figures stood on top, surveying their surroundings in confusion. One was larger, the other smaller, but both... familiar.

“AAARRRGHH!!, I can’t see a blasted thing in all this darkness!”

“No see.”

Blinky. AAARRRGGHH!! Why were they here? Unless...

Oh no.

“Blinky! AAARRRGGHH!! Over here!” Jim called out, not sure what good it would do.

His friends heard him and turned towards the sound of his voice. “Would you look at that? Master Jim! Do tell, what are we doing in this infernal cave?”

Before he could respond, there was a flash as the Decimaar Blade swung wide and low, hitting the pillar. He watched in horror as the stone crumbled beneath them. In barely more than the blink of an eye his friends plummeted into the abyss, their cries for help quickly fading into nothingness.

Jim felt a numbness spread in his chest. They hadn’t even stood a chance.

His blood started pumping hot with rage, the glow of his armor rising to match. He locked onto his foe, the cause of his friends’ demise, and tried to pick his target. If Jim threw with all his strength, he might be able to throw the Eclipse Blade far enough to end this once and for all. But he would only get one shot.

As he steeled his muscles and his will, another pillar with two more figures emerged from the dark. Toby. His mother. He had to stop them from meeting the same fate as Blinky and AAARRRGGHH!!

“Mom! Tobes! Quick, jump towards me!”

But they were still disoriented from the lack of light, and by the time they located Jim their fates were already sealed. The blade swung. The rock crumbled. Two more of his loved ones swallowed by neverending darkness.

No... this can’t be happening... they’re supposed to be safe. Far away from here. This was his battle, not theirs.

He felt hollow. Empty. It was all happening so fast. Eventually the pain and tears would come after the shock wore off. If he lived long enough for that to happen.

“This is between you and me!” Jim shouted across the void, his voice hoarse. “Leave them out of this!”

“Foolish boy,” the shadow chided, “I’m merely doing what all great warriors do. Exploiting my opponent’s weakness.”

Jim’s pulse gathered in his throat when he saw yet another platform appear, this time with only a single figure on its surface. Even from this distance, he could see the red of his armor reflected in beautiful brown eyes.
No, not Claire, too.

“Claire, you have to jump towards me, quick! I’ll catch you!” he yelled in desperation. She was already facing him. Maybe she had a chance.

Only hesitating slightly, Claire got as much of a running start as possible before flinging herself across the empty space between them. Jim reached out as far as he could, using his sword as an anchor.

Almost there.

So close.

Her fingers grazed his, her wrist just outside of range.

Jim stretched further. He needed to close the gap.

But as he grasped for her, she started slipping away. His attempts to grab her resulted in nothing but air between his fingers.

She was falling, falling away from the glow of his armor. Her eyes filling with terror before being swallowed by the darkness.

Her last call, his name, lingering in the air as the void claimed her.

Jim fell to his knees, steadying himself with the hilt of his sword lest he tumble down after his loved ones. He couldn’t breathe.

The nightmare of nightmares guffawed triumphantly, its eye glinting with contempt as its gaze washed over the stunned hero.

“Do you fear me now, boy?”

Jim struggled to his feet, willing the newfound pain in his soul to fuel his adrenaline and rage. “You’ve made a mistake,” he chuckled lowly through the pain, “now I have nothing to fear.”

The monster roared as it closed the distance between them. The Decimaar Blade swung out, intending to fell the Trollhunter, but Jim met the blade with his own. He could feel the cursed weapon’s power calling to him as it thirsted to claim his very existence. The scar on Jim’s face burned white-hot, blurring his vision and further numbing his senses. His muscles were straining, his joints on the verge of buckling and giving way. Jim would not be able to survive this for much longer.

Just one, well-placed blow. That’s all he needed.

Summoning his shield to keep the Decimaar Blade from cleaving him in two, Jim shifted his stance and struck at the demon’s heart. The resistance against the Eclipse Blade was familiar in Jim’s grip as it sunk into the living stone.

He gritted his teeth as he used all his might to twist the sword and finish the fight.

But his blade wouldn’t budge.

Alarmed, Jim looked into the face of death itself. Its lips curled in a sneer, its eye piercing through Jim’s soul. It reached out and effortlessly trapped Jim’s waist with one of its clawed hands, holding him out over the abyss. The Eclipse Blade vanished, leaving behind no trace. The
Decimaar Blade hovered close to Jim’s head, terror and a burning pain flooding his senses.

“You cannot defeat me, Trollhunter. Nor can you escape me. It is only a matter of time.”

The sound of bellowing laughter reverberated in Jim’s ears. It released its hold on Jim, letting him plummet into the empty darkness below.

Jim sat straight up in bed, doubling over as he tried to suck air into his lungs. His eyes darted around the room, trying to fill his vision with mundane objects in hopes it would chase away the memory of the eye of Gunmar. But in every shadow he could see his nightmares still lurking. He felt a cold sweat dripping down the sides of his face, getting trapped against his skin under the shell of his armor.

He squeezed his eyes shut in an attempt to block everything out. He could still see the pulsing red patterns from his armor dancing across the back of his eyelids.

_Breathe. Focus. It was just a nightmare._

This nightmare had been longer than the others, though. More detailed. More realistic.

Jim desperately grabbed for the water bottle at his bedside. His heart pounding, he tried to quench the fire that burned through his veins and numbed his nerves. After quickly emptying half the bottle, he still felt as if he was slowly suffocating as he struggled to breathe normally. Setting down the water, he willed the Eclipse armor to retreat into the amulet, leaving him in a too-small shirt that was drenched in sweat and clung to his skin. He peeled off his shirt to ease his attempts at breathing, removing all restrictions on his heaving chest and shoulders. Goosebumps prickled across his back and chest as his sweat started to evaporate in the cool, nighttime air.

He concentrated on the cold feeling enveloping his exposed skin. The texture of the cotton sheets grasped in his hands. The slight pinching and pulling from the bandages on his torso as he steadily took deeper, more even breaths. He drained the rest of his water as his pulse leveled out, still beating more rapidly than normal.

Feeling restless, Jim swung his legs out from under the covers and stood by his desk, leaning on the edge for stability. He looked out the window across the street. The lights in Toby’s house were all out, save a faint flickering glow in Toby’s bedroom - he must have fallen asleep while playing Go-Go Sushi again. Relief replaced some of the unease that weighed in the back of his mind.

Noting that his clock read almost 3:30am, Jim quietly staggered out his room and across the hall to the bathroom. Before softly closing the bathroom door, he could hear his mom faintly snoring on the other side of her door. A little more of his unease lifted. His finger hesitated by the lightswitch, eventually deciding against turning on the blinding fluorescent lights; the little blue night light plugged into one of the wall sockets was bright enough.

Taking a small cloth, he doused it in cold water and started wiping away the sweat from his face. His cheeks didn’t look quite as gaunt as they had the previous morning (thank you, pancakes and pizza), but the sunken appearance of his eyes hadn’t changed. Maybe it was a trick of the low lighting, but the bags under his eyes almost looked worse. And the way the soft, blue light reflected off of his scar made it look like his face was being cleaved in two by a shadow. Overall, a haunting visage.

His face feeling a little refreshed, he proceeded to run the cloth over the back of his neck and his
chest, careful not to disturb his bandages (though his mom’s bandages were notorious for never coming off a moment before they were meant to). The cool water on his skin calmed him and helped chase away some of his drowsiness. It helped him feel more human.

He stood there for a few minutes, grasping the edges of the sink as he let the air dry him. He cautiously thought back on his nightmare in hopes that some tidbit of knowledge from it could be useful. But he kept seeing the terrified looks on his loved ones faces before they plummeted to their doom, over and over and over again. Jim strengthened his grip on the sink, willing himself to not collapse.

Then, like a lighthouse slowly becoming visible in the fog, a phrase of dialogue surfaced in his swirling thoughts.

*Exploiting my opponent’s weakness…*

But what did it mean? Jim had a lot of weaknesses - for a start, being a squishy, scrawny, fleshbag human instead of a troll.

*Does the fact that I’m human inherently make me weak? Or am I simply not strong enough? Is there some sort of hidden armor power I still need to unlock? Is that why I couldn’t save my friends?*

… my friends.

*That’s my weakness.*

*They’re too close to me. I care too much. And Gunmar plans to exploit that.*

*I can’t let that happen.*

But he couldn’t just suddenly not care about his friends anymore. No, that wasn’t possible. And if he tried to pretend they meant nothing to him, Gunmar would just call him on his bluff. Which pretty much only left one option:

*When the time comes and I have to face Gunmar, whether it’s back in the Darklands, in Arcadia, or anywhere else on or under Earth, I have to face him without their help.*

*I have to face him alone.*

Chapter End Notes

Jim, you come to very poor conclusions when you're sleep deprived and scared. But I wouldn't have a story if you didn't, sorry not sorry.

Also, Jim won't actually be facing Gunmar anytime soon because I have a lot more feelings I need to put him through first. Just in case y'all were curious.
There was no way in hell Jim was going back to sleep. Three nightmares in less than 24 hours was more than enough, thank you very much. He considered going back to his room, but since there wasn't much to do there except stare at his walls Jim decided to wander downstairs.

*Maybe I can make some tea. That has caffeine, right?*

He crept down the staircase, carefully stepping around the squeaky and creaky bits that had been there as long as he could remember. No need to wake his mom up due to his inability to sleep. After reaching the ground floor, Jim made his way over to the kitchen and turned on the lights. Blinking momentarily at the sudden brightness, he surveyed the familiar domain. It had been months since he'd set foot in a kitchen, or really properly cooked a meal - the occasional monster egg cooked by a small fire in a dark cave was for survival purposes only, not pleasure, so it definitely didn't count.

Jim was itching to break out the pots, pans, and utensils and whip up something spectacularly delicious, like maybe an omelet. But he didn't want to risk waking his mom up with the sounds or smells of his cooking (though she was typically a heavy sleeper, but that could have changed after he'd disappeared for six months). Besides, his primary mission was to acquire caffeine to keep any and all future nightmares as far away as possible.

He rummaged in the cupboard where they usually kept the ingredients for hot beverages. Hot cocoa mix, chamomile tea (that was a big *nope*), herbal mint tea…

*Come on, don't we have just plain black tea or something?*

Rather than continue digging in the cupboard, Jim’s gaze was drawn to the large plastic container adjacent to the boxes of tea bags. Its semi-opaqueness allowed Jim to see it was over halfway full of a coarse, dark brown powder.

Now, Jim had never been a fan of coffee. He'd always thought it was too bitter than anything had a right to be. But desperate times called for desperate measures.

Scooping some of the grounds into a filter, he prepped his mom’s coffee maker to brew a small pot. After getting it all set up and pushing the start button, it wasn't long until a low, gurgling sound filled the kitchen as the water began heating up. A few moments later, the infamous dark brown liquid started dripping into the pot.

Jim decided to eat a couple more slices of pizza to satiate his grumbling stomach while he waited. He pulled the leftovers from the fridge, leaning against a counter as he ate straight from the box. He watched as the coffee pot slowly filled.
It was kind of cathartic to watch, and definitely an improvement from the shadowy thoughts lurking in his recent memory. And to be honest, the aroma of the coffee sort of smelled nice. It smelled comforting. It smelled like home.

Jim wiped a tear from the corner of his eye as he retrieved a mug from the cupboard.

Dammit, Jim, no need to get emotional over bitter bean juice.

He filled up his mug (with plenty left in the pot for seconds and even thirds) and put the half-empty pizza box back in the fridge. As he was about to close the door, the can of whipped cream nestled behind some juice bottles caught his eye. Jim could almost visualize the lightbulb that floated over his head as he grabbed the can.

Oh yeah, this will help.

Jim took his mug of coffee and the whipped cream out to the dining room table, settling himself into one of the chairs that faced the door. Careful not to splatter, he sprayed a dollop of cream on top of the hot liquid, watching as the edges melted into the drink to make it creamy brown in color. He took a sip, flinching when he burnt the tip of his tongue.

Huh. It doesn't taste too horrible. This could work.

Jim sat for a long time nursing his coffee. The warmth transferring from the mug to his hands was soothing, and the alert buzzing starting in the back of his mind eased a little of the tightness in his chest. He definitely wouldn't be going back to sleep anytime soon.

When he got up to refill his cup, he noticed a shadow move in the hallway. He quickly set the mug down on the counter and grabbed one of the chef’s knives, holding it up in a reverse grip as he slowly approached the hall.


A pair of glowing yellow eyes blinked back at him. Jim had to cover his mouth with his free hand to stifle a yell.

“Sorry to startle you, young Trollhunter.” Draal looked warily at the knife, waiting until Jim lowered it to continue. Not that the kitchen knife would have done much damage against the troll’s rock-hard skin. “I heard movement, so I came to investigate.”

“Oh, uh, thanks. I guess.” Jim retraced his steps to put the knife back, retrieving his coffee mug. Draal wordlessly watched Jim as he refilled his mug and made his way back to the table, then joined him in the dining room after he returned to his chair.

“Tell me, Trollhunter, why are you awake when other humans still sleep?”

“I was hungry.” A half-truth.

“But now you drink coffee,” the troll stated.

“And I was thirsty.”

“Trollhunter, I know your species uses that strange brown substance to avoid sleeping,” Draal said, raising an eyebrow. “So why do you avoid sleep?”
It was a point-blank question, and Jim couldn't think of a good way to skirt around it. “To be honest, nightmares.”

Draal’s tone became hushed. “Of the Darklands?”

Jim nodded, taking another sip of coffee. Again, a half-truth.

“Ah.” The two sat in silence for a while, Jim sipping on his drink as Draal stared at the table. At some point, the troll’s gaze turned to Jim. “I did not know humans could change color from their battle wounds.”

“Huh?”

Draal pointed at Jim's side. Since he hadn't bothered to put a shirt back on yet, his injured side was openly on display.

“Oh. That. That's a bruise. They appear when our insides have been damaged and our blood sort of leaks into our skin.”

“Interesting. Does it hurt?”

“Yeah. But it’ll heal eventually. My mom thinks I cracked some of my bones underneath there, so it'll take a while.”

Draal nodded in acknowledgement. “And what about that one, Trollhunter?” He pointed at the gash on Jim's face.

“That… um… I'm not sure.”

“If I may ask, how did you acquire that battle scar?”

“Well, uh…” no point in lying, since he'd already told Blinky and the gang earlier. “That was courtesy of Gunmar.”

Draal's eyes went wide. “Gunmar?!”

Jim frantically signalled for him to lower his voice.

“*The* Gunmar?” the troll repeated, much softer this time. “You mean the Decimaar Blade cut your flesh?”

Jim nodded.

“How did you survive?”

Jim shrugged. “Apparently I'm pretty resilient for a fleshbag.”

Draal struggled to keep his rumbling laughter contained.

Jim felt the corners of his mouth curve upwards. He liked talking with Draal. He treated him as his equal, like a warrior. Not a breakable teenage boy.

“Human scars don't typically look like this,” Jim continued. “Usually the part of the skin that got cut mostly grows back and looks lighter in color. But this one…” he trailed off, running his thumb over the part that gouged the bridge of his nose.
“Is a scar meant for trolls. A scar borne only by the toughest of warriors.” Draal revealed a toothy grin. “It suits you, Trollhunter.”

That might be one of the nicest compliments Jim had ever gotten from him. He smiled back, draining the rest of his second cup of coffee.

Jim was at the bottom of his fourth cup (apparently he'd made more than he thought) when his mom came downstairs. Draal had retreated back to the basement about an hour beforehand, having run out of conversation topics he deemed interesting enough. And Jim was perfectly fine with that.

“You're up early, kiddo. Did you sleep okay?” Looking at her son, she realized the answer to her own question when she laid eyes on the coffee mug. “Do I even want to know how long you've been up?”

“Nope.”

She sighed. “Jim, why don't you let me take you to the trauma psychologist here in Arcadia? I refer patients to him all the time, and I honestly think it could help with your nightmares.”

“And what am I supposed to tell him, exactly?” Jim forced his mug down onto the table in frustration. “That trolls are real? That I'm the sworn magical protector of trolls and humans alike until the day I die? And that there's an evil set on destroying life as we know it, and it's trapped in another dimension called the Darklands?! Oh, and by the way, I was in that alternate dimension for six months, just so I could save Claire Nuñez's little brother, and now that I'm back I keep having terrifying nightmares?! Is that what I'm supposed to tell him?!”

At some point Jim had gotten to his feet, inadvertently towering over his mother. After a few heaving breaths, Jim bit his lower lip and sat back down, turning his head away from her. His overgrown hair helped shield his eyes, which were on the brink of tears, from whatever look his mom was giving him.

He couldn't see her face, but he heard the desperation in her voice. “Just… think about it, okay?” He heard her walk off to the kitchen and start up another pot of coffee.

What's gotten into me?

After the coffee finished brewing, his mom came back to the table with the pot in one hand and her own mug in the other. “Since apparently you drink coffee now,” she started tersely, “would you like some more?”

“Yes please,” he replied, suddenly feeling very small.

But he was grateful when his mug was once again full of the caffeinated beverage. He'd have to remember to stop for a while after this cup, though - surely there would be adverse side effects later from drinking five cups of coffee in a row. His mom could probably tell him exactly what those were, but that wasn't a question he was going to ask anytime soon.

Barbara laid out the schedule for the day as he topped his mug with a generous helping of whipped cream. “Don't take too long, I want to leave for the clinic in an hour so we're there right when they open. That way we can get you x-rayed and get out of there before the masses start pouring in. Then we'll go get your haircut, and I guess we'll stop by a clothing store and get you shirts that actually fit properly. That whole muscle t-shirt look you had going on yesterday really doesn't suit you.”
Jim would have begged to differ, but he decided his best route was to simply nod in response. The sooner he got through this half of the day, the sooner he'd be back in Trollmarket with his friends.

That time couldn't come soon enough.

Claire tapped her fingers impatiently on her knees. It was a nice enough day outside, so she and Toby had decided to sit on the front steps of the Lake household to wait for Jim and his mom to get home. They should be back any minute, now - Jim had texted them both a little bit ago saying they just finished the last of their errands.

She had sent Jim a private message earlier this morning asking if he was feeling better today, but he never responded.

_I don't know what I'm supposed to do. We definitely had a moment last night - a few moments, actually - but it's like he's still holding back._

Now, granted, this was only his second day back from the Darklands. Claire wanted to be supportive and understanding, because none of them really knew what sort if hell Jim had been through the past six months. But it was all so frustrating. Especially since Jim should have never gone alone in the first place.

_I really have to let that go. It's in the past. It's over. No going back. I should just be happy Jim's back, safe and sound._

And yet…

She was brought out of her reverie when Toby started nudging her with his elbow. “Claire, look! I see Dr. L’s car!”

Indeed, Dr. Lake's sedan came rolling into the driveway, acknowledging the duo with a short beep of the horn. Claire and Toby waved as the passengers emerged from the vehicle; Jim's mom wore a pleasantly neutral expression, whereas Jim was practically scowling.

_Great, so we're starting off the day with Grumpy Jim._

He looked slightly better today, though. He wasn't nearly as gaunt as yesterday, and he was looking more like his normal self with his fresh haircut and a new blue jacket that actually fit his taller form. But dark circles still hung under his eyes, competing for attention with the other-worldly scar on his face. Jim moved gingerly towards the front door, holding his side with one hand and a manilla envelope in the other. His mom followed closely behind with a bulky shopping bag.

“Ooooh, are those your x-rays?” Toby pointed at the envelope. “Can we see?”

“I mean, I guess so. Four fractured ribs don't look as exciting as you would think.”

“Four?” Claire asked, glancing at Dr. Lake.

“But no other internal damage, thank heavens,” she responded.

The group herded themselves inside the house. Toby sat down with Jim in the living room (he was determined to judge just how interesting a few cracked ribs could look) while Claire helped Dr. Lake take the shopping bag full of clothes upstairs.

Once they were in Jim’s room, Claire asked quietly, “So, how’s he really doing?”
“I wish I knew,” she sighed, passing Claire some shirts to hang up in the closet. “I don't think he slept much last night. When I woke up this morning he was already awake, and drinking coffee of all things.”

“But I thought Jim hated coffee!”

“Apparently not anymore. Or, at least, he’d rather drink something he hates than dream about whatever he fears.”

“So he had another nightmare?”

“He won't tell me,” Barbara said wearily, handing over the last pieces of clothing that needed to be hung up. “But I would bet my physician's license that he did.” She sat down at the foot of Jim's bed, burying her face behind her hands. “I suggested seeing a psychologist to help with the nightmares, or whatever they are, but he practically bit my head off when I brought it up. He's never done that to me before, and I'm just… so…”

“Worried.” Claire sat down next to her, placing a comforting hand on one of her shoulders. “We all are, Dr. Lake.”

The two women sat for a moment, the silence between them interrupted only by the distant sound of Toby’s curiosity as he studied the prints of Jim's x-rays.

“If it helps,” Claire began, “Jim’s pretty tough. A lot tougher than I thought when I first met him.”

Barbara lowered her hands, smiling sadly at Claire. “Oh, I know. He's always been my little hero. I knew someday he'd start growing up on me, but it never crossed my mind that I could lose him, too. Especially not like this.”

Jim and his mom were always very quiet about the lack of a father figure in their household. They rarely brought it up in conversation, and if they did it was typically only to reference a moment in time. But, knowing about that chapter in their lives, Claire had seen how it had made the bond between mother and son stronger than any she'd witnessed before. Definitely stronger than her relationship with her own parents. So for Dr. Lake to offhandedly allude to Jim’s deadbeat dad, Claire knew the woman must be hurting.

“It’ll be better once Jim can actually catch up on his sleep,” Claire encouraged. “He’s just sleep deprived and cranky, that's all. It has to be.”

“I hope you're right, though I doubt whatever's going on in his head is that simple.”

“But a good night's sleep definitely wouldn't hurt.”

“True.” Barbara stood up. She tilted her head as she formed an idea. “I wonder… would a certain four-armed, six-eyed friend have some sort of magical solution? You know, to help Jim sleep?”

“Oh, I'm sure he's got at least one or two remedies buried somewhere in his library.” Claire could feel a weight in her heart lift as she walked out the door of Jim's room. Why hadn't any of them thought of that yesterday?

“All the more reason for you to head off to Trollmarket as soon as possible, then.” Dr. Lake followed her out of the room, the two of them walking back downstairs. “I’ll pack you guys plenty of snacks and water to take with you.”

“Wait, you’re not going to come with us?” Claire asked. They had reached the bottom of the
staircase, and Toby and Jim were both looking their way.

“Not today. I don’t think Jim wants his mother in tow during his first trip back to Trollmarket in months.”

“Oooh, Trollmarket time!” Toby leapt to his feet. “Whaddaya say, Jim, feeling up for it?”

Jim wearily got up beside him, clutching his side. Standing up to his full height, he squared his shoulders as if steeling himself for a long journey. “Yeah. Yeah, I am.”

Chapter End Notes

Trollmarket and everyone's favorite troll dads are next, I swear. ;)


Damn, Jim, finally back in Trollmarket again
i don't care if it's an old meme i like dwelling on the past

Chapter Summary

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Jim took a deep breath as Claire dug the Horngazle out of her purse. Six months… would the citizens of Trollmarket even remember him? Had they all written him off as dead?

“Jim…” Claire started, watching him with concern.

“Huh?”

“It’s just… well, we tried to fill in for you while you were gone. But you were gone so long and…”

“… What? What is it?”

“Some trolls will be happy to see you. Others…” she trailed off.

“Others are a teensy weensy bit upset you went missing in the Darklands,” Toby finished. “You might not get a very warm welcome down there.”

“Well, I’m still their Trollhunter, whether they like it or not,” Jim said defiantly. His curled his hand around the amulet in his pocket, feeling the mantle of guilt settle on his shoulders.

I deserve it, though… I was gone when they needed me. It's my job to answer their calls, and I wasn't even around to hear them.

“Are you gonna be okay?” Claire glanced sideways at him.

“Jury’s still out on that one,” Jim chuckled darkly. “But I’ve gotta go down there sooner or later, so might as well be today. Besides, that’s where Blinky and AAARRRGHHH!! are.”

“Alright.” Claire didn’t seem amused by Jim’s sense of humor as she drew the archway on the wall under the bridge. The stone glowed a brilliant blue, breaking away when she touched the center.

Toby was the first to bound happily through the doorway, with Claire and Jim following closely behind. As Jim navigated down the fourth “step” of the seemingly endless crystal staircase, he was already gasping for breath and his side was killing him. “You guys go on ahead,” he panted, “I’ll catch up with you at Blinky’s library. Eventually.”

“Claire, you stay with Jimbo, make sure he doesn’t fall to his death or anything,” Toby directed, half-ignoring Jim. “I’ll go and get reinforcements.” He winked and started picking up speed down the staircase.
“Wait, Tobes, that’s not - !” Jim tried to call out, but Toby was already long gone. Distracted, his footing slipped and he felt gravity taking hold over his fate, only to be stopped by a couple of strong, thin arms wrapping around his waist. He let out a stifled grunt when one of the arms applied pressure against his fractured ribs, but it was decidedly a better fate than tumbling to his death.

Claire let go of him after he’d regained his balance, covering her mouth in mild horror when she read the pain on Jim’s face. “Ohmigod, Jim, your ribs! I’m so sorry!”

“What, sorry that you saved me from cracking open my skull on one of these rocks? I’ll be fine, Claire. But for now…” he sat down on the crystal step, “I think I’ll just sit here and wait for Toby to get back.” One brush with death was more than enough for today.

If I can’t even handle the stairs to Trollmarket, how am I supposed to resume my Trollhunter training? How am I supposed to face Gunmar?

Until he healed and regained more of his strength, Jim would be no more than a sitting duck. He felt a new wave of frustration bubble up beneath his skin.

Claire sat down beside him and carefully took one of his hands in both of hers, tracing rhythmic circles on the back of his hand with her thumbs. It felt soothing, but did nothing to abate his simmering frustration. After a few moments of silence he tried looking at her to read her expression. Maybe he was just bad at reading people, but it seemed like she was regarding him with a mix of concern and pity. Unable to meet her gaze, Jim quickly picked a spot on the wall to interest himself in.

“Jim, would you please talk to me?”

“Talk to you about what?” he said, refusing to look anywhere but the wall.

“Well… for starters, whatever’s going on in your mind right now. Nothing else. Just… right now.”

Jim took a deep breath, wincing when it aggravated his side. That was a topic he could at least start with, and he could easily stop if he didn’t feel like elaborating. “I’m frustrated.”

“Frustrated about what?”

He resisted the urge to glare at her, instead opting to see if he could burn a hole in the rock with his stare. It didn’t work.

“Jim,” she started once she realized he wouldn’t say any more, “You’ve only just gotten back. You’re injured.” She let one of her hands go so she could tenderly cup the side of his face. Jim continued to stare at the wall, but he tilted his head slightly to sink into her touch. “Contrary to our current surroundings, we don’t live in some fantasy world where you’ll magically heal overnight. It’s going to take some time for you to get your strength back.”

“But I don’t have time,” Jim mumbled.

“Sure you do.”

“No, I don’t,” he insisted. “I have to get back to training. To doing my job. Gunmar’s still out there, and -”

“And he’s still in the Darklands. We made sure of it when we got you out.”
“But what about all his goonies? The global network of changelings? Even if Gunmar’s contained, they’re still on the loose.”

“So we’ll deal with them whenever they rear their ugly heads.” Claire briefly squeezed his hand. “We’ll be by your side until you get better, Jim. And we’ll be by your side long after. You don’t have to save the world all by yourself. That’s what we’re here for.”

Jim chewed on the inside of his mouth to bite back his retort. She didn’t understand that he actually did need to save the world by himself, otherwise some unspeakable terror would befall everyone he loved and cared about. She wouldn’t understand. She’d never understand. Because he’d never tell her. Otherwise she’d never be safe.

“Jim…” she gently pushed on his cheek to try and get him to face her, but Jim remained as still and unmoving as stone. She made a little huffing noise and ran her other hand through his freshly cut hair. He felt her hesitate beside him, followed by a timid pair of lips lightly pressing against his cheek. Immediately his heart skipped a beat, and he turned to look at her just as a couple of figures came galloping up the stairs into view.

“Jim!!” AAARRRGGHH!! shouted, coming to a halt on the step below them.

Toby followed closely on his wingman’s heels, smiling as he caught his breath. “See? Told you I’d get reinforcements!”

“Going down.” The large troll carefully scooped Jim into the crook of his arm, securing him so he wouldn’t slip. Descending a giant, semi-perilous staircase was definitely a lot safer while being carried by a troll. Slightly embarrassing, but safer. And being tucked against AAARRRGGHH!! was surprisingly comfortable. Almost kind of relaxing.

Maybe if I close my eyes for a few seconds...

In seemingly no time at all, they had reached the bottom of the crystal staircase. “Jim okay?” AAARRRGGHH!! questioned as Jim’s eyes fluttered back open.

“Oh, yeah, just tired.”

AAARRRGGHH!! grunted in sympathy as he set Jim down, keeping a finger on Jim’s back to steady him until he found his balance again.

“Thanks, AAARRRGGHH!!”

“No problem.” The troll grinned at Jim, who fist-bumped him in return.

“Blinky’s already waiting for us,” Toby chimed in. “You ready, Jim?”

“As ready as I’ll ever be,” he replied. Taking the lead position in their group, Jim walked through the archway into Trollmarket proper. He was greeted with all the glowing, vibrant colors and lively sounds that the underground civilization was home to. It was a stark contrast to the dark, barren landscape of the Darklands that Jim had toiled in for months, and for a moment Jim was disoriented until he gradually remembered the path to Blinky’s library.

Walking through the streets of Trollmarket could be summed up in one word: staring. Every troll they passed stared at Jim. Some only briefly, some for a long time until he was no longer in sight. Some watched as quietly as statues, some waved and shouted “the Trollhunter has returned!”, and some grumbled curses under their breath and gave him the best stink-eye they could muster. It was a lot of eyes in a short period of time (especially from the trolls who owned more than just one
pair), and by the time Jim walked through the entryway to Blinky’s library he was feeling extremely unnerved.

“Ah, Master Jim!” his four-armed mentor exclaimed. “I am glad to see you did not get pelted with any rotting trash, as I had feared.”

“Pay up,” AAARRRGGHH!! happily grumbled.

“I can’t believe you two were betting on whether or not Jim would get garbage thrown at him!” Claire scolded, her hands on her hips. Blinky smirked as he retrieved a couple of argyle socks from a container and tossed them to his friend, who happily slurped them down.

“Just a little friendly form of entertainment. I assure you, I am very pleased to have lost the bet.”

While Claire was lecturing the trolls, Jim found an empty stool by the large table and sat down. He felt a surge of nostalgia overtake him as the smell of musty paper filled his senses, mixed with the confusing and ever disconcerting scent of the other strange odds and ends Blinky kept on hand. But although it smelled weird, Blinky’s library was warm, friendly, and very much a second home.

For a while, Jim wasn’t even aware that his friends had changed their topic of conversation. “So do you think there’s something that could help in one of your books?” Claire asked Blinky.

“Undoubtedly. The trick will be finding the remedy that works best for Master Jim.”

“Well, he’s…”

Blinky held up a hand to silence Claire. “I think it would be best to hear Master Jim’s opinion on what ails him.” When Blinky looked his way, Jim immediately looked down at the table and started tracing the knots in the wood with his fingernail. “And I believe that might be a conversation he and I need to have alone, if you do not mind. AAARRRGGHH!!, my friend, would you please take Claire and Tobias to see if there are any gnome infestations that need attending to in the meantime?”

There was some mild protesting from Claire and Toby as AAARRRGGHH!! herded them out of the library, followed by a peaceful silence when only Blinky and Jim were left inside. Blinky brought a stool around the table to sit next to him, and Jim was suddenly very grateful they were alone.

“Master Jim,” Blinky began softly, “is it true you are having difficulty sleeping?”

He nodded.

“Claire said it is due to nightmares.” It was a statement, not a question, but Blinky’s phrasing left it wide open for Jim to expand upon.

“Yeah... Um, I keep having nightmares of the Darklands. And every time I wake up from them, I'm in my armor.”

“And I take it you did not originally fall asleep in your armor?”

Jim shook his head.

“Hmm, that is concerning, indeed. Anything else you wish to tell me?”

Jim simply stared at Blinky, unable to say no, but unwilling to divulge any other details about the
subject of his dreams. Particularly the most recent one.

“Well then. I think our best option is to find something to grant you a dreamless sleep so that your recovery process may be expedited. I believe there’s a recipe for both a tonic and a totem in here somewhere, so we shall see which one is found first.” Blinky shuffled over to one of his shelves and returned to the table with a couple stacks of books. “Let’s start here,” he said, pushing the smaller stack towards Jim.

For a few minutes it was nice doing research in Blinky’s library again, scanning the dusty pages as the amulet translated for him. But the novelty quickly wore off after making it three-quarters of the way through the first book and he was reminded just how boring it could be. Finding no success in the first tome, Jim set it aside and started on the next. As he flipped through the pages, his eye was caught by a section on healing various battle wounds.

“Hey, Blinky,” he started, “what about these?”

He peered over at where Jim was pointing, blinking all six eyes at once. “Those are all for physical ailments, Master Jim, which will do no good for your troubles with sleep.”

“I know. But maybe it would help with my other injuries.”

“If you are referring to your scar, Master Jim, I do believe that has long since healed. Or, at least, it is as healed as it will ever get.”

“No! Uh, I mean my side,” he partially pulled up his shirt to remind Blinky of the snarling green and purple bruise that decorated his ribcage.

“Oh my, I don’t remember it being this color yesterday,” he commented, barely restraining from poking at the bruise. “Nevertheless, I fear those remedies are specific to troll anatomy. It is enough of a gamble to employ enchantments of the mind on your human brain, but your physical composition? I would feel more comfortable leaving that in the hands of your very capable mother.”

“What about when you shrunk me to go into that gnome hole? You messed with my physical composition then!”

“That was different.”

“How?”

“I am exponentially more fond of you now than I was back then.”

The two exchanged a smile, and Jim felt a fuzzy warmth fill his heart.

“Ah, here it is! A tonic for dreamless slumber!” Blinky exclaimed, excitedly gesturing to a page in one of the books in front of him. “Let’s see… Oh dear, it appears I am missing some of the ingredients.”

“Which ones?”

“All of them.”

Jim lightly smacked his hand to his forehead.

“The snail mucus, valerian root, and ground pixie tooth should be easy enough to obtain from
“Rotgut’s,” Blinky listed, “but I'm afraid the last ingredient will be harder to track down.”

“Yes? What is it?”

“Hmmmm… some sort of purple flower. Laaa… laven…”

“Lavender?” Jim finished. “Practically every flower shop in Arcadia sells that, that'll be easy!”

“Aah, excellent!” Blinky clapped two of his hands together. “You should message Claire and Toby so they can retrieve the flower from the surface world forthwith. Then you and I shall go pay a visit to Rotgut's.”

Jim pulled his phone out from his pocket to send a text to Toby and Claire:

[need lavender for potion. can u run to a flower shop and get some? please?]

Within a minute, Toby texted back with a thumbs-up emoji. He relayed the update to Blinky, “They're on it.”

“Splendid! We should head to Rotgut's without delay!” Blinky reached around the table to grab a sack to carry the ingredients back in, throwing in a wad of argyle socks to use as bargaining chips. Scurrying to the entrance of the cave, he turned and gave Jim an incredulous look as the Trollhunter teetered off of his stool. “Master Jim, if you are unable, you do not need to -”

“I'll be fine, Blinky. Besides, if I stay here I'll just fall asleep.”

“Nonsense! Even with the wealth of knowledge surrounding you? You could fill days, nay, weeks with reading alone!”

Jim responded with a deadpan stare.

“Very well,” the troll sighed, grumbling something about how today's youth doesn't appreciate reading the way they used to. But when Jim joined him at the entrance, he gently smiled and patted him on the back before the duo set out for the underground emporium.

Jim found once again that he was the subject of everyone’s attention as he and Blinky walked to Rotgut’s. “Blinky, why does everyone keep staring at me? I know I've been gone a while, but all this,” he gestured at a particularly gossipy huddle of trolls to the side, “is a little ridiculous.”

“We trolls may have much longer lifespans than you humans,” Blinky explained, “but six months is still a long time, even for us, Master Jim. It is by far the longest we have ever been without our Trollhunter to protect us. And more than enough time for rumors to spread.”

“What sort of rumors?”

“Hm. Well, many thought you had somehow run away. Some thought you had died and the amulet had refused to pick a new champion.”

“Good to know the people have such great faith in me,” Jim said sarcastically as he returned a glare from a troll sitting outside the pub.

Blinky pulled Jim a little closer to his side. “Very few know the true reason for your disappearance,” he whispered. “The Tribunal thought it best to keep your foray into the Darklands a secret from the public, to minimize the potential spread of mass chaos.”

“Seriously? How could that cause more chaos than Angor Rot invading Trollmarket?”
“You must understand, Master Jim, the gateway between worlds has never been bridged since Gunmar’s banishment. The mere thought of the bridge being opened, if ever so briefly, is enough by itself to cause great unease. But the Trollhunter being the one to make the journey to the other side? And to come back, nonetheless? Completely unheard of.”

“Having a human Trollhunter was unheard of, too, before I came along.”

“Indeed. And you remember how well that was received at first?”

“Point taken.”

They stopped in front of Rotgut’s towering door. Blinky strolled up and banged on the large, metal knocker in the middle. “Rot? Gut? I require your assistance!”

An eye peered through one of the panels in the door. “What now, Blinkus? I swear, if you’re here for yet another Gaggletack -”

“No Gaggletack, or any other magical artifacts, for the matter. I simply am in need of a few ingredients to restock my supplies. Just some essentials, really.”

A second eye appeared in one of the higher-up panels. “Oh, of course!” It glanced briefly over Blinky’s shoulder and noticed Jim. “Would you look at that? The Trollhunter is here! Hi Trollhunter!” The twinkle in Rot’s (or was it Gut? Jim could never keep them straight) eye served as a pseudo-wave.

The first eye narrowed its gaze. “Ah, finally decided to grace us with your presence again, eh? And what’s with your face? I don’t know much about humans, but I’ve never seen your kind look like that before.”

Jim couldn’t think of any good response, but luckily Blinky was already on it. “Master Jim has had a very trying time these past few months. His species calls it ‘puberty’. And it has taken its toll.”

“That sounds horrendous,” the second eye sympathized.

“Whatever,” the first eye rolled. “What do you want?”

“Valerian root, a vial of snail mucus, and a handful of pixie teeth.”

“A whole handful of pixie teeth? Don’t you know how hard those are to come by?”

“But we have an entire barrel right over there!”

The first eye sighed at his partner. “Seriously, I don’t even know why I bother anymore.” It turned its attention back to Blinky. “It’ll still cost you!”

“I am prepared to pay,” Blinky said, holding up his bag, “in argyle.”

“Oooh, argyle!”

Both panels immediately closed, and Blinky passed the bag of socks through the slot in the door. In a moment’s time the bag was returned, the socks removed in place of a jar of mucus, a large gnarled root, and a small satchel that had a faint glow to it.

“A pleasure as always, Rot and Gut!” Blinky shouted. He placed an arm around Jim’s shoulders as they turned and headed back to the library.
When they got back, AAARRRGHH!!, Claire, and Toby were already waiting for them. A vase of lavender sat in the middle of the table.

“I think the touch of purple really ties the room together, don’t you?” Toby commented to no one in particular.

“Color nice. Smells good, too,” AAARRRGHH!! grunted in agreement.

“I take it you two went to get the rest of the ingredients?” Claire asked.

“Indeed. And our expedition to Rotgut’s was successful, if I do say so myself,” Blinky replied.

Jim sat back down on one of the stools across from Toby. He suddenly felt extremely weary - hopefully the potion they were about to cook up would work.

“You know, Jim,” Toby started, “I’m really glad you’re back.”

“Me too, Tobes. I missed you guys so much.”

“Oh, yeah, I missed you, too, Jimbo,” Toby said, scooting out of the way as AAARRRGGH!! brought over one of Blinky’s cauldrons and set it down on the table. “But I really missed it when you were the one handling gnome outbreaks, not us.”

Jim chuckled. “Come on, they’re not that bad!”

“I’ve gone through twenty belts these past few months, Jim. Twenty. And not because my diet has been working. If I never see a gnome again, it’ll be too soon.”

“Um, what about Chompsky?”

“Oh right. He doesn’t count.”

Jim snickered, leaning over the table and resting his head on top of his forearms. His side was throbbing; he’d have to remember to ice it when he got home.

And maybe, just maybe, he’d finally be able to get some rest.

Chapter End Notes

*sits in a corner ominously, deciding whether Jim will get to rest yet or not*
Chapter 10

Chapter Summary

Blinky (aka: everyone's Dad) shares some desperately needed words of wisdom.
and i delay deciding whether or not Jim gets to rest yet

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

“Is it done yet?”

“No, Tobias, for the forty-second time, it is not done yet.”

Blinky stood over the cauldron, patiently stirring its contents while it simmered over a low flame. The rest of the motley crew assembled around the table, however, did not share the troll’s patience. Even AAARRRGGHH!! was restless as Toby tried to teach him how to play tic-tac-toe - AAARRRGGHH!! refused to be constrained to only one symbol per box, and it was turning out to be a much more entertaining version of the classic game. Claire had pulled a book out of her bag a while ago - from the looks of it, a summer reading assignment for whatever history class she was enrolled in this upcoming school year - but Jim caught her paying more attention to the tic-tac-toe extravaganza than to her book.

Jim was feeling impatient, too, for he wanted nothing more than to go home and lie down for a while. After being upright and moving around pretty much all day, the pain in his side was so great that the rest of his senses were starting to feel numb. But with any luck, once the magic potion was finished he’d be able to not only ice away the pain, but sleep it away as well. It would be worth the wait. In the meantime, he was attempting to skim through volume twenty-eight of a Brief Recapitulation of Troll Lore to help pass the time. This particular volume contained information about special tactics some of the greater Trollhunters of the past employed in battle, like summoning the might of a thousand warriors. Since Jim was reluctantly accepting he wouldn’t be in fighting shape for some time yet, he figured the second best thing was to actually try and read and absorb some knowledge for once.

But between his short attention span and Toby’s questioning, he hadn’t made much progress.

“Tobes, if you’re that antsy, why don’t you go train with your warhammer or something?” Jim suggested. “I’m sure AAARRRGGHH!! would be glad to go with you.”

“To be honest, it’s no fun training in the Hero’s Forge without you, Jim,” he replied as he inscribed a triangle on top of an ‘x’ that was in the middle of a circle. It wasn’t tic-tac-toe anymore, it was tic-tac-madness.

“I could come along and watch.”

“You know what I mean.”

Claire took a deep breath as she got up and stretched. “I don’t know, Toby, I’m kind of in the mood for a sparring session.”
“No way. You’ve beaten me the past eighteen times in a row!”

“So then you won’t mind if I beat you one more time.”

“Actually, I would mind,” he retorted, standing up as AAARRRGGHH!! scrawled a giant ‘x’ over their entire grid with glee. “You wanna spar, Nuñez? Let’s spar.”

Claire slung her bag over her shoulder, smirking at Toby. “You’re on.” She then glanced at Jim, “Jim, are you coming?”

“I dunno, guys, I -”

He was cut off by a pointed look from Blinky. “Master Jim, go with your friends. Observing you read the same page repeatedly is making me tired. This solution will eventually turn from light purple to midnight blue, with or without your watchful eye, and when it does I shall let you know.”

With a nod Jim stood up from his seat, only to fall back down when a searing jolt in his side caused his legs to give out.

“Jim need ride?” AAARRRGGHH!! questioned.

“Nah, I just need to -” he didn’t get a chance to finish his sentence, instead tumbling all the way to the floor after his second attempt to stand up. The wind was briefly knocked out of him as he lay face-up on the cobblestone floor.

“Jim!” shouted a concerned chorus around the room. Six pairs of eyes were instantly hovering over him. Not this again.

“Guys,” he gasped, “could you back off? Just because I fell doesn't mean you have to initiate DEFCON 3.”

“Sorry about that, Jimbo,” Toby apologized for the group as they all backed up a little. “We're just, well, you know... worried.”

“I do know. And I wish you all would knock it off already,” Jim replied tersely as he cautiously lifted himself off the floor. Hitting the ground really hadn't helped the throbbing in his side, but he hid any trace of pain in his expression with a scowl.

“Jim,” Claire started, “come on, that's not fair -”

“Not fair? Not fair?” Jim struggled to keep his voice at a normal speaking volume. “You want to know what's not fair? I spent six shitty months in the Darklands. I rescued Enrique. I tried to go up against Gunmar. And sure, it didn't work out the way we planned. But I survived. I managed to not get killed. For six. Freaking. Months. And yeah, you guys had to come and rescue my sorry ass. But since I've been back, you've either treated me like I'm super fragile and about to fall apart, or you nag me about how I shouldn't have gone alone in the first place. But you know what? While I was in there, you still got to live mostly normal lives. You didn't have to wake up wondering if the next day might just be your last. I didn't get that luxury. I'll never have that luxury. Because as long as I'm alive, this stupid amulet is essentially a giant target on my back! I don't ever get to walk away from this! But you, you all have that option. So sorry for doing what I thought was right and trying to keep you all safe because it's my damn sacred duty! I'm grateful you care, really, and I'm glad you rescued me, but would it be too much to ask for you to treat me like a goddamn normal human being while I'm readjusting to being back?!”

The only sounds heard in the library were the gentle bubbling of the potion and Jim's labored
breathing. Nobody dared move a muscle, even after Jim forcefully sat back down on his stool and refused to look at any of his friends.

Claire was the first to try and break the silence. “Jim -”

She was immediately cut off by Toby. “Claire, I think… we should go.”

Out of the corner of his eye, Jim saw her hesitate. But Toby put a hand on her shoulder, and the gesture was enough to help propel the two of them out of his line of sight and away from Blinky’s library.

AAARRRGGHH!! stationed himself on the floor beside Jim, just barely out of reach of the Trollhunter, while Blinky resumed stirring the contents of his cauldron on the other side of the table. The air hung heavily around them, weighed down by Jim’s words and unable to be lifted by the faint floral scent emerging from the cauldron. It was some time before Blinky spoke and broke the silence.

“Master Jim, I know this ordeal has been stressful for you. Not just the Darklands, but bearing the mantle of Trollhunter, as well. You did not ask for this, but fate intervened and decided the path of your destiny, as it does with so many souls. You have risen to the office with more success than I could have hoped, and I hope we will continue to witness your further successes in the decades to come. You are a credit to your species, and perhaps one of the finest ever chosen to wield Merlin’s amulet.”

Jim warily studied the surface of the table, waiting for the “lesson” portion of Blinky’s speech.

“However, although your friends are not as forcefully bound to this fate as you, their devotion to you has nonetheless forged the path for their own destinies. Their conviction is perhaps the strongest I have ever observed among your kind. And whether or not you agree, their paths, at least for the time being, are parallel and - dare I say it - coincident to yours. For, as you said, you did not have much choice in the matter, but they had all the freedom in the world to choose their path and they chose to be by your side without a second thought. The same applies to AAARRRGGHH!! and myself. And though we may irritate you now, our actions come purely from a place of love. We will try to give you the time and space you need to heal, but I pray you do not keep us at arm’s length for too long.”

Jim looked up at Blinky, hoping his face expressed the gratitude that was currently trapped in the back of his throat. The troll’s words still caused him to bristle, but despite that it was somehow exactly what he needed to hear.

“Ah, and would you look at that! The tonic is finished!” Blinky triumphantly held up a spoonful of dark blue liquid, completely changing the subject. Reaching for the shelf behind him, he grabbed an assortment of small glass containers and filled each to the brim with the magic concoction. He slid three of them over to Jim, putting the rest of the filled containers back on his shelf for safekeeping. “The instructions say to ingest one drop for every hour of dreamless sleep desired. Follow that for now, and we shall see what happens. Remember, troll magic has a nasty habit of affecting humans in ways we do not expect.”

“Got it,” he nodded, carefully stowing the glass vials in a spare knapsack. He could tell the massive amount of caffeine from earlier had just about run its course; the ache of sleep weighed on him more than ever. Jim turned to the larger troll, “AAARRRGGHH!!, you can fit through the tunnel in my basement, right? Could you take me home?”

“What about Wingman? And Claire?” For a troll of so few words, the look AAARRRGGHH!!
gave Jim was worth a thousand.

“Fret not, my dear friend, I shall locate them,” Blinky reassured him. “I have a pretty good estimate of where they’ve wandered off to, and I do believe I’m overdue for a chat with the both of them.”

Satisfied, AAARRRGHH!! gently scooped up Jim. A comfortable feeling of deja vu washed over Jim as he settled into the crook of AAARRRGHH!!’s arm. As a precaution before they left, he pulled out one of the vials and took a small sip of the sleeping draught. It tasted woodsy and mysterious, like a midsummer night. With as heavy as his eyelids felt, combined with AAARRRGHH!!’s soothing presence, Jim could pretty much guarantee a nap was close at hand.

_Time to find out if this stuff works…_

Blinky entered the Hero’s Forge to the sound of clanging metal and shuffling footwork. The two sparring humans were compy oblivious to his arrival, much in the way they were oblivious to a wizened figure with great twisting horns who already stood off to the side, studying their movements.

“The children seem quite upset, Blinkous,” Vendel commented as he approached. “I would have thought the return of their friend would be a joyous occasion.”

“Oh, they are most definitely glad that Master Jim has returned.”

“Odd, they have a funny way of expressing it,” the older troll pointed to the duo with his staff. Toby and Claire were sparring much more aggressively than normal, each of their faces plainly displaying their frustration. In addition, Claire’s expression held the burning flame of anger closer to the surface than usual. The Shadow Staff reacted in kind as she let fly a flurry of quick strikes. Toby’s eyes widened as he parried her onslaught. Claire’s fury was indeed powerful, but also unpredictable and difficult to focus - Blinky made a mental note to work with the girl on some other way of commanding the staff. But that would have to be a topic for another day, when cooler heads might prevail.

“So, where is our Trollhunter?” Vendel turned to Blinky, emphasizing his words with a tap of his staff against the ground. The baubles wrapped around the crook of the wooden replacement jingled in harmony. “I heard rumblings that he was back in Trollmarket today, and I had hoped I would get to see him.”

“AAARRRGHH!! is delivering him home as we speak. The boy is stressed, exhausted, and still healing, and I fear he will not be back in fighting condition for some time.”

“Is that why the pudgy one and the girl fight?”

“In a way. Master Jim's emotional state is exceedingly volatile at the moment, and his friends are greatly concerned for him. Some words were said earlier, and… well, now it seems they are releasing their frustrations regarding Master Jim upon each other.”

They watched as Claire took a particularly wicked swing at the space where Toby’s head had been moments before.

“Blinkous, I suggest that you break these two up before we have more injured fleshbags on our hands.” Vendel turned to leave the training grounds. “And I shall speak with our Trollhunter tomorrow - fighting shape or not, there are many things we must discuss. Including his account of the last six months.”
“But Vendel, the boy just got back! He’s barely divulged anything from his time in the Darklands even to us! I do not believe he will be willing to speak of it in depth anytime soon.”

“Except that now is the best time to broach the topic, while it is still fresh in his squishy little brain. I fear our upcoming struggle against Gunmar and his dark forces is approaching more rapidly than anyone wants to admit, particularly with the Trollhunter’s ill-advised foray into the Darklands. We will need every bit of intelligence we can get our hands on to inform our strategy going forward.”

“Very well. I shall see to it that Master Jim is here tomorrow,” Blinky conceded as Vendel turned his back and walked away. Blinky returned his focus to Claire and Toby, who were still going at each other full-throttle. Well, more like Claire wasn't holding anything back and Toby was trying desperately just to hold on. “Claire! Tobias!” his voice boomed across the arena. “I do believe that is enough for one day!”

They broke off their fighting and turned to look at him. “Blinky!” Toby waved with his hammer. “Does this mean the potion is done?”

“Affirmative.”

“And Jim?” Claire quirked an eyebrow.

“Expediently on his way home for some much needed rest.” Blinky gestured for the two of them to come closer. Toby sat down on a stone outcropping next to Blinky to catch his breath while Claire paced anxiously beside him, still with plenty of breath in her lungs to mutter her frustrations aloud.

“How can he… And then he… but he can’t… I know he’s hurt, but…” It was as if her mind was racing so fast that her sentences couldn’t keep up.

“Claire, my dear, out with it already!” Blinky urged.

She stopped her pacing and looked Blinky directly in the eyes. “He doesn’t get to disappear for six months then come back and tell me I care too much! He can’t tell me to stop worrying! He can’t dictate how I feel! It’s not fair!” She angrily redirected her attention to the ground, letting the Shadow Staff clatter beside her feet as she held herself. Blinky thought he could see a tear streaking down her cheek, though it could have just been sweat.

Blinky waited as Toby wordlessly put his hand on her shoulder, guiding her to sit next to him on the rock. After a beat, he spoke, “I know this is difficult. It has been difficult on all of us. But it is important to keep in mind that, although the pain, concern, and anxiety we have collectively felt over these past months is perhaps one of the most distressing things any of us have had to endure, none of us truly know what happened to Master Jim in the Darklands.”

“We would if he would just tell us…” Toby mumbled.

“Even if he were to open up,” Blinky continued, “it would never be the same as experiencing it first-hand as he did. His thoughts, his emotions, whatever traumas he has survived, all are now a part of Master Jim, shaping his mind and informing his actions. He is still healing on many levels, but I fear that, even as his healing progresses, Master Jim will never be quite the same again. He may come close, but he is forever changed by this experience.”

“But that still doesn’t give him the right to be mad at us for just trying to help!” Claire interjected, her voice slightly cracking at the edges.

“Indeed. He should not invalidate our own emotional anguish, just as we should not invalidate his.
And it behooves us to hold him accountable for that. However, it must be approached from a standpoint of compassion and support, not confrontation. Particularly during this early stage of his healing process.

“I was not being confrontational,” Claire huffed. Toby rolled his eyes.

“Although you may believe that, that is not how Master Jim perceived it. And his current, albeit foolhardy, insistence on being the strong, independent hero, despite his injuries, is not helping to ease our frustrations in the slightest.”

“You can say that again,” Toby groaned, fiddling with the hilt of his warhammer.

“However, it is our duty as his friends to be there for Master Jim and support him. Even if that means giving him the space he needs to sort out his mental state. He has already gone above and beyond the call during his short tenure as Trollhunter so far; we owe it to him to help ease his transition back into ‘normal’ life, although it may feel like we are putting aside our own emotional healing to do so.”

“Wait, so now you’re saying we can’t be happy until Jim’s happy?”

“You twist my words, Tobias. No, I mean that if we are patient with Jim as we aid in his healing, I believe we will find that the remedy for our individual struggles will accompany the effort.”

“So… if we help Jim be happy, we’ll be happy?”

“I would substitute the phrase ‘be happy’ with ‘find peace,’ but yes, Tobias, that’s the idea.”

“But how will we know what to do?” Claire asked. “It’s like he changes his mind every other minute!”

“We listen and we respond. Which for now, starts with giving him some space and not doting on him as if he will break if we so much as look at him, as he alluded to earlier. But that does not mean we won’t be close by when the moment arises and he needs us. Understand?”

They nodded.

“Good. Now, unless you wish to stick around to see if Bagdwella has come up with yet another random errand, I suggest you go home and get some rest yourselves. And in the morning, I would ask that one - or both - of you check on Master Jim and bring him to Trollmarket; Vendel wishes to speak with him tomorrow.”

Blinky remained where he stood as he waved the humans out of the Forge, waiting until they were well out of earshot before muttering, “And so we shall see what the morrow brings.”

Chapter End Notes

To rest, or not to rest; that is the question.

who am i kidding there’s no way the kid is resting yet. he’s a goldmine for angst.
Chapter 11

Chapter Summary

Magical solutions are a delicate matter.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Jim drifted in and out of consciousness, vaguely aware he was being carried. Or… was he being dragged? No, he was definitely being carried; he couldn’t feel the usual aching tension that occurred whenever his arms were forced to drag the rest of his weight along the ground. Or maybe he had finally lost all feeling in his limbs. It had only been a matter of time, with as often as Gunmar demanded he be yanked from his cell so he could put pressure on the Trollhunter. Force him to fight for his life. Torture him. All in an attempt to break him and use him for his own sinister designs.

No… No, that’s not right… I left the Darklands. I’m safe now. I’m home.

… Right?

Not quite awake, but not quite asleep, Jim found the line between his dreams and reality was blurred.

Did I only imagine going home? Was my escape from the Darklands all just a dream?

Willing his eyes to open slightly, all he could see was darkness. A panic instantly rose in his chest, paralyzing whatever autonomy he might have still had over his extremities. But as he slowly made out the shape of the shadows on the walls, something seemed off. Like there was a faint light being reflected from somewhere. He tried to focus more on his surroundings as he weakly struggled for breath. There was something else, too… The sound of running water. The smell of human waste.

The sewers of Arcadia. Oh thank god.

Jim’s breathing slowly returned to normal. But a small whimpering sound caught in the back of his throat when he was painfully reminded of his bruised rib cage.

“Jim okay?” a concerned voice rumbled somewhere above his head. Right. AAARRRGGH!! was carrying him. Jim used that knowledge to further ground himself in the moment.

“I’ll be fine,” he responded, trying to convince himself as much as his large friend.

“Almost at Jim’s cave. Home soon.”

Jim weakly nodded, settling back against the troll. He continued to fade in and out of consciousness for the remainder of the trip, finding his eyelids too heavy to stay open but his mind too uneasy to rest.

Eventually the sound of AAARRRGGH!!’s footfalls against the damp sewer walkways transitioned to the drier surface of a tunnel made of dirt and rock. Jim was relieved when the
unmistakable stench of the sewers faded, too, and was gradually replaced with the stuffy smell of his basement. And the smell of burnt food.

His eyes still closed, Jim was aware of being passed from AAARRRGGGH!!’s arms into a softer embrace.

“Oh, Jim…” he heard his mother murmur, feeling her fingers smooth the hair from his forehead. “Was Blinky able to come up with something?” Her question was directed at AAARRRGGGH!!.

“Yeah, in bag. Potion to help sleep.”

“Good. Did he say what the dosage instructions are?”

“Doze…ing?”

“Dosage. How much Jim needs to take at a time.”

“Oh. Ummm…”

Remembering what Blinky had said, and a little more certain it hadn’t been a dream, Jim croaked out the answer his mom was looking for, “One drop for each hour of sleep.”

“Jim? You’re awake?” his mom asked.

“Sort of. I guess.” Wearily opening his eyes, he hissed when he tried to shift into a more upright position.

“Shhhh, just relax, kiddo. Let’s get you upstairs. You’re gonna have to help me out, though - you’ve gotten way too tall for me to carry, and AAARRRGGGH!! doesn’t exactly fit up the stairs.”

She gently helped him stand up and guided his right arm over and around her shoulders. Holding his wrist with her right hand, she brought her other hand around his back and firmly grabbed his waist (the non-injured side) to add additional support. She nodded a thank you to AAARRRGGGH!!, and without another word the two of them ascended the stairs.

“What’s that smell?” Jim asked as they reached the first floor of their home.

“I thought you might be hungry when you got back, so I started making dinner. It should be ready soon. Would you like some? It’s spaghetti carbonara.”

“Umm,” Jim had to think for a moment. His stomach was crying out to be fed again, but he wasn't sure if filling it with his mom’s improperly cooked pasta was a good idea. In the end, he decided to risk the stomach ache in favor of humoring his mom. “Sure, that'd be great, mom.”

She helped him walk over to the table and set him up in one of the chairs. Then she lightly mussed the hair on top of his head before turning to go to the kitchen. “I'll get you some water. Anything else you need, kiddo?”

“Painkillers and an ice pack would be great, actually. My side is killing me.”

He heard the sound of his mom opening cabinets, the rattling of a plastic pill bottle, and the clatter of ice. She came back into the dining room, carrying a glass of water and the requested items.

“You weren't training already down in Trollmarket, were you? You're in no shape to do any strenuous activity with your ribs the way they currently are.”

“Believe me, I know,” he groaned, eagerly swallowing the pills she offered to him. “No, I think
I'm just tired and sore from being up and about all day.”

“Hm. Would you mind if I take a quick look? Just want to make sure you're not getting worse. And I can check on your bandages while I'm at it.”

“Yeah, sure,” he mumbled, knowing she'd examine him whether he actually wanted her to or not. And he was too tired to protest when she helped him shrug out of his sweater and strip off his undershirt so she could get a better look at his injuries.

“Looks like that bandage needs changing,” she commented, poking the gauze over the left side of his chest. The tape that kept it in place was peeling back around the edges, allowing the bandage to expose parts of the deep scrape to the open air. Now that he was paying attention to it, the wound kind of stung. But the pain still paled in comparison to the throbbing in his side.

Before examining the rest of his injuries, his mom retrieved some gauze, tape, antibiotic ointment, and a few other odds and ends from her stash of medical supplies. It irritated his skin when she removed the old bandage and started cleaning the area underneath with a damp washcloth and some hydrogen peroxide. She carefully wiped away the dried blood and other grime from his skin, her eyebrows furrowing with concern.

“Jim, I’m worried about this gouge. I don’t like the way it’s scabbing over - rather, the way it’s not scabbing over. We should have gotten a better look at it when we were at the clinic this morning, it might be too deep to heal properly on its own.”

“Mom, I’ll be fine, it’s not like it’s bleeding profusely or anything,” he tried to convince her. “Besides, what would we have told the other doctors? That, after I ‘fell up the stairs’ and cracked my ribs, I fell in the shower and hit the faucet on my way down?”

“Jim, I’m serious.”

“Don’t worry, it’ll heal! It might not look that great when it does, but eventually it’ll heal.”

“Oh, so now you’re the medical expert in this house?”

“I learned from the best.” His response earned him a tender smile from his mom as she reached for the antibiotic ointment. Gently, her fingers rubbed the ointment over his broken skin. She worked methodically, pausing to look at him thoughtfully.

“Kiddo, how did you get this nasty scrape? Do you remember?”

“I don’t know, Mom, I -”

*Darkness. The faint red pulsing of his armor, coupled with the eerie orange glow of the adjacent prison bars. Weighed down, unable to move. One of Gunmar’s goons on either side of him, each pinning an arm and a leg down to the unforgiving stone floor. He was powerless. Exposed. The armor was the only thing standing between himself and his captors. But it couldn’t hold forever. A figure with six eyes hovered over him, clawing at the amulet. It flashed a warning in response, staying firmly affixed to the Trollhunter’s chest. The one with many eyes was shoved aside; the one with only a single eye took his place. Gunmar tried to rip the amulet off. Horror filled Jim’s senses as his armor audibly groaned under the force. The skin on his chest felt like it was tearing as he felt the amulet slip fractions of an inch away from his body. He cried out in pain, an ear-splitting shriek. In return the amulet flashed bright as if its protective abilities had been renewed, repelling Gunmar. The demon left his cell with a roar, followed swiftly by his underlings. Jim was left alone on the floor of his cell, cold, shaking, and with no strength to get up. The area of his chest*
underneath the amulet flared white hot in pain with every beat of his racing heart.

“I… can’t remember.”

“That’s alright, kiddo,” she said as she finished redressing the wound. Seemingly satisfied, she shifted her attention to the mottled bruise on his side. “Jim!” she gasped. “What did you do?! It looks like you’ve seriously aggravated your side! You’d better not be lying about training in Trollmarket, mister!”

“Chill, Mom! I told you, I didn’t do any training!” Jim did his best to keep his increasing ire in check. “But I did… uh, almost fall down the giant crystal staircase,” he admitted sheepishly. “Claire stopped me, but she caught my side when she saved me.”

His mom sighed. “I swear, sometimes the biggest threat to your health and safety is you, Jim.” She examined the sprawling bruise more closely, lightly prodding isolated areas of his ribcage. “Good news is I don’t think you did any more damage to your ribs. At least not that I can tell, not without taking you to the ER to get more x-rays. I won’t drag you there again, but if you notice that anything’s remotely off, like if you have trouble breathing, please let me know. Okay?”

“Okay. Can we eat dinner now?”

Her eyes went wide. “Oh, right, the spaghetti!” Leaving her assortment of supplies on the table, she rushed off to the kitchen. It wasn’t long before he heard an exasperated moan. “Um, kiddo?” she called out.

“Yeah, Mom?”

“Are you okay eating the rest of the leftover pizza for dinner?”

He tried not to sound too hopeful in his response. “Why, what happened to the spaghetti?”

His mom rounded the corner holding a large pot, the source of the pungent burning smell. Wordlessly, she tilted it sideways so he could confirm there was indeed pasta inside. She then completely flipped the pot over. Even under the full force of gravity, the contents of the pot didn’t budge. “It seems I managed to fuse our dinner to the bottom of the pot.”

Jim laughed. “Leftover pizza, it is.”

After dinner, Jim insisted he had enough strength to make it up to his room without any help. His mom had protested, but in the end he won out, successfully ascending the staircase alone while she stayed behind in the kitchen to try to remove the burnt pasta remains from the pot. Now he sat on the edge of his bed, watching the vial of dark blue liquid in the palm of his hand as he tilted it back and forth.

Will this actually work?

He supposed he hadn't encountered any bad dreams while AAARRRGGHH!! carried him home. But the trip back from Trollmarket was hardly long enough to fully test out the potion’s effects. And even if it was successful and granted him a dreamless sleep, it surely wouldn't help ward off his waking nightmares. Unless his sleep deprivation was fueling his recent vivid flashbacks.

Yeah, that's gotta be it. I'm just super tired. I'll be better after a full night's sleep.

Jim took a couple sips of the tonic, figuring that had to be around eight-ish drops, then laid down,
setting the vial on the corner of his desk near his phone and the amulet. He lay there on his back staring up at the ceiling, his eyelids slowly closing as he waited for the silent embrace of sleep. Occasionally a wave of anxiety would crash over him and jolt his eyes wide open again, but eventually even his nerves were no match for the exhaustion that gradually overtook his being.

A flash of pain forced Jim wide awake, sitting up in bed and desperately gasping for air. He was shivering and sweating at the same time, his limbs simultaneously alive with electricity and as heavy as blocks of lead. His hands found their way to his face, naively hoping that covering his scar would push the splitting pain away. That digging his fingers into the groove in his skin would draw out whatever kept tormenting him just below the surface.

Eventually the blinding pain reduced to a dull throbbing, allowing Jim to take inventory of his surroundings. The amulet still rested on his desk, its glowing pulse stuttering in time with Jim’s heart. The darkness outside his window told him it was still the middle of the night. Tapping his phone, the screen lit up to inform him he’d only been asleep for four hours.

On the bright side, he hadn’t had a nightmare. Or at least, not one that he remembered. But Jim couldn’t shake the feeling of unease that had wound itself around his chest.

Suddenly his scar seared white-hot again, nearly causing him to cry out.

A voice. A mocking laugh. The sound of steel slicing through the air. The sensation of cold metal branding him as it tried to reach his soul, but only succeeding in leaving its mark skin-deep.

A single fiery blue eye.

“No... no no no no no...” he groaned lowly, curling up so that his head was between his knees while his hands covered his face. “Get out of my head... Leave me alone... I left you in the Darklands now just leave me alone…”

Jim had no awareness of how long he stayed in that position. Occasionally a gasp or a sob would escape past his lips, sounding foreign and far away to his ears. But beyond the unsteady rise and fall of his shoulders as he struggled to breathe, it was a long time before he so much as moved a muscle.

When he eventually unfurled from his position on the bed, he found his hands were damp with tears. He clumsily wiped them dry on his pajama pants and reached for the amulet. Jim ran his fingers along its many grooves and ridges, tracing the intricate markings as if they would reveal words of encouragement he hadn’t noticed before. But the only reaction from the magical artifact was its continuous pulsing.

*Why is this happening to me?*

The soft glow of the amulet caught on the glass vial on his desk, still mostly filled with dark blue liquid.

*Maybe it'll help if I take a larger dose. What's the worst that could happen?*

Removing the stopper, Jim proceeded to drain half the bottle. He instantly felt a sense of calm
spread through his senses, replacing the edge in his nerves with a pleasant drowsiness that coaxed away the hitch in his breathing. Setting down the vial, he nestled against his pillow while clasping the amulet to his chest. After that, it wasn't long before the shadows haunting his waking memories were replaced by the soothing blanket of sleep.

Barbara lightly knocked on her son’s door. “Jim?” she called softly, slowly cracking it open. Receiving no response, she opened the door wide enough to enter, balancing a tray of oatmeal as she crossed over to Jim’s bedside. It was already late in the morning, and sunlight streamed through the window to dance warmly across her sleeping son’s face.

Setting the tray down on the desk, she smiled as she watched Jim’s chest slowly rise up and down. He looked so peaceful, she was almost loathe to wake him. But if he was ever going to get back to a normal schedule, she couldn't just let him sleep all day.

“Jim,” she called out a little louder, “kiddo, it's time to wake up.”

Jim didn't stir.

She sat down on the edge of his bed, brushing away some of the hair on his forehead. “Jim?”

Still nothing.

In the past whenever Jim had been tired enough, he could sleep so deeply that he’d be oblivious to his alarm going off in the morning. But never so deeply that he didn't react to his mother's attempts to wake him.

“Jim? Jim!” Barbara raised her voice as she felt her desperation rise. Something wasn't right.

Her son wasn't waking up.

Chapter End Notes

*lecturing past self* when i said to let Jim rest, this is NOT what i had in mind. except that it was in my mind. it appeared as an alternate route as i was writing so obviously i had to take it. because aaaaaangst.
Chapter 12

Chapter Summary

A ray of hope there still may be... Not in death, but just in sleep...

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

When Claire woke up that morning, she figured it would just be another normal Sunday. Well, mostly normal, all things considering. But that quickly changed when, shortly after waking up, an urgent text message flashed on her phone from Toby:

[JIMS HOUSE ASAP]

Her heart plummeted to her stomach. Before giving herself even a minute to think about what might have happened, Claire immediately slung her purse over her shoulder and opened a portal with the Shadow Staff; she could explain her disappearance to her parents later. In no time, she found herself standing inside the entryway of the Lake household.

“Toby? Dr. Lake?” she called out.

“We're upstairs!” Toby replied. Claire raced up the stairs, finding Toby waiting for her right outside the door to Jim's room. “In here,” he waved to her, gesturing for her to join them.

Panting and feeling like her pulse was caught in her throat, Claire nearly ran Toby over when she charged into the room. Her blood iced over as she took in the sight of Dr. Lake kneeling by her son’s bed, clasping the hand of an unconscious Jim.

“What -? Is he -?” Claire gasped.

“He's asleep,” Dr. Lake answered stonily, keeping her eyes glued to Jim's face. “But he's not waking up. The potion, it’s...” she choked on the end of her sentence.

Claire walked over to kneel beside Jim’s mom, placing a hand on her shoulder. Jim, completely oblivious to his surroundings as he slumbered, wore a peaceful expression. His right hand clutched the amulet to his chest, gently rising and falling in time with his slow breathing.

At least he’s finally sleeping. But if we can’t get him to wake up...

“We need to get him to Trollmarket. Blinky will know what to do,” Claire said as she stood up. With the way she was currently feeling, zapping them all there using a portal wouldn’t be an issue. Nodding, Dr. Lake silently lifted Jim into her arms, her Superhuman Mom Strength kicking in to help her carry the tall Trollhunter.

Just as Claire was about to make a portal, Toby darted over and picked up the half-empty potion bottle from Jim’s desk. “In case Blinky needs it,” he explained.

“Right. Good thinking, TP.”
With that, Claire opened the gateway that would take them directly to Blinky’s library. They stepped through the portal, instantly finding themselves in the familiar, dimly lit cave. Blinky and AAARRRGGHH!! sat at the large table staring at a book, though their attention was immediately diverted to the unexpected visitors.

“Great grumbly gruesome! What happened?” Blinky asked as he got to his feet, reading their worried expressions. His gaze then settled on Jim. “Oh dear. Set him down over here, quickly.” He gestured with two hands to a wide cleared-off section of the table. Dr. Lake lifted Jim onto the table while Blinky busied himself with flipping to the recipe he’d used for the sleeping draught. “I don't understand, I followed the instructions to the letter! Tobias, is that the vial you carry?”

“Yep,” Toby replied, passing the bottle over to Blinky’s outstretched hand.

“Oh no,” Blinky moaned as he held it level with his line of sight, “This bodes ill, indeed.”

“Why? What's wrong, Blinky?” Toby asked.

“I fear Master Jim has ingested a larger quantity of the potion than was intended, especially for a human.”

“So what does that mean for Jim?” Claire pressed.

“I do not know,” Blinky sighed as he tentatively tapped the back of Jim’s hand, the one still clutching the amulet to his chest. There was no noticeable reaction from Jim, but Claire could have sworn she saw his eyebrows briefly scrunch together as if annoyed. Or it could have been a trick of the light. “He appears to be in a deep state of sleep, somewhat comatose in nature,” Blinky diagnosed.

“Oh, really, Captain Obvious?” Dr. Lake stared down Blinky, her arms crossed in front of her chest.

“Apologies, Barbara,” he responded, the mother’s frustrated sarcasm lost on the troll, “but I am no captain, nor any sort of military officer -”

“Just figure out how to fix my son!” she cried in desperation, her voice starting to crack by the end of her sentence.

“Right,” he said sheepishly. Turning back to the book, he frantically turned pages to search for some sort of answer. “Dreamless sleep... Eternal sleep... Fun sleep? What is - Oh, that is most definitely not what we’re looking for.” Blinky hastily continued flipping pages until he’d exhausted the contents of the book. “I do not understand. A multitude of possibilities for putting someone to sleep, yet not a single entry on how to wake someone back up!”

“Blinky, there’s gotta be something! Maybe a different book?” Toby pleaded, noticing Jim’s mom was on the brink of a breakdown.

“Possibly. But that could take hours, days even. And the longer Master Jim remains asleep, the greater chance I fear he has to accumulate additional side effects. I believe our best course of action now is to get him to Vendel straight away. If anyone knows of a solution, it’ll be that old goat.”

Without hesitation, AAARRRGGHH!! carefully scooped Jim up and started herding everyone out the entrance of the library. The group swiftly made their way through Trollmarket, setting a course to find Vendel. They tried not to draw too much attention as they weaved in and out of the crowds of Trollmarket, but the sight of three distressed humans, two worried trolls, and one unconscious Trollhunter wasn’t exactly inconspicuous. The denizens of Trollmarket craned their necks as the
party passed, trying to get a glimpse of Jim. AAARRRGGHH!! shielded him from view as best he could, though occasionally Claire heard a gasp and low muttering when a passerby caught sight of the scarred and inanimate Trollhunter. She could have sworn at least one group they’d passed had been whispering bets on how much longer the human Trollhunter would last. If they hadn’t been in such a hurry to get to Vendel, Claire would have picked a fight with all of them right then and there.

Finally they arrived at the Heartstone Hall, all but bursting into the space and startling the wizened leader of Trollmarket. “Blinkus Galadrigal, what is the meaning of this?! Why is it that whenever you come barging in - Oh my,” Vendel cut off his own lecture, noticing Jim was motionless in AAARRRGGHH!!’s arms. “When I said I wanted to see the Trollhunter, I meant I wanted to speak with him while he is sentient! By Kanjigard’s fist, what happened?”

“I fear he has overdosed on a potion meant to induce dreamless sleep,” Blinky answered, handing over the half-empty bottle to Vendel.

“I found him like this this morning,” Barbara added. “He’s not waking up.”

“Why on earth would he need a dreamless -? Nevermind, that is obviously a matter to be discussed later,” Vendel said as he inspected the bottle and its contents. “I can detect nothing wrong with the potion itself - a standard recipe, though perhaps a little heavy-handed on the lavender. But sleeping enchantments are tricky to reverse, and humans are notoriously more susceptible to their effects, making it all the more difficult to undo this sort of thing. Honestly, Blinkus, you should have supervised the boy more carefully.”

“I gave him explicit instructions on how much to take!” Blinky huffed.

“Jim has excelled at many things during his tenure as Trollhunter; following directions is not one of those things.”

“It’s my fault,” Barbara muttered as she held her face in her hands. “He told me he was only supposed to take a few drops. I should have been watching him. I should have -”

“My dear,” Vendel started, walking over to her and placing a hand on her shoulder, “you have already done more for Jim than a mother should ever have to endure. This is not your fault.”

“But there is a way to undo this, isn’t there?” Barbara asked. “There’s a way to wake up my son?”

“There should be, yes,” Vendel responded. “Though as I said, reversing a sleeping enchantment can be tricky - mostly because there are a multitude of possible solutions, and attempting to use the wrong one could make matters worse. Blinkus, I suggest you go acquire some Elixlore from RotGut’s and get to scouring those tomes of yours.”

“But-”

“Now, Blinkus. Take AAARRRGGHH!! and the children with you. Time is of the essence.”

Claire tried to linger as long as she could, even as their troll mentors were trying to herd them on to their next destination. Seeing Jim lying on the stone table, the sunny orange glow of the Heartstone washing over his sleeping figure, stirred something within her. Protectiveness, worry, fear… She couldn’t quite name it, but whatever it was made her heart ache more the farther she was pulled away from him.

Jim’s in good hands. He’s got his mom and Vendel at his side. He’ll be alright. We just have to figure out how to wake him up.
Assuming that a way to wake him up even existed.

Claire nearly gagged when she took a sip of the Elixlore. “Uulch! Why does it taste like mold?”

“Mold good. Tastes like knowledge,” AAARRRGGHH!! commented, happily taking a swig from the bottle and trotting off to one of the far corners of Blinky’s library.

“Hmm,” Toby contemplated as Blinky carefully made sure he only drank a little bit. “It doesn’t feel as tingly this time.”

“That is because you are ingesting the proper amount this time, Tobias,” Blinky replied, corraling them towards the books he had piled next to the large table. Taking a drink himself, he set out for one of the nearby shelves. “Elixlore,” he grumbled to himself, “a shameful substance indeed. Completely ruins the joy of reading.”

“Jim doesn’t have time for us to enjoy reading right now, Blinky,” Claire sighed.

“Right. For Master Jim.” The troll went silent as he started steadily devouring the contents of the books in front of him.

Internally, Claire agreed with Blinky’s distaste for Elixlore. A soft buzzing had started in the back of her head, and there was a weird tightness in her chest as if she had indigestion. But if it helped them help Jim, she could put up with a few unpleasant temporary side effects.

The first six or so books she absorbed didn’t help at all. Most of them seemed to be more focused on troll history rather than breaking enchantments. The next few books from the stack yielded similar results, and Claire was about to give up on the pile altogether when she noticed the title of the next book: *Grimm Folklore*. There was no author on the cover, but something about the title seemed uncannily familiar.

“Blinky?” she called out, holding up the book.

“Hm, yes?” Blinky turned half his attention to her, the other half still pouring over his own stack of books.

“Who wrote this one?”

“I do not see why that is relevant to our cause. But that particular volume was written by a pair of changeling brothers. A deplorable duo, but they collected a fascinating array of accounts of magic interacting with humans. A very entertaining read, otherwise I would have burned it eons ago.”

The recognition finally clicked. *The Brothers Grimm. Of course.* “Magic and humans, you say?” she raised an eyebrow at Blinky, waiting to see if he’d come to a similar conclusion.

The look on Blinky’s face as he turned to her was almost priceless. “By Deya’s grace, I do believe you’re on to something!” He abandoned the books he was looking at to join Claire and Toby at the table, the three of them huddling around the book. Thankfully the effects of the Elixlore were already waning a bit, so the words stayed on the pages for all of them to read (well, mostly all of them - Toby still hadn’t bothered to learn how to read Trollish yet).

Blinky stopped her when she flipped to a page with an illustration of two sleeping young ladies, one asleep near a old-fashioned spinning wheel and the other guarded by seven very lively looking gnomes. She felt like she recognized the tales, but Blinky snatched up the book before she could read any of the words.
“Of course!” he exclaimed, “The answer was here the whole time!”

“What?” Claire and Toby asked in unison. At this point they had gotten AAARRRGGHHH!’s attention, the larger troll abandoning his corner to join the rest of them around the table.

“I do believe the human versions of these tales are called ‘Sleeping Beauty’ and ‘Snow White.’ You are familiar with them, yes?”

Claire nodded, starting to see the connection, “In both of these, the princesses were woken up by a kiss from a prince!”

“Exactly.”

“Hold up,” Toby interjected as he began connecting his own set of dots, “Where are we gonna find a prince? Or does any nobleman count? Wait, since I’m sort of a duke, would I count? I mean, don’t get me wrong, I care about Jim and I’ll totally do it if it means Jim will wake up, but -”

“Hush, Tobias,” Blinky cut him off. “It is not necessarily the who that is important, but the what. Well, I suppose the who is made somewhat important because of what. Nevertheless. You humans have a rather romantic term for it, ‘true love’s kiss’, if I’m not mistaken. Now, the concept of kissing is quite foreign to trolls, but the power of love is universally understood. It is quite the force to be reckoned with, especially against magical enchantments. I cannot believe I did not think of it sooner!” Tucking the book under his arm, he motioned towards the exit of the library. “Come now, I think it is due time we returned to Master Jim.”

“Wait, but you didn’t actually say how we’re going to wake Jim up!” Toby cried out.

“Oh, I believe that will sort itself out just fine when we arrive,” Blinky answered, winking pointedly at Claire. She immediately felt blood rush to her cheeks.

But he’s barely even looked at me since he got back. Could this really work?

Claire didn’t have time to dwell on her doubts, however, as they were once again speeding along back to the Heartstone. When they arrived, they found Dr. Lake nervously pacing by Jim’s side while Vendel tried to soothe her. From the looks of it, the troll’s attempts were no match for the worried mother. But they both donned relieved expressions when they saw the group return to the cave.

“So you found a cure? You can wake Jim up?” Barbara asked hopefully. “What do we have to do? Is there some sort of antidote? Why aren’t you carrying an antidote? Do we have to take him somewhere?”

“Relax, Barbara, we have indeed figured out the solution to wake Master Jim up. But I need you to stand here beside me while Claire attends to the next step.” Blinky put a reassuring arm on Barbara’s shoulder, partly to help stop her pacing, and nodded at Claire.

“Ohhhh. Claire. Right,” she heard Toby softly mutter as he finished connecting the dots.

Taking a breath to try and calm the butterflies that had suddenly set up shop in her stomach, Claire slowly approached the table where Jim lay. She couldn’t help but draw parallels to the first time she’d kissed him, back when he had been her Romeo in the school play. Back when she had recently learned he was the Trollhunter, and had been plunged into this other fantastical, magical reality on a quest to get her little brother back. It all seemed so long ago. So much had changed since then.
Their first kiss had also, at least so far, been their last. At least, the last they’d exchanged on the lips. Every time they’d come close to kissing again since then, something in the universe had ended up stopping them. And then Jim went and got stuck in the Darklands for seemingly an eternity, and now… well, now she wasn’t sure of much anymore. She knew she cared for Jim deeply. She knew the mere thought of him made her heart feel like doing cartwheels. She knew the memory of his smile and laughter made her feel like she was soaring. She knew she still wanted to spend as much time as possible around him, and if there was a way for her to somehow melt away his fears and pain, even if it was just to lighten the burden for a moment, she would do it in a heartbeat, as often as necessary.

But she was terrified to wrap up all those feelings and tie them together with a name.

And, for better or for worse, that was essentially what she was about to do.

*Either it’ll work and Jim will wake up, or…*

Claire pushed the thought aside. Instead, she focused on Jim’s sleeping features now that she was close enough to touch him. She hesitantly reached out, her thumb following his scar from the bridge of his nose down and across his cheek, continuing until her hand was embracing the far side of his head. She let her other hand sweep along the other half of the scar and wander to the top of his head, burying her fingers in his hair. The lines of his face had hardened during his time in the Darklands, but the sensation of holding him was nothing but soft. She would have been content to stand there and simply hold him for quite some time if she didn’t have a mission to complete.

Nervously licking her lips, she gradually leaned over. She almost lost her nerve when she was close enough to feel his light breathing against the apple of her cheek.

*Focus, Claire. Jim needs you.*

She quickly closed the gap between them, pressing her lips against his. He tasted warm and sweet with an edge of saltiness, either from sweat or from whatever tears had driven him to take too much of the sleeping draught in the first place. She lingered longer than she typically would have dared (his mother was watching, after all), waiting for the dormant lips beneath her to spring back to life. But even as she slowly pulled away, he remained unresponsive.

*It’s not working.*

*Why is it not working?*

*Oh god if it doesn’t work…*

“Jim, please wake up,” she whispered, on the verge of tears as she desperately threaded her fingers through his hair, as if somehow the action would drag him away from his slumber. “Please…”

She could sense the other occupants of the room grow tense as she visibly choked back a sob.

But just before the last of her hope could fly away, Claire felt Jim’s breathing pattern sharply change. She heard the soft rustle of fabric against the stone table as his limbs stretched ever so slightly.

She nearly cried out in joy when Jim’s eyelids fluttered open.

Chapter End Notes
I'm a sucker for a good ol' "true love's kiss" trope, and I couldn't let this opportunity just pass me by. Deal with it.

does this mean there will be more jlaire kisses and such in the future? will jim's long period of sleep finally put the boy in a better mood? am i already scheming up more ways to induce more angst? stay tuned...

heheheh.
Chapter 13

Chapter Summary

Poor Jim just can't seem to catch a break.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

When Jim opened his eyes, the first and only thing he saw was Claire. There was a warm orange light surrounding her like some sort of halo, the soothing glow echoing the calming sensation flowing through his veins. For the first time in seemingly forever, he felt, dare he say it, relaxed and rested. Blinky's sleeping draught had worked like a charm.

“Well this is a nice sight to wake up to,” Jim grinned sheepishly. “I’d say I must be dreaming, but… well, you know.”

As his vision adjusted to the light, he was able to better focus in on Claire's expression. With a start, he realized there was a mix of relief and frustration swirling across her features; her brown eyes were bright and on the brink of tears. She was clearly upset about something. And he could bet that something was somehow his fault - it was one of the few things he'd been excelling at since his return from the Darklands.

Shit, what did I do now?

Suddenly she moved towards him. Jim tried to prepare for impact, sure that she was about to tackle him or something. But he was very much caught off guard when the only collision that came was the crash of her lips against his.

For a brief moment Jim was completely stunned. Claire’s fingers threaded through his hair and she used the leverage to keep him pulled close, as if for some reason he would even consider slipping away. He almost felt like an unwitting bystander as her lips desperately tried to envelop his own. Her unsteady breaths warmed his cheek while she pressed against him, a hint of salt mixing into the kiss when the tears threatening in Claire's eyes spilled between them. But when she tugged on his lower lip, her teeth slightly grazing his skin, Jim felt something stir low in his belly that spurred him to respond in kind. In her haste she had inadvertently pinned one of his arms to his side underneath her, so he reached up with his free hand to caress the back of her head; he barely even noticed the sound of the amulet clattering to his side when he released his grip on it.

Simultaneously pulling her closer and attempting to push back against her mouth, he clumsily returned her advances, sucking lightly on her lips but not yet daring to engage his teeth or tongue.

He always imagined his first real kiss with Claire would be sweet, tender, slightly awkward, and maybe a little more drawn out than it needed to be. Instead this kiss felt needy, desperate, and almost carnal, as if they were each a meal the other was trying to devour before they starved to death. The rough desperation flavoring the kiss made a thought at the back of his mind surface again: surely something bad just happened, and somehow that thing is related to me. But it was easy to bury that thought while all his senses were filled with Claire’s presence; her touch, her scent, her taste. Jim’s desire to be gentle with her was currently at war with the growing hunger inside him that he couldn’t explain, fueled by each new and exciting sensation she elicited from his
lips. He felt like he was spinning as he closed his eyes to the world around him, his sole focus on
the girl pressed against him.

His focus was interrupted, however, by a familiar voice. “Whoa, you two, let’s try to keep things
PG-13 in here!”

Wait, Toby?

Distracted, Jim abruptly realized he wasn’t in his room and the stone surface he was lying on was
definitely not his bed. Claire quickly pulled away from him, her cheeks burning bright red as she
gave him space to sit up. Slightly reeling from the loss of her warmth that had been so close mere
moments ago, Jim tried to suppress a low whine as he propped himself up on his elbows. The
glowing crystals surrounding him, shining with the color of sunrise, could only mean one thing: he
was literally in the heart of Heartstone Trollmarket. But he distinctly remembered falling asleep in
his bed back at home.

What the hell had happened?

Looking around, he found that Toby wasn’t the only other presence in the room; Blinky,
AAARRRGGHH!!, Vendel, and his mom were all there, too, their faces revealing signs of recent
distress that were in the process of being replaced by relief. As if that wasn’t unnerving enough,
the expressions he saw around the room were reminiscent of the array of reactions that close
friends and family members tend to have at weddings. In particular, his mom was softly smiling at
him through tear-stained cheeks.

They all just watched me make out with Claire. Shit.

Immediately any residual passion burning inside him was snuffed out, allowing the dull throbbing
of his injured side to become more prominent. Awkwardly, he raised a question to the room, “So…
uh, what’s up?”

“What’s up?” Claire glowered at him, her face still flushed, “You overdosed on the sleeping
potion, that’s what!”

“Oh, um…” I did? But I definitely only took - oh, wait, yeah, I did. Double-shit.

Seizing the opportunity, his mom rushed over to embrace him. “Jim,” she murmured against the
side of his head, “you had us all really worried. Please, please, don’t ever do that again. Why did
you take so much in the first place? Didn’t you remember Blinky’s instructions?”

Jim tried to keep himself calm as he sensed the atmosphere quickly turning from one of comfort to
one of lecturing. “I did, Mom, I swear! But then I woke up in the middle of the night, and… Look,
I thought it would help, okay?” In truth it had helped - after he took the larger dose of potion he
hadn’t had any dreams or sudden panic attacks whatsoever, just a long, blissful, empty sleep. At the
moment, he was the most rested he’d felt in months.

His mom squeezed him tighter. “When you weren’t waking up, I thought… I thought I’d lost you.
If they hadn’t figured out how to reverse the enchantment… I… I don’t know what I would have
done…”

Jim shifted so he could hug her back. “It’s okay, Mom. I’m okay.”

“But you won’t always be,” she sniffled, her voice cracking slightly. “You’re not invincible, Jim,
even with that stupid magic armor. Just… next time, promise me you’ll talk to me before you make
another rash decision like that.”
“I’ll try, Mom,” he replied, but with no intent on keeping that promise. She meant well, but Jim already had a few things queued up for the future that would surely be considered rash - taking out Gunmar alone being one of them.

“And while we’re on the subject of talking,” Vendel chimed in, “yesterday I was promised I would speak with the Trollhunter tomorrow. Well, tomorrow is now today, the Trollhunter is now awake, and I’m not getting any younger.”

“But -” Blinky tried to interrupt.

“No buts, Blinkous. For both Jim’s sake and the sake of Trollmarket, it is imperative I talk with him now. I want the rest of you to wait outside.” When nobody moved, Vendel slammed the butt of his staff against the ground. “Go on, get!”

Jim’s mom quickly squeezed him one more time before migrating outside with the others. Taking a deep breath, Jim swung his legs over the side of the table so that he was in a more appropriate position to be conversing with the leader of Trollmarket. He trusted and respected Vendel, and he even believed the old troll was possibly starting to like him, but nonetheless a nervous feeling started twisting his insides into knots. He didn't really want to talk right now; he'd much rather have Claire kissing him senseless again.

Vendel pulled a stool around the table so that he was sitting directly in front of Jim. “So, Jim… I would like to ask you a few questions about the Darklands.”

Jim's pulse quickened.

“But first, I think it would be prudent to discuss your current state of being. Including what drove you to take an exorbitant amount of dreamless sleeping draught, and why there was a need for it in the first place.”

A cold ache clawed its way into his chest. A shiver running down his spine, Jim wanted nothing more than to escape having this conversation with Vendel. Where was a good ol’ gnome infestation or goblin outbreak when you needed one?

A moment passed while Vendel stared expectantly at Jim. “So, young Trollhunter, what is it that plagues your dreams?”

Jim shifted in his seat, choosing to look down at his knees rather than up at Vendel. He mumbled under his breath so softly he couldn't even hear his own response.

“You'll have to speak up, boy,” Vendel encouraged, picking up on Jim’s growing distress.

“Nightmares,” Jim admitted.

“That part seemed obvious enough. And the subject of these nightmares?”

“The Darklands. Gunmar.”

“Hmm. You did spend quite a long time there, so I suppose that is only natural. Tell me, has each nightmare been different, or has their content repeated?”

“Uh…” Jim anxiously ran his fingers along the edge of the amulet. “They've been different, but also sort of the same. Kind of like different chapters in the same book.”

“Curious. And Gunmar has been a running theme throughout them all?”
Jim hesitated before nodding.

“If you don’t mind, I would like to switch to a different topic for a moment.” Jim glanced up at Vendel, noticing that the wizened old troll was studying him intently. “That scar on your face. How did you come to acquire such a mark?”

When Draal had asked about his scar, giving the answer had seemed so much more straightforward. But with Vendel asking, strategically prodding him with questions as if he were some sort of jumbled puzzle the Darklands had spit out, the answer became so heavy that Jim couldn’t dislodge it from the back of his throat.

“Was it Gunmar’s doing?” Vendel asked gently, watching Jim expectantly.

Taking a shaky breath, Jim nodded.

The tone of Vendel’s next question was more hushed. “Gunmar’s blade?”

Once again, Jim wordlessly nodded. By this point something was creeping through his being and constricting his insides, making breathing more difficult and his pulse more erratic.

“You mean to tell me you have been touched by the Decimaar Blade, the very instrument that enables the creation of Gunmar’s armies, allowing him to bend all manner of creatures to his will, and yet somehow your thoughts and actions remain your own?”

Jim sensed the urgency in Vendel’s voice. *Is he implying I could be under Gunmar’s control? That’s not possible!*

In truth, Jim had never really considered it. But aside from the nightmares and traumatic experiences he’d really rather not think about, he felt just about as normal as any other sixteen-year-old defender of the world - okay, so not exactly normal, but at least as normal as he would ever get. Then again…

*Would I even know if I was under Gunmar’s influence?*

That particular thought was accompanied by a crippling wave of anxiety. It took all of his effort to remain sitting up rather than curl over in hopes of being swallowed whole by the stone table.

“Jim…” Vendel said softly, standing up so he could rest a hand on Jim’s shoulder. Even as the touch tried to tether him to the moment, Jim’s surroundings started fading and spinning at the edges of his vision. Focusing on Vendel was becoming increasingly difficult, and even his fingertips were becoming numb to the engraved metal clutched between them. Vendel’s next words were distant, “You must tell me exactly how you got that scar.”

The orange glow of the Heartstone faded to black.

The sound of jeering rang in Jim’s ears. A living wall of Gumm-Gumms surrounded him, restricting him within a smaller circle inside the cavernous arena. Jim’s shoulders heaved while he caught his breath. He gripped the assuring weight of his Eclipse Blade in both hands, its edge slightly tainted from its victorious strike against Jim’s most recent opponent. The horde of dark soldiers could have easily overtaken him all at once, but their instructions had been to come at him one by one in a never ending stream. Like a coursing river, it was their intent to continually rush at Jim in order to wear away at his rock-hard will. This latest phase of Gunmar’s game would either end when they finally succeeded in breaking him, or when Jim felled enough of Gunmar’s soldiers that they would grow frustrated and throw him back into his cell. Luckily, Gunmar wanted to keep Jim alive - if that plan ever changed, Jim feared his stay in the Darklands would be dramatically
“ENOUGH!” a voice boomed over the crowd. “I tire of waiting! I shall face the Trollhunter myself!”

The sea of Gumm-Gumms parted to make way for their leader as he entered the circle. The dark underlord towered in front of Jim, summoning a blade that was at least as long as Jim was tall. The taunts and trollish curses from the crowd fell hushed as Gunmar pointed the tip of the sword at Jim.

“ You will be mine .”

Jim gritted his teeth, barely raising his sword in time to block the immediate onslaught. Still catching his breath, the sweat trapped underneath his armor weighed him down like a thick fog. The air hung silently around their battle except for the clanging of metal and the distant sounds of cackling goblins. Jim danced around Gunmar, attempting to take advantage of being smaller and more nimble, but the sheer amount of reach the troll commanded made it exceedingly difficult to dodge his attacks in the limited space. Jim was forced to meet many of his swings head on with his own blade, his strength waning with each blow he parried. He doubted he could last much longer.

The Decimaar Blade slashed upwards on a diagonal, taking Jim by surprise. His field of view was filled with the blade’s unnatural light. Jim desperately moved to block the cut. But he wasn’t quick enough. There was a scraping sound as Gunmar’s blade glanced off of Jim’s sword and the edge of the blade flashed in front of Jim’s face. The metal sliced through his exposed skin, the resulting pain icy cold and white hot all at once. The pain immediately disappeared, however, replaced by an eerie sense of nothingness. No battle. No Gumm-Gumms. No Darklands. Nothing. Although he could still see his surroundings, his brain could no longer register what any of the shapes and shadows meant. He could tell they existed, that something was there, but to him they were simply… nothing.

Except for the large figure in front of him. That was the one thing he could make out as clear as day. A single blue eye sneered down at him as its owner spoke to Jim without moving its mouth.

“You cannot resist me forever, Trollhunter. Eventually, you will be mine.”

As quickly as it had set in, the unnerving nothingness in Jim’s mind was filled back in with the full awareness of reality. There was a low rumbling from the ring of Gumm-Gumms as Gunmar let his blade fall to his side, his mouth curling in a satisfied smirk. Jim’s vision was blurred with tears as the excruciating pain splitting his face came back in full force. He stumbled to his knees, his sword vanishing into thin air as he desperately pressed against the new wound. It did not bleed as he had first feared, for the Decimaar Blade had cauterized the gash even as it cut away part of his flesh. But the raw pain it left behind burned like a tormenting fire just below the surface of his skin.

“Take him back to his cell,” he heard Gunmar command.

Rough hands forcefully grabbed Jim’s arms, lifting him so that only the tops of his feet touched the ground below him. He briefly caught a glance of Gunmar sauntering away before a bag was shoved over his head. Disoriented and in agonizing pain, it took all of Jim’s effort to keep from crying out as his captors dragged him like a rag doll along the winding route back to the cell block. He was grateful when he was finally tossed unceremoniously into his cell, sliding across its rocky surface until he came to a stop at the back wall.

There, Jim curled into a fetal position, his entire body shuddering as he clutched his face. He desperately longed for his mother’s healing touch to make the pain go away. But instead he was
alone. Painfully alone.

“...Jim?”

The sound of Vendel’s voice called Jim back to the present. Though he wasn't curled up on his side, Jim found his hands had crept to the edge of the stone table to grasp it with all his might. Merlin’s amulet lay abandoned in his lap, its sputtering pulse mimicking Jim’s racing heartbeat. He was gasping for breath, and the sensation of beads of sweat slowly crawling along his skin raised goosebumps on his arms. Tears ran paths down his cheeks and off the edge of his jaw, dripping onto the front of his sweater. All other sensations were being eclipsed by the blinding pain flaring along the line of his scar.

Vendel stood patiently in front of Jim, his hand still on the Trollhunter's shoulder. If the troll was made uncomfortable by Jim's current emotional state, he showed no sign of it.

“Jim, I know it is difficult, but you must tell me. How did you get that scar?”

Sniffling, Jim worked on getting enough air into his lungs to spit out a response. “He… it… Gunmar's sword… I couldn’t… wasn’t... fast enough…”

Vendel's grip on his shoulder gently strengthened, as if trying to directly transfer that strength into Jim. The nerves under his scar that still retained feeling continued to burn white-hot.

“It… it cut me... Vendel, it... The Decimaar Blade...”

“And? What did you feel when the blade touched you?”

Jim’s entire being was shaking, his grip on the table the only thing preventing him from completely unraveling. He wasn't trembling out of fear, per se; anxiety wasn't quite the word for it, either. More like an unholy amalgamation of the two, laced with stress, peppered with agony, and all together coated in a layer of unshakable impending doom. After giving himself a minute to attempt to recenter himself, Jim answered, “N-nothing.”

Up until that point, Vendel's entire expression had been calm and stoic; now his eyes narrowed as if to scold Jim.

“N-no, seriously, I felt nothing!” Jim continued, tremulously taking a ragged breath. The pain from his scar had subsided to a prickling twinge. “It… it was like I was in a void. Not the Void with all the past Trollhunters… it was… dark. Confusing. The only thing I could recognize clearly was…” Jim gulped, “Gunmar.”

Vendel's expression shifted, his eyebrows furrowing with concern. “And?”

“He… he spoke to me. Taunting me. But... he didn't move his lips. It… it only lasted a few seconds, a-and after that everything went back to normal… Well, normal for the Darklands.”

Jim worked to calm his racing heart while Vendel took a moment to consider his words. “This… is most concerning, young Trollhunter. No one who endures a physical injury from the Decimaar Blade has ever lived to tell the tale. All others are either felled by the blade or turned to heed the command of the one who wields it. To be honest, I know not what to make of this.”

Vendel helped Jim off the table, steadying him as he fought to regain his balance. Looking down at Jim, he continued, “I believe your nightmares could be related to the reason your face is permanently marked. Your fate, and perhaps even a part of your mind, is linked with Gunmar's more so now than ever. I implore you to stay vigilant, for if we can uncover more regarding how
this connection works there might be a way to manipulate it to our advantage. And, of course, we wouldn't want our Trollhunter falling under the power of the evil he is sworn to fight.

“I shall do my best to keep this a secret from the Tribunal; I fear what course of action they may take against you if they discover you have been touched by Gunmar, even though you maintain autonomy over your own actions as far as I can tell. After all, you would not be the first to resist Gunmar's mind tricks.” Obviously Vendel was referring to AAARRRGGHH!! “But when the Tribunal comes asking, and believe me, they will, you must have a believable cover story prepared. To that extent, fewer ears keep better secrets, but I implore you to relay this information to your friends - they can help you in more ways than you can possibly imagine.”

Jim nodded in acknowledgement. The discomfort caused by his scar was practically gone now, bringing the throbbing of his bruised side back to the forefront of his awareness. Drained by everything that had just transpired, the only thing Jim wanted to do now was curl up on the couch at home and hide under a blanket while he watched another movie. Maybe ‘How to Train Your Dragon 2’. Yeah, that would be nice.

As Jim turned towards the entrance of the cave, Vendel stopped him. “One last question for today, Trollhunter - and perhaps this is more suited for your companions to answer. When you returned from the Darklands, you are sure that Gunmar did not cross the bridge as well?”

Jim's heart was telling him 'absolutely not' while his brain screamed 'there's definitely a possibility!' But he had been unconscious for a large portion of his friends’ rescue effort, so he had no way of knowing for sure. “I... I don't think so. But I really don't know. I... don't remember.”

“Very well, I shall ask your friends instead. Though if Draal remained at his post guarding Killahead Bridge during their efforts, as he said, I'm sure we have nothing to fear. Now, go and get some rest, James Lake Jr. - we shall save further discussions about the Darklands for when you have more strength. And this time, please do not overdose on any magical concoctions.”

Jim smiled weakly at Vendel before leaving the cave, silently mulling over a thought in the very back of his mind. He could have sworn that during his friends' recounting of their rescue mission they’d said Draal had saved the day when he swooped in with the Gyre to carry everyone to safety at the last minute. Which would mean Draal had left his post. Which meant that, for at least a brief period of time, the bridge to the Darklands had been unguarded.

They might have something to fear, after all.

Chapter End Notes

*glances sideways back at chapters 2 and 3* Remember those hints I dropped about Jim's scar way back when? Sometimes it's like I sort of know what I'm doing. Sometimes.

Also I might possibly enjoy writing angsty flashbacks/nightmares more than the average human being. but we've now established i'm a beautiful angst-god so it's all good in the hood.

also maybe i shouldn't be writing author's notes after drinking a large glass of wine.
maybe.
Chapter 14

Chapter Summary

“But… everything’s such a mess right now. *I’m* a mess.”

She paused the movie, setting down the remote and shifting so she could cup the side of his face. “Spoiler alert, Jim: you’ve always been a mess.”

More Jlaire and more angst ahead, what else did you expect?

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

“Jim, honey, are you sure you’ll be okay if I’m gone for the evening? I can call the hospital and tell them -”

“Mom, don’t worry, I’ll be fine!” Jim tried to persuade his mother. He was snuggled up on the couch, buried up to his neck under one of their large, soft blankets, watching his mom rush around as she tried to locate her keys and hospital badge. “You’ve already taken a bunch of time off of work because of me. I think I can manage to stay out of trouble for one night.”

Barbara paused her frantic searching to glare at her son. “With your recent track record, I’m not convinced.” A brief moment passed before she threw her hands up in frustration, “You know what? No, I’m not going. I’ll just call them back and -”

“Dr. L,” Claire interrupted, walking in from the kitchen with a couple glasses of water in hand. “The hospital staff know you’ve been taking care of Jim, they wouldn’t have called you in the first place unless they really needed you.”

“But -”

“I’ll look after Jim while you’re gone. I promise.”

Jim’s mom looked resigned, but not quite yet defeated. “What about you, Claire? Won’t your parents be expecting you to be home? It *is* a school night, after all.”

“Don’t worry about me, Dr. L, I’ve got it covered. Now go.”

“But my keys - !”

Jim spied a glint of metal poking out from the couch cushion beside him. Reaching over, he fished out his mom’s keyring and tossed it her way. She caught it, hesitating in the entryway.

“But -”

“*Go,*” Claire and Jim urged in unison.

Barbara sighed, grabbing her purse from the stand by the door. She glanced over her shoulder as she opened the door, “Claire, if Jim gives you any trouble, just text me and I’ll come home right
“I think I can handle him, Dr. L.”

“Fine. But if there are any problems whatsoever -”

“I’ll let you know. No go, don’t make me say it again!”

Jim heard the door click behind her as his mother finally left the house. After getting home from Trollmarket and eating dinner (thankfully, even his mom couldn’t completely mess up making a salad), it had been surprisingly easy to convince his mom to let him watch the second installment in his favorite movie series before going to bed. He’d texted both Claire and Toby to see if they wanted to join him - Claire had quickly said yes, whereas Toby conveniently made up some excuse about his Nana’s cats (followed by sending Jim a private message containing a rather lewd string of emojis). So Claire, and only Claire, had come over to his house just in time to watch the opening scenes of *How to Train Your Dragon 2* before the hospital called, begging Dr. Lake to man the severely understaffed night shift. Up until this moment his mood had been on an upswing for the evening; now, after the interaction he’d just witnessed between his mom and Claire, he felt like he was on the precipice of crashing again.

“So what, you’re my babysitter now?” he grumbled as Claire sat next to him on the couch. In his head the words had been a lighthearted quip, but his heart never intended to let the phrase be a joke. Rather, he was starting to feel as if he was the joke.

Can’t leave Jim alone. He might get into trouble. He might hurt himself. He might overdose again, on magical remedies or god-knows what else. No way can we leave him alone. We can’t trust him to stay safe on his own. Let’s conveniently ignore the fact that he survived six months, alone, in the Darklands...

The weight of Claire’s arm settling around his shoulders broke him from his brooding. “Come on, Jim, don’t be like that. You know your mom’s just being overprotective right now. Can you really blame her?”

Jim frowned. “I don’t need a babysitter.”

“¡Dios mío! I’m not your babysitter! But if you’re going to act like a five year-old, maybe you do need one!”

Her words hung between them, her arm stiffening around him.

Barely a moment later, Jim felt her arm and demeanor relax. “Jim, I’m sorry, I… I shouldn’t have yelled at you like that.”

Jim frowned. “I don’t need a babysitter.”

“¡Dios mío! I’m not your babysitter! But if you’re going to act like a five year-old, maybe you do need one!”

Her words hung between them, her arm stiffening around him.

Barely a moment later, Jim felt her arm and demeanor relax. “Jim, I’m sorry, I… I shouldn’t have yelled at you like that.”

“No, don’t… Look, I was acting kinda childish. I deserved it.”

She gently cupped his face with both hands. “Jim,” she murmured, barely above a whisper, “you don’t deserve any of this.”

As soft as a light rain shower, as lightly as the touch of a butterfly, Claire’s lips found Jim’s for the second (wait, third) time that day. She was warm. Tender. Sweet. Unlike earlier, she made no attempt to devour him - this time their kiss was like a gentle embrace, her lips attempting to comfort him while her thumbs delicately caressed his cheeks. It was simultaneously the most chaste and most intimate thing he’d ever experienced. Slowly, oh so slowly, she deepened the kiss, pressing against him with incrementally more force while he felt himself turn to goo under her touch. He yearned to melt completely against her, to let their bodies intertwine so that he could be
entirely surrounded by her soothing presence. But that sort of closeness might be considered inappropriate at this stage in their relationship. Whatever this stage was.

Eventually she drew back, still holding his face as she watched him with those beautiful brown eyes. He immediately missed the feel of her lips against his, sensing himself unconsciously lean forward against her hands as he searched for more of her touch. Softly but firmly, she held him back.

“Jim…”

*Shit, I must have messed up. What did I mess up? Oh no what if my breath stinks or I’m an awful kisser or -*

“Do… do you want me to start the movie back up?” she asked, her cheeks glowing with a rosy tinge.

“Oh, uh…”

Before he could fully form a response, she withdrew her hands so that she could reach for the remote. The complete loss of her against him drew an inaudible whimper from his lips. A cavity somewhere in the back of his chest immediately ached, craving to be filled with the sensation of human contact. He wound his fingers around the edge of the blanket, finding no solace in its plush texture. His breathing faltered as an unseen entity constricted his chest, the memory of a feeling once again invading his thoughts.

_Pain. Cold. Alone._

“Jim?” Claire’s call was distant. His eyes squeezed shut, all he could see was darkness. “Jim, are you…? Oh god, Jim!” Her voice, still distant, grew slightly clearer as he felt hands embrace him. Soft hands. Warm hands. Hands that held him and pulled him close to more softness.

But the shadows of more abrasive hands remained.

“Jim, are you okay?”

He shook his head, squeezing his eyes even harder. The tears were coming, he could feel it.

She continued to hold him, silently running a hand through his hair in slow circles, a smooth cheek gently resting against his forehead. Even more distantly he could make out the low dialogue of the movie. Not enough to pinpoint the exact moment in the movie, but enough to remind him of his whereabouts.

_Home. Safe._

… _Maybe._

A shudder ran down his spine, releasing the tears gathered behind his eyelids.

“Jim…” she murmured in his ear, pulling him even closer. Half of his face was now buried against what felt like Claire’s shoulder, his tears quickly soaking the fabric of her shirt. Fingers attempted to brush away the tears on the other side of his face. A pair of lips gently pressed against his forehead, warm breath tickling his skin.

They stayed like that for a while until Jim’s stream of tears gradually subsided. Opening his eyes, he blearily looked up at Claire and sniffled, “I’m sorry.”
“Sorry for what, crying?” She continued wiping stray streaks of water from his cheeks with one hand, her other arm still firmly holding him close to her side. He could tell when her fingertips lingered at the edges of his scar.

“But I got your shirt wet.”

“Oh, that?” she glanced at the dark purple splotch on her shoulder. “That’s nothing compared to baby spit-up.” Tilting her head, she looked Jim in the eyes, “So, do you wanna talk about it? Or do you just want to watch the movie for a while?”

“Umm… movie, please.”

Keeping an arm wrapped around him, Claire retrieved the remote from where she'd left it. “Looks like we missed nearly twenty minutes of the film,” she said with a little sigh, “I'll rewind it.”

“I'm sorry,” Jim mumbled while she found the place they'd left off.

“Stop saying that. You don't need to apologize for crying.”

“But… everything's such a mess right now. I'm a mess.”

She paused the movie, setting down the remote and shifting so she could cup the side of his face. “Spoiler alert, Jim: you've always been a mess.”

His eyes widened with indignation.

“We're teenagers, it comes with the territory,” she continued, running the pad of her thumb across his cheekbone. “You just happen to have a lot more going on than the average teenager. Especially right now. But you'll get through it - we'll get through it. Together.”

“Claire…” He let himself follow the line of her arm, ignoring the protesting from his bruised rib cage as he twisted to press himself against her side. Her arms cradled him, holding his head close to her chest.

Soft. Warm. Safe. Not alone. More tears he didn't know he had escaped from his eyes.

“Oh, Jim…” she murmured. She stroked his hair as she held him tight. “Your talk with Vendel earlier really shook you up, huh?”

He shakily gasped in between sobs, unable to form a proper response. He'd been trying to forget about earlier, actually - that's what the movie was supposed to be for. But the occasional pain in his scar and the nagging in the back of his mind were not fading quietly into the night as he had hoped.

“Jim, you know you can talk to me, right?” she soothed. “About the Darklands, the nightmares, anything. When you're ready, that is.”

Claire was being much more patient with him than she'd been the past couple days. Maybe she'd somehow cooled down a bit. Or maybe his brush with eternal sleep earlier had caused her to have a change of heart. The kisses they'd shared seemed to be evidence of that. Whatever it was, her current demeanor was definitely helping him slowly center himself again.

He couldn't tell her about the nightmares yet, though. They were too strongly linked to the horrors he endured in the Darklands, and he definitely couldn't tell her about those. He needed to protect her from the cruel and unforgiving reality he'd experienced during his time there.
His scar twinged, as if in response to his thought.

*But do I need to protect her from myself?*

*Vendel told me I should talk to my friends about it. But how could they possibly help? ... Maybe he just meant that I need to talk to them to get our cover stories straight. But then they'll ask what I'm trying to hide from the Tribunal. Which... I guess means I'll have to tell them all about it, anyway.*

*... Tomorrow, though, not today.*

Still feeling drained from his chat with Vendel earlier, he didn’t have enough, well, *anything* to even think about starting down that rabbit hole of a conversation. Not right now. But there might be one topic he could try to broach this evening. “Claire?” he started, his voice slightly muffled against the fabric of her shirt.

“Yeah?”

“Vendel asked… when… when you rescued me, Draal was guarding the bridge the whole time, right?”

“Of course! ...Well, nearly the whole time. He did leave for a few minutes to come pick us all up in the Gyre.”

Jim inhaled sharply.

“Only for a few minutes,” she repeated, smoothing the hair on the back of his head. “And we were definitely alone in the forest once we got out. We would have known if anything followed us; Arcadia would be in chaos if anything got out, if *Gunmar* got out…”

“Well, Vendel has his doubts. And if *he* has doubts, imagine how the Troll Tribunal is gonna react - they probably won't let me live to see my next birthday!”

“Don't worry about them, Jim. You just focus on getting better, and we'll make sure the uppity Tribunal can't blame you for anything.”

“But if anything happens, I *am* the one to blame! I'm the one who waltzed into the Darklands! Anything that happens because of that is all my fault!”

“That's only *if* anything happens. Which it won't. And don't forget, we're the ones who went in after you, so we're just as much at fault - if not more, because we didn't follow Kanjigar's instructions to the letter.”

“But you wouldn't have had to come rescue me if I hadn't gone in the first place!”

Claire still held him tightly against her. “Jim, we can play the blame game all night, but it won't do any good. In the end it really doesn't matter. All that matters is you’re back, my brother is back, and we’re all safe for the time being.” She gently tilted his head up towards her, pecking him on the lips to stop his protesting. “We’ll sort out our stories about what happened tomorrow after TP and I get out of school.”

“And me.”

“Excuse me?” She raised an eyebrow at him.

Jim sat up, the throbbing in his side finally demanding that he fix his posture. “I'm going to school
“Are you sure that's a good idea? You're still recovering! Did you ask your mom?”

“I mean, not yet, but I doubt she'll stop me. I've already missed enough being in the Darklands for so long, I'm not missing the first day of school!”

“Jim…”

“Hey, I'll be surrounded by people, I'll have you and Tobes to look out for me, and it might help me get my mind off of things. You know, start getting back to normal.”

Claire chewed on her lower lip, furrowing her brow. “I don't know, Jim. You've been having a tough time navigating Trollmarket. And so far you haven’t been able to make it through a single movie without some… thing happening. What makes you think high school will be any better?”

“Because I got over twelve hours of uninterrupted sleep earlier and I'm feeling optimistic?”

The corner of her lips twitched upward right before she planted a small kiss on the tip of his nose. Jim was glad they'd finally overcome the awkward barrier that had risen between them after his return from the Darklands - he was thoroughly enjoying her increase in affectionate little touches. Each one surprised him a bit, and he wasn't sure how long it would take for him to fully get used to them, but he relished them nonetheless. Holding him at arm's length, she studied him and sighed, “Fine, you win. But only if you can convince your mom.”

He grinned, fighting back a yawn.

“Speaking of sleep…” she started.

“Uh-uh, no way. It's only seven thirty, and I still wanna finish the movie!”

She smiled back at him. “You’re impossible, Jim Lake.” She helped him get resituated, her arm wrapping around him once again as he nestled against her side. Finding a position that wouldn't aggravate his ribs, he leaned his head on her chest and tugged on the blanket while she pressed the play button on the remote. The room filled with the cacophony of vikings and their dragons once again, accompanied by the sound of Claire’s steady heartbeat in his ear.

He had every intention of staying awake for the whole movie. But the deep sense of calm settling over him had other plans, carrying him off to a blissful sleep in Claire’s arms. Without needing any sleeping draught.

When Barbara came back home sometime after midnight, she was mildly shocked to find the troll that usually cohabitated their basement standing just inside the front door. She nearly cried out before Draal motioned for her to be quiet, gesturing over at the couch with a crooked smile on his face.

Sure enough, Jim was curled up on the couch asleep in Claire’s arms, a content smile painted on his face while he snuggled into the girl’s side. Claire was fast asleep, too, her head tilted down against her chest as if she had fallen asleep while watching Jim.

“A few hours ago, when the house grew quiet, I came to investigate,” Draal started, keeping his voice low. “I found the young ones like this. They are, as you call it… cute, yes?”

“Yes, Draal, they're very cute.” Barbara rubbed the back of her neck while she hung up her purse.
“I should make sure Claire gets home, though - I’m sure her parents are worried sick.”

“Right, the parents of Claire. I should like to meet them someday.”

“You and me both, big guy. Though in your case, I don’t think they’d react too well to meeting a large, blue troll.”

“True.”

Barbara softly walked over to the couch, lightly tapping Claire’s shoulder. “Claire,” she whispered as the girl stirred, careful not to wake Jim. “I’m back, Claire, would you like me to take you home?”

“Hmm? Oh,” Claire took a moment to collect her thoughts from sleep, “I’ve got it covered, Dr. L., the Shadow Staff is in my bag.” She carefully extricated herself from under Jim, gently laying his head down on the couch cushion. A brief frown passed over his sleeping features while he pulled the blanket tighter, attempting to make up for the sudden loss of heat.

After the girl picked up her bag from beside the couch, Barbara led her outside the front door so they could converse more freely without disturbing Jim.

“How is he? Did anything happen while I was gone?” the concerned mother questioned, hugging herself to ward off the chilly night air.

“He’s fine, Dr. L. He’s stressed and definitely riddled with anxiety, but he still won’t talk about it. Overall, though, it seemed like his mood’s improved a little- I think all that sleep he got earlier did him some good.”

“Speaking of which, how much of the potion did he take tonight? Did you make sure he didn’t take too much?”

“Actually, he hasn’t taken any,” Claire admitted, causing Barbara’s eyes to widen in surprise. “He fell asleep while we were watching the movie, and he hasn’t woken up from any nightmares or anything. Maybe those have stopped now?”

“I doubt it,” Dr. Lake replied. “But I guess we’ll see. Anything else?”

“Oh, um, Jim wants to go to school in the morning.”

“Oh course he does,” she sighed, rubbing her temples. “I suppose there’s no harm in it if he thinks he can make it through the day. I’ll have to write up some notes to his teachers, though, to make sure they’re aware Jim’s not at one-hundred percent yet, and that they need to call me right away if anything happens. Ugh, and I’ll have to make sure I wake up early enough to take him to school.”

Claire chuckled, “I can swing by in the morning, just in case you need help with Jim. Toby will probably help, too.”

“Thank you, Claire. You and Toby are such great friends to Jim, I really appreciate it. And thanks again for looking out for him this evening.”

(Of course. Though I’m pretty sure Jim doesn’t need a babysitter.”

“You’re right, he doesn’t,” Barbara smiled, “but I think he definitely needs you.”

With a blush, Claire brought out her staff. She’d seen it in action before, but Barbara was still wary
of the thing - that staff had a rather sinister air to it. But the fiercely kind girl seemed to handle it well enough, so she supposed there was nothing to be concerned about. In a matter of moments, Claire expertly opened up a portal and disappeared into thin air.

Walking back into the house, Barbara was greeted with yet another startling scene. Draal was hovering over the back of the couch, his eyes wide and clearly at a loss for what to do. Jim was completely curled up on the cushions; somehow the blanket had been abandoned in a heap on the floor next to him. Eyes still closed in sleep, he was clutching his hands to his chest as he moaned lowly, “No… no… get away… leave me alone…”

A red light pulsed from where he’d put the amulet in his jeans pocket, sputtering along like a broken heartbeat.

“Barbara, what do we do?” Draal asked. “This does not seem like normal human behavior!”

“We wake him up,” she replied, determinedly setting her jaw. “He’s having another nightmare.” Quickly striding over to the couch, she knelt by her son’s side while Draal stood watch over them. She tried to wrest Jim’s attention from whatever terror was clawing at him, smoothing a hand over his forehead while she called out to him, “Jim… Jim, honey, wake up… Jim, it’s just a dream, come back to me… Jim, please…” Her voice began to crack as her repeated attempts had no affect.

Suddenly, a large, stony arm pushed her out of the way just as a flash of red light filled the living room. She tried to navigate around it to get through to her son, who had donned his armor and started lashing out at the surrounding air with his arms, but Draal held her back.

“Stay back,” he said gruffly, “It is better if the Trollhunter hits me rather than you.” As soon as he said it, one of Jim’s fists collided with Draal’s prosthetic arm. Annoyance shaded the edges of the troll’s expression as he turned his full attention to Jim. Ever so carefully, he used his good hand to pin Jim’s arms to his side, utilizing his prosthetic to keep the boy’s legs from thrashing about. Fully restrained, but still very much asleep, a look of pure despair overtook Jim’s features, giving way to a stream of tears falling over his face.

Barbara’s heart ached to see her son like this.

“Jim,” she continued calling out, daring to move closer to him. “Jim, please wake up… Wake up, Jim… It’s just a dream… Jim…”

She sat there for a few moments, on the verge of tears herself, trying to no avail to bring her son out of his nightmare.

“Jim, come back to me…”

With a start, Jim’s eyes opened wide. Disoriented and gasping for breath, he struggled against Draal’s hold on him. Barbara motioned for Draal to release him, immediately resulting in Jim curling in on himself and covering his face with his hands. They watched silently as his shoulders shuddered while he sobbed into his armored hands, his occasional moaning or sniffling the only sound in the room.

Barbara reached out to comfort him, hoping to run her fingers through his hair to soothe him - a gesture she’d done countless times throughout Jim’s childhood. But as soon as her fingers made contact, he clumsily reached out and brushed her away.

“Jim?” she murmured, again trying to reach out to him. But again he pushed her away, shaking his
head as he retreated further into himself. “Jim, please talk to me…”

“But -,”

“Come.” Draal steered her away from her son, leading her into the dining room. He pulled out one of the chairs from the table, insisting that she sit in it. “Wait here for him.”

“But -” she made to get up out of the chair, only to have Draal gently push down on her shoulders.

“Stay, Barbara.” Giving her a thoughtful look, he started making his way back down to the basement. Peering his head around the corner at her, he imparted his final words of wisdom for the evening before disappearing down the stairs, “When the Trollhunter is ready, he shall come to you.”

And so she sat at the table and waited. After nervously tapping her fingers for a while she collected some paper and a pen, deciding her energy would be better spent writing her mother’s/doctor’s notes to the school. Just in case Jim was still serious about going back to school; which, knowing her son, he would be.

She was nearly finished writing the last of the letters when she heard soft footsteps cause the floorboards to creak. Glancing up, she saw Jim slowly making his way across the floor. No longer in his armor, he looked exhausted and confused, as if he had been away at battle for a long time only to come back and feel like a stranger in his own home. But when his eyes met hers she found recognition in them, along with a touch of… shame? Barbara felt conflicted, desperately wanting to rush to embrace her son, but also wanting to give him space if he still needed it.

She watched him steadily make his way closer to her. Just barely outside of arm’s reach, agony flashed across his face as he grabbed at his side, causing him to stumble. She raced over, looping her hands under his arms to keep him from falling. After he regained his footing he flung his arms around her waist, bending over to bury his face against his mother’s hospital scrubs. His body was wracked with sobs as she tried to soothe him, rubbing circles across his back.

“I-I’m sorry, Mom… I just…”

“Sssshhhhh, it’s okay, Jim. It’s going to be okay.”

She lost track of how long she stood there with her son, attempting to ease his keening while he clung desperately to her. Jim had always been an emotional child, but she hadn't seen him cry this intensely since the day little five year-old Jim realized that his father was never coming back. In fact, it seemed like his turmoil right now was eclipsing even that painful moment from their shared past.

She silently sent a plea up to the heavens: Please, please let my boy be okay…

Chapter End Notes

Next up, the gang goes back to school. What could possibly go wrong??

heheheh
Chapter Summary

The gang goes back to school, part 1

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

“Mom, seriously, you can just drop us off here.”

“Jim, honey, the school is still a block away, and I need to park anyway so I can get these,” Jim’s mom waved a small stack of letters in her hand, “to your principal and teachers.”

“Mom…”

“C’mon, Jimbo, just think of it as arriving in style!” Toby piped up from where he and Claire sat in the backseat of Dr. Lake’s car.

“Rolling up to my first day of 11th grade in the passenger seat of my mom’s sedan? Not what I’d call style, Tobes.”

“And what, hobbling in while you clutch your broken ribs is?” Claire teased.

“No…” Jim played with the strap of his messenger bag. “But my Vespa -”

“Honey, you can barely make it down a flight of stairs right now,” his mom added, half-playful, half-scolding. “Like I’m going to let you ride your Vespa anytime soon. Or even your regular bike.”

Jim leaned his forehead against the window, only partially pouting as his mom pulled into the school's visitor parking lot. She had a point; he just didn't like it when she was always right.

“Jim, let's be real, no one's going to care. Especially when they see that you're actually alive,” Toby stated.

“TP’s right, Jim,” Claire added as the car came to a stop. “So quit being moody and just focus on getting through the day, okay?”

“Fine,” he rolled his eyes and unbuckled his seatbelt. Toby was already out of the car, helping Jim open the door and step out of the vehicle. He also helped Jim make sure his bag was situated so it wouldn't aggravate his side. “So, where to first?” Jim sighed.

Toby peered at their schedule on his phone. “Ugh, you and me get to go to trigonometry first with Miss Janeth.”

“Triga-what-now?”

“I think it's supposed to be like algebra on steroids. And something about triangles.”

Jim's eyes widened in pure terror. “But I didn't even finish algebra!”
“Technically, you did,” Claire stated as she came around to the other side of the car with Jim's mom. “Don't worry, I can tutor you later to help get you up to speed.”

“Gee, thanks.”

Toby continued rattling off their schedule. “Then after death-by-triangles, we meet up with Claire for chemistry,” Jim expected nothing less when Toby started nudging his uninjured side with his elbow, “followed by history right before lunch.”

“I wonder if they've managed to actually find a new history teacher, yet,” Claire mused. “Coach Lawrence was the permanent sub for the rest of last year,” she explained to Jim, “but I'd almost rather have Strickler back if it means actually learning something in class again.”

“I'd rather jump out a window than sit through a class taught by Strickler,” Jim grimaced. Sure, he believed the changeling could, well, change his ways. And he'd actually been a pretty great teacher, ignoring the whole “trying to destroy Jim and take over the world” thing. But the fact remained that his former teacher/nemesis had unabashedly hit on his mom - therefore, Jim would always have a problem with one Walter Strickler.

“Strickler? Who’s that?” his mom asked after tucking away her stack of papers in her purse. “The name sounds kind of familiar, but I can't quite place it…”

“Oh, just our retired history teacher, Dr. L.” Toby quickly explained before Jim had a chance to say anything potentially incriminating. “Boring guy, you wouldn't have liked him. Crotchety old geezer up and left in the middle of last year cuz he decided he couldn't take it anymore.”

“Hmm, odd. I could have sworn I knew someone with that name…” Her train of thought was derailed by the claxon ringing of the first warning bell. “Anyway, you three had better head to class; I'll swing by the office and then be on my merry way. If anything happens, and I mean anything, call me. You two have my cell, right?”

Claire and Toby nodded, whereas Jim started protesting again, “Mom, I'll be fine! How much trouble can I get in at school, seriously?”

“I don't want to find out, but I'm worried I will anyway. Just promise me you'll call if you don't think you can make it the rest of the day, okay?”

“Fine, sure, I promise!”

“Good.” She exchanged a knowing glance with his friends before waving them on their way, “Have a great day at school, kids!”

“Thanks, Dr. L!” Toby called back, already turning Jim around towards the front steps of the school. “You ready, Jimbo?”

Jim took a breath, staring at the looming staircase. Why did I think this was a good idea, again?

… Right, because I want to get back to a ‘normal’ life. And because I don't want to miss out on any more of it.

But a large part of him just wanted to go back home, curl up on his bed, and hide underneath a blanket or three.

“Jimbo?” Toby repeated, snapping his fingers in front of Jim’s face.
“Oh. Ummm...”

_You got this, Jim. Just one day of high school. Survive the next seven hours, then you get to go home. This ain’t nothin’ compared to the Darklands. Just keep it cool. Keep it crispy._

“... Yeah, I’m ready. I think.”

Toby let Jim lean on his shoulder while they made their way up the stairs. Jim nearly had his balance back, but he didn’t want to risk having an accident before he even stepped foot in the school. He took advantage of their slow pace to ask his friends a question.

“Wait, so my mom really doesn’t remember Strickler?”

“Nope, back when Vendel disconnected them or whatever, her memory was thoroughly wiped,” Toby responded, putting a hand on Jim’s lower back to keep him from teetering backwards. “I think she sort of remembered bits and pieces, like meeting Blinky when he was a human, but everything else...” he gestured with his free hand, “Gone with the wind. Vanished. Poof.”

“Oh. So you didn’t -”

“Tell her that she already found out about all the Trollhunter stuff once before but was forced to forget about it to save her life, then when you had the chance to jog her memory before you left for the Darklands you decided not to?” Claire, a few steps above Jim and Toby, paused to throw Jim one of her no-nonsense looks. “No way, Jim, that’s a conversation you get to have with your mother, not us.”

“Or she can continue not-knowing about knowing-then-not-knowing,” Jim suggested hopefully.

Toby chuckled, “Alright, Jimbo, but if she ever finds out - which I’m sure she will - it’s your funeral. Now, just a couple more steps...”

Finally reaching the top of the staircase, Jim caught his breath as he surveyed the familiar surroundings. A wave of nostalgia overtook him as he caught the scent of freshly waxed floors mingled with teenage pheromones and the cafeteria’s mystery-meat-of-the-day. “Ah, good ol’ Arcadia Oaks High,” he announced to no one in particular as they started heading towards their lockers. “Never thought I’d miss this place.”

“Jim? Jim Lake, is that you?” a timid, slightly squeaky voice asked from around a corner. The voice was accompanied by the head of Eli Pepperjack peering around the wall, squinting at Jim. In disbelief, the boy removed his glasses, wiped them on his shirt, then took a second glance. “It is you! Hey everyone, Jim’s back! He’s not dead!” Eli tried to rush at Jim, presumably to give his long-lost classmate a hug, but thankfully Toby moved to intercept the overly-enthusiastic boy before he could make impact.

“Woah, Eli, give him some room,” Toby said, holding Eli at bay with an outstretched arm. “Jim’s still recovering, might still be contagious. Better keep your distance.”

“Contagious?” he glanced sideways at Claire. “But I’m -”

“The first person to be cured from the incurable ‘Jim Lake’ disease, remember?” she smirked in response.

“Oh. Right.”

It seemed like anyone within earshot had now turned their attention towards Jim. Some began
muttering amongst themselves, already debating whether Jim Lake Jr. was actually a walking medical mystery or if he’d been a fugitive from the law or something. Others started up a slow round of applause, complete with the occasional cheer or low whistle.

Jim found it hard to believe that so many of his classmates had noticed he’d been gone in the first place.

Eli followed them as they made their way through the crowds of students to their lockers, staring at Jim intently. Eventually he worked up the nerve to ask, “Umm, Jim... What’s with your face?”

*Right, my scar.* “Uh…”

Toby quickly swooped in with an explanation. “A side-effect from the disease. Slight bodily disfigurement. If the doctors hadn’t cured him when they did, who knows what would have happened?”

“I dunno, it looks more like a battle scar to me…”

“Eli, my friend,” Toby clapped Eli on the shoulder, “the road to recovery *is* a battle.”

“Oh. I guess so... Well, I gotta get to class now, but… Good to have you back, Jim!” And with that, Eli was gone.

Jim barely had time to deposit a couple notebooks in his locker when he heard footsteps behind him.

“So it’s true, huh? The buttsnack has finally returned?” This time, Toby wasn’t fast enough to be Jim’s human shield. Jim felt a hand push against the middle of his back, shoving the top half of his body head-first into his locker. The lower edge of the locker caught him just below his ribcage, sparing his injured side but thoroughly knocking the wind out of him.

“Steve!!” Claire yelled, “Back off! Jim’s still recovering!”

“Recovering, my butt -” Steve gruffly dragged Jim back out of the locker by his collar, pausing mid-sentence when he finally got a good look at Jim’s front side. “Holy shizznacks, Lake, what’s wrong with your face?”

“A remnant of the Jim Lake Disease,” Toby glared at Steve. “The doctors said it’s *probably* not contagious, but -”

Steve quickly released Jim and backed away, wiping his hands on the front of his shirt. “Agh, you can keep your germs to yourself! I don’t need you screwing up my face again.” Turning to leave, he pointed a finger at Jim, “But I’m keeping my eye on you, Lake. I still sense something fishy going on here, and I’m gonna get to the bottom of it.”

Once again back in the company of only Toby and Claire, Jim sank to the ground with his back against the lockers, trying to suck air into his winded lungs. His side twinged at the effort.

Claire knelt down beside him, gently placing a hand on his shoulder. Toby stood guard above them, throwing fierce warning looks at any passerby trying to look at Jim for more than a couple of seconds. “Jim, are you okay?” she asked, “Your mom probably hasn’t left yet, we could -”

“No,” he gasped, “I’m fine, just… give me a second.”

*Maybe she’s right, though. Maybe it’s a sign. Maybe I shouldn’t be back at school yet.*
But if I can’t handle high school, or even Steve Palchuck, how am I supposed to handle being the Trollhunter?

No… I can do this. I need to do this.

Gradually, his breathing returned to normal. Taking Claire’s hand, she helped him up off the ground. He adjusted his bag while she smoothed out the collar of this sweater. “You sure you’re okay?” she asked, her brown eyes filled with concern.

“Positive.” He forced a wide grin, hoping it would help convince his friends. He turned to Toby, “So, Tobes, shall we go see what Miss Janeth has in store for us this year?”

Toby quirked an eyebrow at him. “You seem oddly chipper about it all of a sudden.”

He cheerfully wrapped an arm around Toby’s shoulders. “Hey, I survived over six months in the Darklands - how bad can death-by-triangles really be?”

Claire waved to Jim and Toby when she saw them enter the chemistry classroom, motioning for her friends to sit near her. Jim seemed extremely out-of-sorts, and Toby practically had to steer Jim away from the doorway and over to his seat. He deposited the Trollhunter in the stool next to Claire before moving to take his own spot at the lab table behind them.

“TP,” Claire whispered urgently over her shoulder, “Did Jim have a - ?”

“Oh, he’s fine,” Toby replied. “He’s just being dramatic right now.”

Turning back to Jim, she gently ran her hand over his forearm. He barely acknowledged her, instead staring blankly at his hands resting in front of him on the table. “Jim?”

He mumbled something, but she couldn’t make out any of the words.

“Jim, you’ll have to speak up.”

“The triangles, Claire…” he turned his head towards her, his eyes wide. “The triangles are not friendly shapes.”

She rolled her eyes, thankful it was only his recent math class that was disturbing him and nothing else. “Then you’ll love it when a circle is thrown into the mix, too.”

He gasped. “The circles go to the dark side, too?! That’s it, I want to go back to the Darklands. At least there I didn’t have to do math.”

“No funny, Jim,” she lightly frowned at him, softly running her hand through his hair. Out of the corner of her eye, she thought she glimpsed Mary Wang giggling at the two of them. Right, we’re not alone. But Jim didn’t seem to mind, or even notice, as he happily hummed while he smiled at Claire and leaned into her touch. Withdrawing her hand, she cleared her throat and continued, “And be careful how loud you talk about… well, you know.”

“Why? Everyone already thinks there’s something wrong with me, why not humor them? They’ll go nuts if they think I’ve gone completely crazy-town banana-pants.”

“Jim, no one thinks there’s anything wrong with you.”

“Oh yeah? Then why does everyone keep staring at me?”
“It’s just because of your scar, it’s -”

“No, I see the way they look at me.” The lighthearted tone in his voice suddenly vanished. “Everyone’s expecting me to keel over at any minute. The humans, the trolls, my own friends and family, all of you. I’m like a ticking time bomb of disaster you’re all watching, waiting to see when I’ll go off next.”

“Jim, that’s not true! It’s just -”

But her sentence was cut short by the bell, followed immediately by their teacher starting the introduction to the course. Claire couldn’t focus on the syllabus in front of her, finding that her attention kept gravitating back to Jim. He refused to look her way, instead choosing to stare intently at the whiteboard at the front of the room while the teacher scrawled lab safety rules across it. His expression was stormy, and the bags under his eyes seemed more pronounced than they had been earlier that morning.

When Claire and Toby had showed up at the Lake household before school, Jim’s mom filled them in on the events that had occurred right after Claire had left the night before. Claire had been shocked to hear it - when she’d left, Jim had been sleeping so peacefully in her arms. But apparently the nightmares had been inevitable after all. She should have had him take some of the sleeping potion when he first started dozing off, then maybe he would have gotten a full night’s rest. Because by the looks of it, it didn’t look like Jim had been able to go back to sleep after last night’s episode. Surely he wouldn’t be able to get through the entire school day, not like this.

“Miss Nuñez? Miss Nuñez, do you need me to repeat the question?” The chemistry teacher’s questioning forced her attention to stop wandering.

“Oh, uh, yes please, sorry.”

She heard Mary, along with a few other students, try to contain her snickering. *I’m definitely going to get an earful from her later…* But even with the slight commotion, Jim kept stonily staring straight ahead for the remainder of the class period.

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Jim’s stomach gurgled loudly. “Ugh, I wish we could skip history and go straight to lunch. I’m starving!”

Toby started digging around in his backpack. “Hold on, I think I’ve got a Nougat Nummy or two in here…” he triumphantly pulled out a candybar and handed it over to Jim.

“Thanks, Tobes!” Jim happily tore into the wrapper, munching on the chocolate-covered goodness as the trio walked down the hall to their next class. He found it easy enough to ignore (or, at least pretend to ignore) the continued gawking from the general student body as he walked by. The tension between himself and the girl walking at his side, though, was screaming to be addressed. “Claire,” he started, his mouth half-full with nougat, “I’m sorry for… whatever that was earlier during class. You were just trying to help and I… I shouldn’t say stuff like that. I’m sorry.”

“It’s fine, Jim, you were just saying what was on your mind,” there was an edge to her voice, but her hand tentatively grasped Jim’s. “I don’t want to stop you from expressing your feelings, not with everything you’re going through right now. Though your mood swings are… kind of like an out-of-control roller coaster ride, but we can handle that for now. But I do wish you’d stop trying to push us away when you get upset, Jim, we only want to help you.”

“I… I know, and I’m trying. I really am. It’s just… I don’t know…”
“It’s hard, I get it.” She squeezed his hand reassuringly.

“No, not that. Well, I mean… yeah, it’s hard. But… he took a deep breath, daring to look Claire in the eye before he continued. “I’m… afraid. Of so many things. I don’t even know where to begin.”

“Not to be That Guy,” Toby interrupted, “but even if you did know where to begin, I don’t think that’s the kind of conversation you want to have in the middle of a high school hallway. Especially when we have a class starting in just a couple of minutes.”

“When did you get to be so responsible, Tobes?” Jim teased.

“Hey, someone had to step up while you were gone.” Toby’s sad smile reminded Jim that he hadn’t really spent any time alone with his longest and best friend since getting back; he’d have to try and remedy that soon.

They made their way to their history classroom as quickly as Jim’s pace would allow; he tried to take a couple wrong turns along the way, so it was decidedly a good thing he had his friends on either side to nudge him back in the right direction. They managed to cross the threshold of the history classroom with plenty of time to spare before the official start of class. Slipping into some open seats in the back row, they started pulling out notebooks and pens from their bags while the history teacher finished sketching out some sort of timeline on the board. Apparently the school had finally found a new history teacher; the woman standing at the front of the room was definitely not Coach Lawrence.

Actually, she looks familiar… extremely familiar.

“Miss Nomura?” Jim muttered incredulously.

The volume of his voice had barely been loud enough for Toby or Claire to hear, and they were sitting right next to him. But upon the utterance of his words, the changeling turned and looked directly at him.

What is it with changelings teaching history? Is it because they’ve lived through so much of it?

“Good to see you could join us today, little Gynt,” she mused, crossing the classroom to stand next to Jim. Her voice was jarringly smooth, unlike her more raspy troll voice he’d grown accustomed to over the past few months. She walked with a slight limp, a remnant from their escape from the Darklands, but other than that she seemed to be in pretty good shape. Especially compared to Jim.

“You look like you’ve been through hell,” she continued, keeping her voice low so only Jim and his friends could hear.

“Or something like that,” Jim flashed her a crooked smile, “Well… you know.”

“Unfortunately I do,” she breathed, looking down at Jim kindly. “We can talk more later, but if you need anything, little Gynt, let me know.”

“Thanks, I will.”

The bell rang, signifying the start of class. “Alright, everyone,” Nomura raised her voice to address the entire class as she walked back towards the front of the room, “My name is Miss Nomura, and I am your new history teacher here at Arcadia Oaks. Now, if you’ll turn your attention to the board…”

She proceeded to go over the outline of everything she planned to cover over the course of the
year. Jim tried to pay attention, but the combination of his stomach already demanding more food and his drowsiness setting in was making it near impossible to focus. Glancing at his friends beside him, he noticed their postures were stiff and their faces colored with skepticism; they obviously didn’t trust Nomura any more than they had their previous changeling history teacher.

But they didn’t know Nomura like he did. They hadn’t spent months in a cell adjacent to her in the Darklands. In fact, if it hadn’t been for the changeling, Jim probably wouldn’t have survived beyond his first week as Gunmar’s prisoner.

Jim’s head jerked slightly as he started nodding off in his seat.

Come on, Jim, stay awake. Just make it through this class, and you can get some sugar or caffeine or something at lunch.

… But out of all my classes to fall asleep in, this one’s probably the best. Nomura will understand.

Yeah… okay, maybe I’ll close my eyes for just a couple minutes…

…

Jim was curled on his side, trying to ignore the hollowness in his stomach. His throat, drier than the Sahara Desert, scratched and burned every time he took a breath. Dizzy and nauseous, the cool rock of the cell floor against his cheek was the only thing keeping his surroundings from spinning out of control. He didn’t know how long it’d been since Gunmar’s goons had thrown him in here, but he figured it had at least been over forty-eight hours.

Over forty-eight hours without food or water, and he hadn’t exactly been properly hydrated or nourished beforehand.

What a pathetic way to perish in the Darklands. Not from battle with Gunmar or his armies, goblins, or the other monsters that lurk in the deep shadows, but from lack of water. Even though Unkar the Unfortunate had an extremely untimely demise, at least it was a more exciting way to go. And faster. The excruciating pain and hopelessness slowly overtaking him as his body crept closer to complete failure was agonizing. At this point, Jim just wanted it to be over.

The grating sound of the cell bars withdrawing rang in his ears, followed by the thud of heavy footsteps. Multiple pairs of hands grabbed his arms and shoulders, swiftly lifting him and slamming him against the back wall of the cell. After the stars popping in his vision cleared, Jim saw it was two of Gunmar’s minions pinning him up against the wall. They had left his legs unrestrained, but Jim didn’t have any sort of strength to even think of kicking out at his captors. His bones were like lead, his muscles like old rubber bands that had atrophied and lost the ability to stretch or bend.

Two figures loomed in the entryway of the cell; the one with many eyes hung back while the one with a single eye marched forward. Gunmar grasped some of the hair on the top of Jim’s head, forcing his neck to crane upward to meet the dark underlord’s gaze.

“What happened to the bridge, Trollhunter?” the beast roared. “Tell me, before I tear you limb from limb!”

As a warning, the Gumm-Gumms holding him applied tension to his arms. Jim tried to cry out, but his voice came as a raspy croak.

“Why do you not speak?!”
Again, Jim’s voice failed him, too dry and too weak to say anything.

“Perhaps he is scared speechless, my lord,” Dictatious commented, creeping closer to observe Jim more closely.

“Pity,” Gunmar responded, “I had hoped Merlin’s first human Trollhunter would be more resilient.”

Jim desperately wanted to retort something back, but the only sound he could make was a cracked, strangled whine.

“Fools,” came a voice from an adjacent cell. It sounded familiar, but at this point Jim was probably imagining things. “Have you given him any water? Food?”

“Silence, impure!” Gunmar bellowed, “I do not see why those luxuries are relevant!”

“He’s a human, idiots,” the voice continued, “Without food and water, he’s practically dead already.”

“So be it, then!”

“My lord,” Dictatious hastily interrupted, “Remember, he is of more use to us alive than dead.”

Gunmar let out a frustrated breath and let go of Jim’s head. “Fine. See to it that the whelp is given food and water. Then we shall see what he has to say.” Without another word Gunmar stormed out of the cell, his minions following closely at his heels.

Jim crumpled back to the floor of the cell, unsure if he should be grateful for the impending food and water or distraught by how the nourishment would force his existence in the Darklands to be extended. A dark cloud settling around his thoughts, he tried to convince himself that survival was a good thing. The longer he survived, the greater chance he had of returning home. To his friends. To his family.

Jim closed his eyes to keep the room from spinning again. Unable to sleep, he let his mind go blank to try and conserve what little energy he had left.

Eventually he was greeted by the sound of a few goblins entering his cell. Shock coursed through his system as one dumped a bucket of cold water on his head, forcing his eyes open. He greedily licked droplets of water from his lips while the little monsters pushed him into a sitting position, his thirst increasing tenfold from the mere thought of getting a proper drink. A second goblin, with a second bucket of water, climbed up to Jim’s shoulder to force him to drink. He sputtered as the water was poured into his mouth, desperately trying to swallow the liquid rather than inhale it. The goblins chuckled softly as the contents of the bucket were drained; enough of the water made it down Jim’s throat that he felt instantly better, but a significant amount had run down the sides of his face and along his skin, chilling him to the bone underneath the protection of his armor. Not ideal, but at least now he had more of his wits about him.

Noticing another goblin approaching with an armful of odd-looking fungi, Jim glared at it and held it at bay at arm’s length before it could even try to force-feed him. Deciding the boy wasn’t worth its time, it flung the mushrooms at him before scampering with the others out of the cell, all the while chattering under its breath.

As Jim cautiously studied the mushrooms, he heard the voice sneer from the adjacent cell again, “Don’t worry, little Trollhunter, those mushrooms won’t poison you. Gunmar’s trying to keep you alive, remember?”
“I’m not convinced,” he croaked back, slowly finding his voice again. “He almost let me die of dehydration.”

“Because those thick-skulled idiots don’t know the first thing about humans.”

“And you do?”

There was a pause. In the wall beside him was a small gap in the stone he hadn’t noticed before - he only noticed now because a green, reptilian eye was watching him through it. “I’m disappointed. You’ve already forgotten me, Trollhunter?”

Jim’s head swam as he racked his brain trying to put the pieces of the puzzle together. The voice. The eyes. So familiar, but he couldn’t seem to put a name to it.

No… not an ‘it’. A woman. Sort of.

“N-Nomura?”

The changeling chuckled on the other side of the wall. “Good, you still have a few brain cells up there. You might survive this place, yet.”

“But… why are you locked up? I thought you worked for Gunmar? You helped try to open the bridge and free him!”

“Someone had to pay for his son’s death. And since you were out of reach…”

“Oh.”

Silence fell between them as Jim nibbled on the mushrooms, wary of eating too much too fast in case they had some weird side effect or something. But no adverse effects materialized from eating the dirt-tasting fungi, allowing Jim to stave off the gnawing hunger in his gut. His meager meal finished, and feeling a little more human now that the water had a chance to fully enter his system, Jim sighed and leaned against the wall of his cell. He whistled a tune that materialized in the back of his mind.

“Do you even know what you’re whistling, boy?”

“Umm, no. Why, what is it?”

“It’s Peer Gynt.”

“Peer what?”

“Gynt. It’s an aria, like an opera… Nevermind, you wouldn’t understand.”

“Try me. It’s not like there’s anything else to do around here.”

Nomura chuckled. “I was but a young changeling, alone and still new to the human world, when I first heard it. It was opening night. When the curtain rose, and the orchestra swelled…” Nomura sighed before continuing. “Peer Gynt is a young man who, after a series of mistakes, stumbles into a mountain of trolls. He faces the troll king, who asks him, ‘What is the difference between troll and man?’ The king proceeds to tell young Gynt, ‘Out there, humans say to thyself be true; trolls say to thyself be true, and to hell with what the world thinks.’

“But,” Nomura concluded, “it’s just a play…”
Jim coughed, attempting to clear some of the scratchiness from his throat. “Sounds nice. I think I’d like to hear it someday, maybe once we get out of here.”

His comment earned a hearty laugh from the changeling. “Hold onto that hope, Trollhunter. You and I both know nothing escapes from the Darklands.”

“Who knows? Stranger things have happened,” Jim sighed, laying down on his back on the hard stone floor. She had a good point, though - would he ever escape from this place? And if he did, at what cost would that freedom come?

“You’ll need your strength for tomorrow,” Nomura stated. “Rest up… little Gynt.”

Chapter End Notes

Gee, this was more lighthearted than my typical installment, I wonder what the next chapter could possibly bring??? note that jim hasn't woken back up yet muahaha

Also, I love Nomura and I really want to explore how her and Jim interact now that they've been Darklands Prison Buddies and it's my au and i can do what i want, so obviously I had to bring her in as the new history teacher.
Chapter 16

Chapter Summary

"Little Gynt, you need to wake up now..."

(Going back to school, part 2)

sort of

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Jim was shaken from sleep when stony hands grabbed him, scraping his knees along the ground as they pulled him from his cell. They shoved a bag over his head, preventing him from watching where he was being taken. Not that he would have been able to make much out in the darkness to begin with. Disoriented, he quickly lost track of the many twists and turns as they dragged him by his arms through the winding corridors of the cell block.

Suddenly he was flung to the ground, wincing as his face scraped across a cracked, rocky floor; the bag on his head provided very little protection from the abrasive surface. The burlap fabric further betrayed him when it was wrenched off his head, leaving small rug burns where it had been in contact with his cheeks and nose.

His sight somewhat regained, despite the tears stinging his eyes, Jim immediately fought to get to his feet. But firm hands kept him pinned to the ground as he felt shackles snapping into place around his wrists. He grunted as he tried to twist out of the restraints, the sound of clanking chains providing an unwanted percussion line to his desperate aria. It was pointless, though - the metal cuffs were perfectly sized so that his hands couldn’t slip free.

The Gumm-Gumms continued to keep him pinned to the ground while he felt another pair of hands unceremoniously wrap a chain around the lower part of his torso, tightening the newest restraint until it dug into his hip bones through the chainmail of his armor. He cried out as they pulled at him, forcing him upright onto his knees while they worked to anchor his restraints. His arms were stretched as far as they would go, slightly at an upward angle so that his hands hung just above his head. The chain around his hips was secured somewhere behind him on the ground, ensuring that he stayed on his knees. His back was being stretched to its limits and his arms felt like they were trying to separate from his shoulders, even with the armor holding him together. He wouldn’t be going anywhere anytime soon, not until his captors decided to release him from his chains.

And he had a sinking feeling that the discomfort of his restraints would be nothing compared to whatever was in store for him next.

He surveyed his surroundings, taking shaky deep breaths in an attempt to keep his pulse steady. He was in some sort of cavernous arena, and, in true Darklands fashion, everything came in different shades of black as far as the eye could see. Occasionally, a crack or facet would be tinged with an ominous green or blue glow from an unknown, unnatural light source. It seemed like they’d chained him up somewhere near the center of the arena; across from Jim towered a large throne decorated with assorted skulls. Jim spied a large, dark figure occupying the macabre chair.
Gunmar.

His pulse picked up its pace as the underlord got up and started towards Jim. The single, fiery blue eye stared him down, piercing into his soul and turning his blood cold. Jim glared back at his opponent, choosing to keep his chin lifted high despite his otherwise exposed position; beyond the protection of his armor, he currently had no way to defend himself.

“For the first human to ever bear the mantle of Trollhunter,” the troll started, his deep voice carrying undertones similar to nails scraping along a chalkboard, “I was expecting you to be more… impressive.”

“I was impressive enough to slay your son,” Jim spat through gritted teeth.

“Or simply lucky enough. But now, young Trollhunter, I fear your luck has run out.” Gunmar was now within striking range of Jim; the troll let loose a wide, swinging punch, intending to wallop the side of Jim’s head. Before the fist had a chance to collide with his temple, however, his armor flared with a bright light and a close-fitting helmet enveloped his skull, shielding him from the hit. The metal of his armor sang from the impact, ringing in his ears for a moment while Gunmar pulled back his fist.

“Apparently luck is still on your side,” the dark one snarled. “A temporary setback.” With a wave of his hand, he motioned for the soldiers in the arena to draw closer. Panic rose in Jim’s chest as Gunmar became flanked by a living wall of Gumm-Gumms stretching past the edges of Jim’s field of view. Hundreds of eyes stared at Jim, making him suddenly feel very small. And extremely alone.

“As I mentioned, Trollhunter, it is not my intent to kill you,” Gunmar began monologuing. “So long as you live, if the surface world wants its Trollhunter back they will be forced to reassemble the Killalahead Bridge to retrieve you, enabling my escape from this accursed prison. By the time they come for you, I will have broken you. I will peel back that shell of yours, and once your will is shattered I shall remake you with my Decimaar Blade. You shall become my dark champion, enslaved to do my bidding, so that nothing will stop me from taking back the surface world.”

“And what will you do if no one comes looking for me? What if they’ve already destroyed the bridge and hidden it away so that no one can get to it again?” Jim retorted, partially wishing his words would come true after hearing Gunmar’s plan.

The devil’s lips curled as he sneered down at Jim. “Then you shall provide entertainment for me and my armies until your pathetic life force ceases to exist.”

Jim’s stomach sank to a new low, so low that he almost felt like throwing up. But instead he swallowed the fear and yelled defiantly, “Fine! Hit me with your best shot!”

“As you wish, Trollhunter.” Gunmar turned and signaled to his soldiers before returning to his throne. The ring of Gumm-Gumms tightened their ranks, surrounding him with the sight of only their stony visages. It didn't take long before one of the soldiers in the lineup stepped forward, coming within striking range of Jim.

Even with the protection of the Eclipse Armor, the first punch hurt.

So did the second.

And the third.
After the count reached double-digits, Jim quickly lost track of how many times a Gumm-Gumm fist connected with his torso. And the occasional punch to the head definitely wasn't helping his counting abilities, either. His armor continued to hold steadfast, protectively glowing while it deflected the brunt of each hit. But Jim felt each strike in his very core, rattling his bones and shaking his nerves. The chains that bound him creaked and clanked with every punch, mocking him every time he flinched and jeering each time his body absorbed the shock of another hit. His arms, quickly made sore and aching from their lofted position in the restraints, were thankfully left untargeted; surely a well-placed hit from any of his attackers could have easily broken the outstretched limbs, even with his armor donned. But the Gumm-Gumms continued to target only his torso and head, leaving his extremities alone.

It wasn't long before the wind was so forcefully knocked out of his lungs that the shallow gasps he took in between strikes did little to replenish his oxygen supply. Dizzy and further disoriented by the shadows swimming in his field of view, Jim squeezed his eyes shut to attempt to block out his surroundings. The back of his eyelids were the same shade of black as the arena walls, his vision flashing red every time a blow connected with his body; maybe it was due to his armor’s protective glow, but it was probably a side-effect of the pain creeping deeper into his very existence. Jim's pulse echoed in his ears, though it wasn’t loud enough to drown out the clattering of the chains or the shuffling of Gumm-Gumm feet. He bit down on his lower lip to keep from crying out, a metallic taste filling his mouth; he refused to give Gunmar and his army the satisfaction of his exclamations of pain.

After a short eternity of being a human punching bag, the onslaught finally slowed. Jim dared to reopen his eyes, watching through the vizor of his helmet as Gunmar made his way through the ranks of soldiers to stand in front of him. There was a flash of blue, eerie and unsettling, as a giant sword materialized in the dark one's hand.

“Let’s see how resilient you are now, Trollhunter.” Gunmar positioned the blade roughly a foot in front of Jim's face. Outside of striking range, the length of the blade danced with sinister flames as it stared Jim down. Jim's armor flared in response, shielding him from the glowing tendrils reaching out and trying to claim him. The power of Eclipse successfully held the blade’s magic at bay; frustrated, Gunmar roared wordlessly as he lowered the sword to his side.

Emboldened by the small victory, Jim found his voice and gritted through his teeth, “You can't break me, Gunmar.”

The monstrous troll whirled on him. “I can. And I will.” Gunmar's free hand lashed out and grabbed Jim around the waist. Jim's body protested in agony as he was pulled against the restraints; surely his arms would be ripped from their sockets before the chains broke free of their anchors. He cried out, a mix between a yell and a shriek, the sound echoing in the cavernous room while the Gumm-Gumms silently watched the newest round of Trollhunter torture.

A flash at the corner of his vision, and Jim saw the Decimaar Blade slicing cleanly through the irons that kept him bound. He immediately felt his arms dragged down by the weight of the chains shackled to his wrists, the crude fetter around his hips falling to the ground as Gunmar single-handedly lifted Jim into the air so that the two were eye-to-eye.

It took Jim a few moments to fully realize that his arms were no longer constrained; by then, it was a few moments too late. Jim was attempting to summon his Eclipse sword just as Gunmar roared in rage, hurling Jim halfway across the giant arena while it felt like Jim’s internal organs had stayed behind. Everything was painfully accounted for, however, when his back slammed up against a stone pillar. His vision flashed, bright crimson followed by dark black, as he slid down the stone and crumpled to a heap at its base. The shackles still attached to his arms clattered around him as
he fell; they jostled softly when the ground trembled from the heavy footsteps heading his way.

The heavy footsteps transitioned to heavy kicks. Whatever air Jim had left in his lungs was forcibly expelled with a swift kick to his gut. Jim feared he would only survive a few more hits of that magnitude; he could feel the power of his armor sputter like a dying car battery, his meek attempts to summon one of his weapons or his shield yielding no results.

“My lord, remember - “ interrupted the Skullcrusher’s counsel.

“He’s more useful alive than dead, I know!” Gunmar spat back, accentuating his statement with another kick. “But this human - this child - stole my son from me! Centuries of Trollhunters, and the one that causes me the most grief is this pathetic fleshbag! Look at him! The only thing he should be worthy of is being my next snack, and even that is questionable!”

“My lord, please. Remember the plan.”

Gunmar huffed, releasing a breath slowly through his nose. “Have this whelp taken back to his cell. I have had enough of this for one day.” Jim heard the troll turn to leave, his heart beating erratically when the sound of footsteps immediately stopped. It seemed Gunmar had second thoughts, kicking Jim one last time before storming away, causing Jim to let loose a strangled cry. Whether on purpose or not, that final kick had landed farther south than the others. Much farther south. And, unfortunately, that area wasn’t nearly as well-protected by his armor as Jim would have hoped, especially considering the nature of that location.

God, Rule Number Three was a bitch.

The initial pain flared white-hot throughout his senses. Jim nearly spilled the meager contents of his stomach then and there. He didn’t have long to wallow in his agony, however; he felt a tug on the chains bound to his wrists, followed by a rough yank as a couple soldiers began dragging him across the ground on his back. He barely even noticed the strain coursing through his arms, instead dwelling on the dizziness and nausea that engulfed him. He succeeded in not vomiting as they took him back to his cell, but the back of his throat stung from the effort.

Eventually he was half-rolled, half-flung into his cell, leaving Jim to curl up on his side on the hard stone floor. The helmet of his armor dematerialized, allowing the tears eking out the corners of his eyes and streaming down his face to quietly drip onto the rock underneath. His frame shuddered as he gasped for breath. Slowly, oh so painfully slowly, the raw pain from that last hit faded, making room for Jim to feel the aftermath from the rest of the battering session. Nothing seemed to be broken, but there were surely plenty of bruises decorating his skin underneath his armor. The points of contact of his restraints, his wrists and hips, were particularly tender, aching even as the slight movement from his breathing caused his armor to chafe against those spots. A mix between a moan and a sob escaped him, hanging in the too-quiet air of the cellblock.

“Took a beating, Trollhunter?” he heard Nomura call from the adjacent cell.

Jim’s response was part groan, part wail.

“That bad, huh? I hate to break it to you, but it doesn’t get any better over time.”

Time. One of the things he’d completely lost track of. He was aware he’d been in the Darklands for a while now, but he had no sense of how many days or weeks he’d been trapped here. And it felt like an eternity since he’d last seen his friends and family. A pang of profound loneliness summoned another cry from his lips.
“Hey, don’t…” there was clearly discomfort in the tone of the changeling’s voice. “Where did that stupid sense of optimism go, little Gynt? You survived to fight another day. That’s a good thing.”

“Is it?” he retorted between gasps. “Gunmar wants to use me to cross over into the surface world. The longer I survive, the better his odds are of succeeding.” Still curled on his side, he hid his face in his hands.

“He can beat you and bruise you as much as he likes, but he only succeeds if he can control you,” she reasoned. “So you must continue to fight, little Gynt… We will continue to fight.”

He heard a light clattering noise as she threw something through the small hole between their cells. Stretching out his hand and searching in the dark, his fingers wrapped around a small, thin piece of metal that resembled a bobby pin.

“That should help get those shackles off,” she explained.

He intended to express his gratitude, but instead a different sentence formed on the tip of his tongue. “Why are you helping me?”

“The company is a nice change of pace. Now, rest up… little Gynt.”

...

“Little Gynt…”

“Jim…”

“Little Gynt, you need to wake up now.”

Jim’s eyes blearily blinked open. He rubbed the sleep from his eyes, discovering his face was damp with tears. He became disoriented when he realized he was lying on a soft couch instead of a rock-hard floor.

Where am I?

... Right, school.

His vision coming into focus, Jim glanced around at his surroundings; Toby was hovering by the foot of the couch, a concerned look painted across his face, while Claire and Nomura knelt by his side. Claire was holding one of his hands, gently massaging circles across his knuckles. Nomura looked down at him in contemplation, her lips pursed.

“What… what happened?” He said groggily.

“Apparently you found my class boring enough to sleep through, little Gynt,” Nomura raised an eyebrow at him. “But when class ended and you were still fast asleep, your friends helped bring you here.”

“And here is…?”

“The nurse’s office,” Claire answered with a frown.

“You had us worried, man,” Toby interjected. “You were moaning a lot, and you looked like you were in a lot of pain. Luckily you didn't, you know,” he quickly glanced around the room, “armor up, or anything, but… well, you’ve sufficiently freaked out half the school.”
“Oh no,” Jim groaned, pulling his hand away from Claire so he could bury his face behind both hands. “This wasn't supposed to happen.”

“Was… was it another nightmare?” Claire asked softly. Jim felt her fingers start threading through his hair, and he gently pushed her aside.

“Not exactly,” he sighed, “more like a flashback.”

“What was it about?” she pressed.

“I don't want to talk about it.”

“But -”

“I don't. Want. To talk. About it,” he repeated, rolling onto his side in an attempt to hide in between the couch cushions.

_I fell asleep at school. I had a flashback at school. Shit._

“Jim…” Claire started. But Nomura interrupted her.

“Leave him be, there's nothing more you can do right now. You two should go eat lunch while the cafeteria is still open.”

“But -”

“Go. I will stay with little Gynt until his mother arrives. Which should be any minute, now.”

He heard Claire and Toby sigh reluctantly as they shuffled out of the room, followed by the soft click of a closing door.

“Nomura?” He asked tentatively, still nestled in the crack where the back of the couch met the seat cushions.

“Yes?”

“Do you… have you had nightmares, too? After… you know.”

“I'm sorry, little Gynt, but no. Not in the way your friends say they plague you. There are a host of things from my past that haunt me, not just the Darklands, but I've grown accustomed to them over time. Just as you will gradually become accustomed to this.”

“But what if I don't? What if things never go back to normal?”

“Well, there's your first problem,” she replied, a hint of a sneer in her voice. “You can't change the past. What happened, happened. Sure, it's rotten, but what are you going to do about it? Will you hide, Trollhunter, or will you face your problems head-on?”

“I… I'll face them!” he turned his head to look at the changeling, tears building in the corners of his eyes. “But… I… I don't know how…”

“You'll figure it out. You're the Trollhunter, after all. But first you need get back to a normal sleep schedule - I understand you're still exhausted, but ‘history class’ is _not_ code for naptime.”

“Oh… sorry…”
“You’d better be.” She tilted her head, straining to hear a sound in the distance. “And I do believe that's your mother.”

Moments later, the door burst open as a frazzled redhead entered the room. “Jim? Oh god, Jim! Are you okay?”

“I'm fine, Mom,” he said, exasperated, while his mom immediately fell to his side. “I fell asleep, that's all.”

“Right. You fell asleep, didn't wake up, and started moaning and crying in your sleep. Because that's perfectly normal!”

There was that word again. Normal.

“If I may interrupt, Dr. Lake,” Nomura started, “there is nothing normal about your son. Particularly after what he’s been through.”

Barbara eyed the teacher skeptically. “And you are…?”

“Miss Nomura, the new history teacher. Your son and I were both in a similar…” she glanced at the school nurse, hovering just on the other side of the doorway, “dark place for the past few months.”

His mom responded with a raised eyebrow. Had he told her about how he and Nomura had been imprisoned together? He couldn't remember.

“Perhaps I could come over for tea later? It might be beneficial to discuss some things with you and Jim.”

“Sure, I guess that would be - Oh! Now I remember, you used to work at the museum, right?”

“Correct. In a manner of speaking.”

He saw the gears in his mom’s head start cranking away, trying to put bits and pieces of a past she barely remembered back together. There was still plenty of confusion and uncertainty present, but a small light of recognition flickered on.

“You are more than welcome to drop by for tea, feel free to stop by anytime. I think we might have a lot to talk about.” Barbara turned her attention back to Jim. “So, kiddo, think you can get up and walk out to the car with me?”

“The car?” he said incredulously. “I'm not going back to class?”

“Absolutely not! You couldn't even make it to lunch time, you're obviously not ready to be back at school yet.”

“But Mom, I'm fine! I fell asleep, so what? I'm awake now, and I feel fine! At least let me finish out the day!”

“Honey, this isn't negotiable,” she lectured, standing up and crossing her arms. “You're pushing yourself too hard, too fast, and it's only going to slow down the healing process.”

“Slow it down? It's already going too slow!”

“It's only been a couple days, Jim! These things take time -”
“Time? I don’t have time! I’ve already lost too much time, I can’t afford to be stuck at home on bed rest!”

“Jim, just give it another day or two. The world won’t end if you miss a couple more days of school.”

“But it could end! And I can’t do anything about it if I’m stuck at home!”

“You can’t do much of anything until you’re properly healed.”

“But I’m okay! I have to be okay!” his voice cracked. He looked down at his mother, shoulders heaving as he caught his breath, hands balled into fists at his sides.

Wait, when did I stand up?

“Jim,” his mom tried to soothe him, “you will be okay. I know you’re frustrated, but you have to be patient. What you're recovering from doesn’t magically go away overnight, you have to allow yourself time to heal.” She reached up to gently hold the side of his face, her thumb resting on the edge of his scar. “And I’m not just referring to your cracked ribs.”

Jim fought the urge to recoil from his mother’s touch, squeezing his eyes shut to hold back a new wave of tears. A million potential responses ran through his mind: But I'm frustrated. Tired. Anxious. Impatient. Angry. Upset. Afraid. But no single coherent thought could succinctly convey the emotions struggling inside him, so he stood silently and let the tears roll down his cheeks.

“Little Gynt,” Nomura sighed, “Go home. It's the first week of school, you won't be missing much anyway.”

But Jim didn't want to go home. Not yet. Being stuck at home would only bring anxiety and the persistent worries of what had been and what was yet to come. No, he wanted to stay right here and get back into the routine of school, homework, and superfluous teenage drama. High school may be a pain… but it was also the perfect distraction. And the closest thing to normal he had left.

My life may never be normal as a whole, but if I can't even hold onto a tiny sliver of normality I might literally go insane.

“I don't want to go home,” he hissed through clenched teeth. “I want to stay here.”

“And what, fall asleep in the middle of some other unsuspecting teacher's class?” Nomura retorted, her arms crossed in front of her. “From what I gather, your ‘incident’ in my room wasn’t as extreme as others you've had; you would stay here and tempt fate rather than go home?”

“I'll get some caffeine or something, I'll be fine!”

“Jim, now is not the time to insist on being the hero,” his mom chided, her hand gently squeezing his shoulder. “You need rest.”

“But -”

“Listen to your mother, little Gynt. Arcadia Oaks High will still be standing when you're rested and ready to return,” Nomura promised. “Now go.”

Begrudgingly, he let his mom take him by the elbow and lead him out of the nurse’s office and down the hall, only partially aware of his movements. Thankfully the other students were either in class or at lunch, so there was no audience to witness his pitiful exit from the school. He and his
mom walked in complete silence until they made it out to her car; Barbara settled into the driver's seat after she deposited Jim’s backpack at his feet and made sure he was situated.

“So, kiddo, how about we swing by somewhere on the way home to grab some lunch?” she glanced over at him as she pulled out of her parking spot. “Maybe that Chinese takeout place around the corner?”

“I'm not hungry,” he pouted, leaning against the window.

He could practically hear his mom roll her eyes. “Well, I'm hungry. So either you can decide what you want to eat, or you'll be stuck with whatever I order.”

“Whatever.”

She sighed, and he felt the car stop before pulling out onto the main road. “Jim,” she started, her official Parental Voice of Lecturing coming out, “I know you're upset. I know you're hurting. And you have every right to be. But there are ways to express those feelings without an attitude like that.”

“I know, Mom! It's… it's just…” Jim felt something snap inside him. “I don't know what to fucking say or how to fucking say it! Everything is so fucking messed up, and I feel so confused and broken and scared and… and…” he trailed off in a fit of angry sobs.

“First of all, watch your language, mister,” she scolded sternly. But after that, her tone immediately softened, “But Jim, honey, that's okay. Honestly? I'd be extremely concerned if you’d come back all chipper as if nothing had happened and everything was sunshine and rainbows.” Making sure the car was put in park, she reached over to soothingly rub his shoulder. “I'm not expecting you to be happy or at peace or anything like that, not in the slightest. I just ask that you work on being patient with yourself and understanding towards those of us trying to help you. That's all.”

“I know… it's just…”

“Easier said than done?”

He nodded.

“Believe me, kiddo, I get it,” she sighed. Resigned that the sedan wasn't going anywhere anytime soon, she switched off the engine and turned in her seat. “When your father left, all those years ago… first I was heartbroken. As I grew more and more upset, I started wracking my brain trying to figure out what had gone wrong, what I had done to drive him away. I picked apart everything I thought was wrong with me - my horrible cooking, my long and crazy work hours, my unavailability to be intimate with him -”

“Mom, TMI.”

“The point is, I put all of the burden and all of the blame on myself. So I got frustrated, and I was angry pretty much all the time. It took me a while to let go of that anger and accept that there was nothing I could have done to change the outcome of my marriage. I eventually realized that you and I would be okay without him around, maybe even better off in the long run. In fact, I cherish that, because of our situation, the two of us have been very close as you've been growing up - and that's something I never want to go back and change. But back then, while I was still attempting to cling to the shattered pieces of my life, I ended up pushing away a lot of people who cared about me and tried to help and encourage me in my time of need - that, I regret. I know what happened between me and your father is by no means similar to what you've been through with the
Darklands, but... I don't want to see you make the same mistakes I did. Okay?"

“Yeah, okay,” he replied quietly. His mom had never talked much before about his dad leaving, especially not as emotionally in-depth as this. He wasn't quite sure what to make of it.

“So… lunch?” she asked.

“Still not hungry.”

“Somehow I find that hard to believe,” she half-teased as she started the car back up. “A large order of orange chicken it is, then, in case you change your mind. But there's no way I'm sharing my egg roll.”

He smiled weakly at her. Their conversation put him slightly at ease, but the tangled glob of emotions in his chest was still messing with his mind. As the car pulled away from the school, bits and pieces of the emotional glob tried to stand out from the rest: his rising frustration and anger from having to leave school - and his friends - in the middle of the day; a melancholic agitation wrapping itself around his insides, making his pulse unsteady and his breathing catch in the back of his throat. He was feeling the increasing urge to either punch a pillow or scream into one, growing desperate for any release of energy that might calm his nerves.

After swinging by the Chinese restaurant to pick up some food, the smell of the sweet and spicy sauce-drenched chicken filling the car caused his stomach to grumble the rest of the way home. Despite his stomach’s complaining, though, the mere idea of eating made him feel slightly nauseous. Which was ridiculous, really - although he wasn't literally starving anymore, parts of his ribcage were still more prominent than they normally should be (not counting the bruised and abused portion). His body should be wholeheartedly craving food, not warring over whether he should eat it or throw it back up. The more his stomach grumbled, the more he felt the need to flee from the source of the delectable smell. The agitation that had been creeping around in his chest was rapidly snowballing into a full-on panic.

Relief came when they finally pulled into their garage.

“So, kiddo, what do you say we… Jim?”

He was already scrambling out of the car before his mom had a chance to finish her sentence. Quickly stumbling into the house, Jim raced up the stairs as fast as he was able, dimly aware of his mother's concerned calls behind him. He shut himself inside his room, leaning against the back of the door while he caught his breath. He slid down along the wooden surface with each exhale, eventually finding himself seated on the floor, hugging his knees to his chest while his back pressed up against the door. His ribcage gave him a sharp reminder that it didn't appreciate that position, though Jim's lack of movement helped it quickly become mute, reducing his side to only occasionally complaining when he took a shuddering gasp.

Meanwhile, Jim's awareness of his surroundings evaporated. Maybe there were tears streaking down his face, or maybe it was just sweat. He might have heard his mom trying to speak to him from the other side of the door; or perhaps the distant, muddled noises he heard were the sounds of a TV or radio wafting in through the open window. Or maybe the noises were only his brain interpreting the rushing pulse in his ears, murmuring to him with every thud of his heart. The source of any of the stimuli would remain a mystery; any attempt on Jim’s part to focus on the environment around him brought a new wave of unprovoked and unnamed anxiety to clutch his twisted insides.

Somehow the amulet found its way into his hands; Jim's fingers wandered around the the raised
engravings around its circumference while he stared straight ahead at a nondescript blemish on the corner of his bed frame. Both actions served as a sort of anchor while he wrestled with the overwhelming blankness of his racing thoughts. A short eternity later, the frantic panic inside of him slowed down enough so that he could start to process his trepidations. They started as nebulous feelings: self-pity, fear, frustration, loneliness. Eventually, more coherent thoughts began associating themselves with those feelings.

What the hell is wrong with me?

First I can't make it through one day of school, then I can't even make it through a car ride home? Seriously, what the hell?

Some Trollhunter I've turned out to be.

I should be better than this. Stronger than this. I need to be stronger. Everyone is counting on me to keep them safe. Trollmarket. Arcadia. My friends and family. I'm supposed to be what protects them from Gunmar.

I can't do that if I can't even go twelve hours before having another mental breakdown.

I mean, come on, look at Nomura! It's like nothing even happened to her!

So why did I get so fucking messed up?

Overcome with frustration, he chucked the amulet across his room and watched it skid under his bed. Embedded in the shadows, its pulsing blue glow taunted him. Tears blurred Jim's vision as he watched it, unable to look away.

They deserve better than me. They all do.

Everyone would be better off without me. They should have a different Trollhunter. A better Trollhunter.

The amulet made a mistake.

Jim could feel the surge of tears approaching, unable to hold them back despite the many ways he tried contorting his face. With the tears came the urge to wail and yell, to cry out to the heavens, the Earth, and all that lay below in hopes that something would hear him and put him out of his misery. But when he opened his mouth, his pleas came out as silent screams. Shoulders wracked with sobs, he squeezed his eyes shut as tears streamed down his face and dripped onto the front of his sweater. His soundless cries were interspersed with the sound of aggressive sniffing, a signal of his attempts to keep the snot running out of his nose from joining his tears in their downward journey.

Jim caught glimpses of the amulet's glow throughout his ugly crying, the magical artifact keeping vigil from across the room. He curled in on himself as much as humanly possible, shifting the landing zone of his tears from his sweater to his knees. The last time he'd felt this small, there had been a horde of Gumm-Gumms surrounding him. And although his current environment was drastically different now, the aching loneliness and distress consuming him felt the same.

Why me?
whoops, i think i broke jim again

Hoo boy, this chapter ended up longer than I expected. Not sure if this is going to become a pattern or not. Also, bit of a disclaimer, I'm going to be kind of busy the next week or so, so it might take longer than usual for the next update. Then again, I'll have some time to kill on some plane rides, so we shall see. also, the blood goblins are coming soon, muahaha

Also also, in case you hadn't noticed, Jim's thoughts are definitely taking a turn for the worse, and I most definitely have some Horribly Angsty Things in store for him still (interspersed with fluffy feel-better moments) - *if any of y'all need me to put warnings in the notes at the beginning of the chapters, please let me know what to be on the lookout for so I can try my best to be accommodating*. Feel free to let me know in the comments or drop a message in my inbox or something.
Chapter 17

Chapter Summary

“I already got sent home from school today,” Jim pleaded softly, “Please don't send me home from Trollhunter duties, too.”

When Jim's friends tell him there's a goblin situation afoot, the last thing he wants to do is stay home, even though the boy is in no shape to fight yet but whatever.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

“TP, we’ve been here ten whole minutes and you still haven’t touched your pudding cup,” Claire stated. She sat across the table from Toby, using one hand to prop up her head while the other chased mushy peas around her tray with a plastic spoon. At least it wasn’t Chicken Surprise.

“What if I was planning on saving it for later??”

“You and I both know that’s a lie,” Claire teased half-heartedly. Dropping her spoon amidst her uneaten vegetables, she sighed and pushed her tray to the side. “Do you think Jim is okay?”

Toby picked at the corner of the lid. “In a broad sense of the term, probably. Though I'd bet my allowance that he's super frustrated and moody right now.”

“That’s not much of a bet - he's been moody and frustrated ever since he got back.”

Toby finally peeled back the lid of the pudding cup, licking off the small bit of chocolate goo stuck to the other side. “I guess. But being sent home in the middle of the day, especially the first day of school? That’s really gotta suck.”

Claire picked her spoon back up and started pushing the peas into a small pile. “This is all my fault,” she sighed. “If I hadn't been so determined to get my little brother back, Jim would have never gotten the idea to go into the Darklands alone.”

“Come on, Claire, don't say that. Jim would have gone in eventually anyway, whether it was for Enrique, some other baby, or,” Tony suddenly dropped his voice, as if his words might summon the evil he spoke of, “to face Gunmar.” He shuddered, scooping out some of the pudding with his finger rather than using utensils. “Let's be real, it's the kind of guy Jim is.”

“I know. But he shouldn't have to miss out on being a teenager because of it.”

Toby stopped mid-lick to grimace at the discolored green slop on Claire's tray. “Right now, I don't think he's really missing out on much.”

“Not unless his mom decided to make him lunch when they got home,” she responded, the corner of her lips twitching upward.

“In that case, we might have to stage a rescue mission after gym class.” The two friends broke into a small fit of giggles, lifting the weight of their somber mood.
Toby waited until he'd polished off his pudding before speaking again. “He's going to be okay, Claire. Jim’s my oldest friend. I've seen him go through all sorts of shit before, he'll make it through this, too.”

“Including over six months of continuous physical and mental trauma?”

“Well, um, no. But that just means it’ll take him a while to get back into the swing of things. Probably a few weeks, maybe even a few months. Who knows? After all, it's only been a few days since we got him back.”

“It feels like it’s been longer than a few days,” Claire frowned.

“Hey, I don't make up the rules on how time works.”

“Oh really, you don’t?” came a voice from behind Claire. “Is that why you didn't have any time for me this past weekend?”

“Darci!” Toby exclaimed, hurriedly wiping his hands on a napkin. “You know that's not true! Jim was -”

“I know, I know,” the girl said with a smile, sitting down beside Claire. “You were helping bring Jim home from the hospital, I get it. How's he doing, by the way? I heard from Mary that you had to take him to the nurse's office before lunch.”

“He, uh, fell asleep during class and had a panic attack,” Claire explained. It was mostly the truth.

“Wow, that disease he caught really did a number on him, huh? Poor guy…” Darci trailed off. She shifted in her seat to face Claire more directly. “How have you been handling all this?”

“I’m fine, but it's definitely been very… trying.” Claire sighed.

“So now that he's been cured, are you two finally…?”

“Oh, um, we’re not… I don’t know…”

Darci smirked as she raised an eyebrow at her. “Really, Claire? Mary told me you and Jim were getting pretty cozy during chemistry.”

_Was there any gossip that Mary didn't know?_

“I mean… Jim's got enough on his plate right now, I don't want to stress him out over any sort of… relationship stuff. For now, I'm just trying to be there when he needs me.”

“Mmmhhmm. Sure. You keep telling yourself that,” Darci teased, standing up to walk around to Toby’s side of the table. “So, TP, ready to head to gym class?”

“Never,” Toby groaned, rolling his eyes. “But I'll gladly follow you anywhere, my sweet. Whether it's to the ends of the Earth or gym class.”

“Cute, but a little much, TP.”

“Oh.” Toby’s crestfallen look earned him a brief kiss on the nose from Darci.

“But still appreciated,” she concluded, flashing him a warm smile. Toby's face immediately lit up. “You coming, Claire?”
“Sure, just a sec. I want to text Jim real quick.” Ignoring the playful glances from her friends, Claire took out her phone and composed her brief message:

{hope you're getting some rest. school’s pretty boring, looking forward to seeing you later}

She doubted she’d get a response back, at least not in a timely manner, but hopefully it would help put him in better spirits when he saw it. Maybe.

At some point during the afternoon, Jim had transitioned from sitting in front of his door to full-out laying against it, morphing into a sort of pathetic human doorstop. His head rested on the hardwood floor as he curled in on himself; it was the perfect vantage point for staring blankly at the steady glow of his amulet where it still lay under his bed.

By this point, most of the negative, self-doubting thoughts had worked their way out of his system, leaving him mentally numb and physically exhausted. Jim almost felt like taking a nap, but he didn't have enough energy to get up, take some of the sleeping draught, and drag himself over to the bed. So instead he opted to continue staring at the amulet, timing the rhythm of his breathing to its slow, blue pulse. Not that he couldn't fall asleep right there on the floor. But he had enough of his wits about him to realize there was no scenario where that possibly ended well, not without at least attempting to lower his chances of having yet another nightmare.

Jim's phone vibrated in his pocket. It was maybe the fourth or fifth time he'd felt it going off since getting home; he hadn't really been keeping track, and there were probably a couple times he’d failed to notice it during the height of his distress. He was tempted to leave it be and let his notifications continue to accumulate, but when his phone immediately buzzed again his curiosity grew strong enough to overcome the numbness weighing him down. Shifting slightly to access his pocket, Jim pulled out the device, unlocked it, and let it rest on the floor in front of his face. 

Shit, it's already two o’clock?

Jim started scrolling through his notifications; a couple were from Toby, but most were text messages from Claire. All were variations on the same sentiment - 'hope you're getting rest’, 'hope you feel better soon’, 'don’t worry, school is super boring and you're literally not missing anything’. Someone should turn that last one into a Hallmark card.

The most recent messages, however, were sent through their trio's group text. First, from Toby, followed mere moments later by Claire:

[blinky just texted us, some sort of goblin trouble. meeting in trollmarket asap.]

{NOT asap, AFTER school. you're not getting out of health class that easily TP}

Goblin troubles? Did some from the museum infestation survive? But why would they resurface now? What could it mean?

But why didn't Blinky text me? Do they not want me there? Does he think I can't handle a few goblins?

… But he'd be right, though. I can't make it through one whole day of school - shit, I can't even get up and down stairs that well - so what good would I be against goblins?

A new wave of despair started washing over Jim right before he saw a new message pop up on the screen:
Jim, we can come over to your place after school so we can all warp to trollmarket

He took a breath and tried to recenter himself. His friends wanted him to come. Even though he'd probably just get in the way. Or slow them down. Probably both. But maybe it would just be a recon mission to find where the goblins are nesting. He could handle being stealthy, right? And he could definitely handle a briefing at Trollmarket; at least then he'd be in the know, whether or not he actually participated.

{Jim? you up for it?}

[sure. count me in]

[omg, he lives!!]

{hush TP. you're supposed to be paying attention in class}

[so are you!]

{but i’m better at multitasking. Jim, we'll see you in about an hour}

Jim couldn't help but smile, imagining his friends sitting on opposite sides of a classroom and making faces at each other while they bickered via text.

Man, I wish I was there…

At least he was in the same dimension as them; not completely satisfying, but a step in the right direction. That would have to be good enough for now. If he kept telling himself that, maybe eventually he'd believe it.

Feeling some of his strength return, Jim scooted across the floor so he could retrieve the amulet. Rolling onto his stomach, he ignored the pain in his side and reached under his bed, groping around until his fingers found the familiar, cold, metal disk. He pulled it out from under the bed and blew away a couple of dust bunnies that had gotten stuck on the clock-like arms. Lifting himself up onto his forearms, Jim glared down at the amulet grasped between his hands.

“You’ve sure caused me a lot of trouble. I hope you know that.”

The amulet gave no response. As is typical of inanimate objects - even the enchanted kind.

“Aaaand now I’m talking to a hunk of magic metal. Cool.” With some effort, Jim pushed himself back into an upright position. He leaned against the leg of his bed, staring at the closed door while he twisted the amulet in his grip. He sat like that for a while as he succumbed to his present identity: a tired, hollow shell with a tenuous grasp on reality.

A low grumbling in his stomach called him back to reality, though, and reminded him he still hadn’t eaten lunch yet. He warred with himself for a few moments, trying to decide if his hunger was strong enough to overcome his exhaustion. Eventually the emptiness of his stomach won out, prompting him to slide the amulet back into his pocket while he slowly got to his feet, using the side of the bed for leverage.

As he regained his balance, Jim took a moment to steal a glance at himself in the mirror on the opposite wall. His face was still blotchy from crying, the red patches a sharp contrast to the pale scar cleaving his features. Dark circles hung under his eyes, and the gauntness in his cheeks, though significantly diminished from a few days ago, served as an outward reminder of his lingering malnourishment.
God, I look like hell.

Carefully making his way out of his room and down the stairs, he half expected his mom would be waiting to pounce on him the moment he reached the ground floor. Instead he found her sitting calmly in the dining room, pouring over some stacks of papers sprawled out across half the table. She didn't even notice his presence until the bottom step creaked from his weight.

“Jim, honey, is that you?” she called out, still focusing on the papers scattered in front of her.

“Yeah, Mom,” he croaked back, his voice hoarse from his afternoon self-pity party.

“I'm assuming you're hungry. Leftovers are in the fridge.”

“Thanks.” Jim shuffled over to the kitchen, quickly finding the box of leftover orange chicken. He eagerly emptied its contents onto a microwavable plate. While his main course reheated, Jim poured himself a glass of water and started slowly drinking it, feeling a little bit of his humanity return with each sip. After the microwave beeped, announcing his food was ready, he pulled a fork out of the utensil drawer and carried his late lunch into the dining area.

He sat down across from his mom, peering cautiously at the papers scattered across her side of the table that were somehow monopolizing her attention. Curious, but becoming more ravenous with each passing second that he smelled the reheated Chinese takeout, Jim waited until he'd scarfed down a third of his plate before he dared to break the silence.

“So,” he started after swallowing a mouthful of rice, “what's all this?” He gestured with his fork, accidentally flinging a few grains of rice onto one of the nearest stacks.

Without breaking her concentration, she quickly brushed the rice away and finished scribbling some notes in the margins. “Research,” she replied.

“Research about…?”

She looked up at him over the top of her glasses and raised an eyebrow. “Promise not to freak out?”

“No, but I’ll try.”

She considered him for a moment before continuing. “Well, over here,” she tapped a packet of papers off to the side with her pencil, “is a list of every therapist and psychiatrist within a 20 mile radius. I've gone through and marked the ones that have been recommended for patients with PTSD, sleep disorders, anxiety, depression -”

“Mom!” Jim exclaimed in frustration, his fork clattering onto the table. “Can’t we wait until after I've eaten to talk about how screwed up I am? And I already told you, I don't want to talk to anybody!”

“Jim,” she said patiently, “please, just keep an open mind. I'm not forcing you to do anything, merely presenting some of the options available to you.”

“Cool. I don't want those options.”

“And that's fine. Just know that the list is here if you ever change your mind.”

Jim sat back in his chair and crossed his arms. “So what's the rest of your research, then?”

“I figured you still wouldn't be keen on going to see anyone. So I decided to read up on some of the
theories and methodologies myself, and look over some case studies, and… well, it's by no means
my area of expertise, but I thought that maybe you’d be more comfortable… you know, talking to
me. Because of all the magical troll stuff.”

Ordinarily he'd be touched - his mom was going completely out of her way to try to help him
through this mess. But the idea of trying to talk through everything with her, the mere thought of
revealing the horrors he endured in the Darklands to his mom… if she ever found out the details of
his suffering at the hands of Gunmar, it would surely break her heart. He'd go to a hundred
therapists before letting that happen.

“Mom,” he sighed, “I… I appreciate that, but… I can't. I can't do that.”

Barbara Lake tried to disguise her disappointment by suddenly becoming extremely invested in
straightening the stack of papers directly in front of her. “Oh. Well… think about it, okay?”

“I will,” he promised. “I just need some time to, I dunno, figure out what's going on first. Sort out
the parts of me that are maybe actually recovering and which parts are outright effed-up.”

“Alright… it’s just… I can’t stand seeing you like this, Jim.” He thought he spied tears threatening
to spill out of his mom’s eyes.

“Trust me, I’m not much of a fan, either,” he chuckled self-deprecatingly.

“Not funny,” she sniffed. “What kind of doctor am I, what kind of mother am I, that I can't even
take care of my own son?”

“You're a great mom,” he reassured her, reaching across the table to place his hand on top of hers.
“ I'm the one who keeps screwing everything up. I promise, in a week or two we can check out
someone on that list. I may not want to, but if you think that's what's best for me then I should at
least give it a shot.”

“Really? You sure?”

“Yeah.”

They smiled at each other across the table, sharing a brief moment of tenderness before Jim
resumed stuffing orange chicken into his mouth.

No sooner had Jim shoved the last of his food into his mouth than a portal opened up in the
entryway. Toby and Claire stumbled through the rift in space, quickly setting their backpacks
down by the stairs and making their way over to the table.

“Jimbo! Good, you're up!” Toby cheered, plopping into one of the chairs next to Jim.

Claire settled into the chair on the other side of Jim. Gently, she placed her hand on his shoulder.
“Feeling any better? Did you get a chance to take a nap or anything?”

“Um, not exactly,” he answered, earning himself a concerned eyebrow furrow from his mom.
Silently, Dr. Lake stacked up all her papers before taking Jim’s empty plate to the kitchen, leaving
him alone with his friends.

“Oh,” Claire breathed. She lightly squeezed his shoulder before running her hand down his arm,
twisting her fingers in his once she reached his hand. He gave her hand a quick squeeze in
return, watching while her thumb began tracing circles on the back of his hand. He suddenly had
the urge to bury himself in her arms, to let her hold him and soothe away his nerves while
muttering sweet nothings in his ear. But now wasn't the time nor place for that - there were goblins on the loose.

“So,” Toby cleared his throat, causing the pair of them to look his way with a start, “Are you up for this? ’Cause if you need to stay here and rest some more, we totally get it. I'm sure Claire and I can bash some goblin butt on our own. Well, with Blinky and AAARRRGHHH!!!'s help, but -”

“Hold up, goblins?” his mom interjected from the kitchen. “Jim, by no means are you in fighting shape yet!”

“No worries, Mom, we don't know that there will be any fighting yet,” he called over his shoulder at her, glaring at his loud-mouthed friend in the process. “We were just going to head to Trollmarket to get more information. Maybe do a stakeout or something.”

“Well, if that's all…” Dr. Lake paused her dishwashing to bite her lower lip. “But you'd better not do anything to aggravate your side again. And don't stay out too late - you seriously should try to get to bed early tonight.”

“Wait, you're not going to tell me to stay here?”

“I mean, I could, but it wouldn't really do any good, would it? You're the Trollhunter. And I know you. You won't be able to rest while you're worried about your friends and the goblins, so who am I to keep you here? Just... promise me you'll be careful, alright?”

“Sure, of course, Mom,” he smiled weakly, relieved he wouldn't have to try and sneak out of the house.

“Huh, that was easy.” Toby commented as he stood up. Jim and Claire followed suit, still holding hands. “Let's move this party to Trollmarket, then!”

“To Trollmarket,” Claire nodded, smiling up at Jim. She pulled the Shadow Staff out of her purse and held it out to extend it to its full length.

“Oh, before I forget,” Jim's mom interrupted, “Jim, your new history teacher was going to stop by later this evening for some tea. Miss…”

“Nomura,” all three of them responded.

“Right, Miss Nomura. Anyway, I think she wanted to talk to me about… well, you. And the Darklands. But... I thought you were the only human to go in that place? Not counting when Claire and Toby rescued you, that is.”

“Oh. Uh. That's... still true,” Jim said, dancing around his mother's implied question. “Nomura is... well, I'll let her tell you.” He didn't feel like explaining - well, re-explaining - the concept of Changelings to her at the moment. Surely that was something Nomura could handle.

“Should I be concerned?” his mom’s eyebrows furrowed in concern.

“No,” Jim quickly replied, despite the wary expressions of his friends. “I trust her. Completely. And with any luck, I'll be back from Trollmarket in time to join you for tea.”

“Well, alright then,” she smiled, waving the trio off. “Stay safe!”

“Will do, Dr. L!” Toby responded. He turned to Claire, “Portal time?”
“Portal time,” she agreed, opening up a gateway to Trollmarket.

The intrepid trio stepped through the portal, finding themselves in Blinky's library. AAARRRGH!!! was lifting Blinky up so that the multi-armed troll could more easily reorganize the top shelf of one of his bookcases.

“Ah, Tobias, Claire, just in time!” Blinky started without turning around, hearing the slight whooshing pop from the closing of the portal and taking that as his signal that he had company. “I do apologize for interrupting your school day earlier, but it seems we have quite the situati-aaaah, Master Jim!” Blinky exclaimed once he laid eyes on Jim. “You should be resting at your domicile!”

“C’mon, Blinky, you don't expect me to rest while there are goblins out and about, do you?”

“No. But I must admit, I did not expect you to have knowledge of the goblins in the first place,” Blinky frowned at Toby and Claire.

Claire crossed her arms in front of her chest. “Like we weren't going to tell him.”

Blinky sighed. “Of course. I would expect nothing less. Though I wish you had not brought Master Jim to Trollmarket at the moment, the Tribunal -”

“Has been eagerly waiting to talk with the Trollhunter,” came a voice from the entrance of the library. In stepped a troll with similar markings as AAARRRGH!!! and an elaborate collar of feather-like leaf-things adorning her cloak. Jim tried to remember the troll’s name, vaguely remembering meeting her once before. Before he had gone to the Darklands.

“Queen Usurna, how… delightful for your presence to grace my humble library,” Blinky forced a smile.

Right. Queen Usurna. Something about the way she looked at him gave Jim the heebie-jeebies.

“Enough of the meaningless pleasantries, Blinkous,” she retorted. “The Trollhunter must be held accountable for his reckless actions.” Usurna narrowed her eyes at Jim.

“The Trollhunter was just leaving, actually,” Blinky stated, repositioning himself so that he could partially shield Jim behind him. “As you can see, he is still recovering from his long and arduous stay in the Darklands, and must return to his human dwelling post-haste. But he humbly throws himself at the mercy of the Tribunal and whatever ruling they deem just and necessary.”

“Um, I do?” Jim muttered to Blinky.

“You do,” he insisted under his breath as another figure entered the library. The knot that had been forming in Jim's chest eased up slightly when he saw the leader of Trollmarket round the corner.

“Fortunately, the Tribunal has already reached a decision,” Vendel announced, glancing sideways at Usurna as he walked up beside her, “and, by the narrowest of margins, has agreed to drop all charges against the Trollhunter in exchange for his full cooperation from this point forward.”

“Hold up, charges ?” Jim asked.

“Opening Killahhead Bridge. Abandoning your duties as Trollhunter for over six months while you frolicked in the Darklands. Endangering the safety of troll- and human-kind alike, risking the release of Gunmar the Black and his Gumm-Gumm hordes, all for the sake of rescuing a single child,” Usurna listed. “Need I continue?”
Vendel noticed the growing distress in Jim's expression. “But again, all charges have been dropped,” he repeated, frowning at Usurna.

Jim swallowed the lump in his throat as Usurna closed the distance between them. She pointed at him in disdain. “You are lucky, Trollhunter. If any evil had been unleashed unto this world because of your actions, the blood would have been on your hands,” she emphasized her sentence by poking Jim’s chest. He tried not to cringe when the force of her finger, though relatively slight, was enough to cause his cracked ribs to twinge.

Turning to leave the library, Usurna asked, “You are certain nothing followed you on your return?”

“Draal never left his post guarding the bridge!” Blinky declared, Claire and Toby nodding silently at Jim’s side.

“Hmpf. Very well then,” Usurna huffed. “We shall continue this conversation at a later date. In the meantime, I suggest your human Trollhunter returns home to rest. He certainly looks… worse for the wear.” She gave Jim a once-over, pointedly eyeing the scar spanning his face, before exiting Blinky's library.

“Wish Usurna would go home,” AAARRRGHH!!! grunted after she was out of earshot.

“I am afraid, my friend, that Usurna and the Krubera will not be leaving Trollmarket anytime soon,” Vendel sighed. “She feels their presence is necessary in light of recent events. And my apparently questionable judgement.” He brandished his makeshift staff, knocking over a bauble from an adjacent shelf. “Whoops. Speaking of such, have you had any progress tracking down the culprit who stole my staff?”

“Not yet,” Blinky responded, “though we shall not rest until the perpetrator is brought to justice!”

Vendel gave the group a sideways glance to end all sideways glances. “Yes. Of course... No matter, there are more pressing issues at the moment, such as the goblin mess one of our trolls discovered on a salvage run. The one I notified you about earlier, Blinkous.”

“Indeed, the goblins! I was about to debrief the young Claire and Tobias on the matter.”

“And me,” Jim added defiantly. “I'm coming, too.”

“Do you think that is wise, Trollhunter?” Vendel challenged. “Surely you are in no condition to fight.”

“I know. But I can at least help with investigating.” He received five pairs of concerned glances from the trolls in the room; Toby and Claire remained by his side in solidarity.

“Master Jim, I implore you to return home. If the situation were to escalate unexpectedly, I fear what further injuries you might sustain.”

“I already got sent home from school today,” Jim pleaded softly, “Please don't send me home from Trollhunter duties, too.”

“If it gets too rough I can warp Jim home right away with my staff,” Claire interjected, protectively placing a hand against Jim’s bicep. “This could be good for Jim, and for us - a nice, small mission to help us all get back into the swing of things.”

“And we need Jim!” Toby added. “Gnome infestations are one thing, but goblins? That's serious stuff, even for just a scouting mission. We’ll need all hands on deck.”
Jim doubted they actually needed him - how useful is a Trollhunter who probably can't even swing his sword right now? - but the fact that his friends were so insistent on including him warmed his heart.

“But -” Blinky began to protest before he was cut off by Vendel.

“Very well. But do be careful,” the leader of Trollmarket made eye contact with Jim, giving him a concerned look. “Your time spent in the Darklands may still affect you in ways you do not yet know.”

Jim automatically lifted his hand to his cheek, feeling the groove in his skin.

“All the more reason why Master Jim should not accompany us!” Blinky insisted, oblivious to the nervous expression on Jim's face. “He requires rest and a controlled environment in which to regain his strength! He does not need to be running after goblins!”

“I'll be fine, Blinky!” Jim turned to plead with the troll. “As Claire said, if I can't handle it she'll take me home.”

“But what if -”

“Enough!” Vendel shouted over everyone. “The longer you argue, the more you allow the trail to grow cold. Just go already!”

Somewhat disgruntled, their party moved to the other side of the library, repositioning themselves so that Claire would have enough room to summon a portal.

“Bad feeling about this,” AAARRRGGHH!!! grumbled as the rift in space opened before them.

“I concur,” Blinky muttered under his breath.

Chapter End Notes

ugh, setting up plot is so much work. but the next couple of chapters are gonna be FUN ;)

Again, I've got another couple busy weeks coming up in the Real World, so it might be a hot minute before the next update. We shall see. and holy crap season 3 is coming out in like 20 days and i am SO not ready
Chapter 18

Chapter Summary

"White? But the only place you can find white goblins is -"
"The Darklands."

A familiar scene behind the Arcadia Cinema takes an unexpected turn. this is an angst au, after all, and i must live up to my reputation as a beautiful angst god

Chapter Notes

**Warning - minor character death ahead**
(still trying to keep the rating 'T', so it's not overly graphic or anything. But... it's there.)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Jim peered around the corner of a building, surveying the alleyway behind the Arcadia cinema. “Alright, looks like the coast is clear.”

He waved his friends on to the empty crime scene, clutching the amulet in one hand as he leaned against the brick wall. He caught his breath while he let the others go on ahead, trying to calm the frantic beating of his heart that had ramped up for absolutely no good reason at all.

Toby looked back at Jim after passing by, picking up on his friend’s hesitation. “Jimbo, you okay?”

“Yeah, I’m… I’m fine,” he wheezed, willing the invisible hands squeezing and twisting his insides to fade back into whatever shadow they had clawed out of. It’s just a recon mission. Just some pesky goblins. You’re fine, Jim, just calm down. Breathe.

“You sure?” Toby raised an eyebrow in disbelief. “You’re looking kinda pale.”

“Duh, I haven’t gotten any sun for, like, six months.”

“Not what I meant. Seriously, if you need to go home -”

“I’m fine, Tobes. Just… working on getting my mojo back, that’s all.”

Toby threw him a deadpan stare. “Did you just say mojo ?”

“Uh…” Jim grinned nervously as he rubbed the back of his neck.

“No. Just… no. It’s official, I’m getting you a book on slang terms for Christmas.”

“That’s a thing?”
“I’m sure it is if I scour the internet long enough. Do not question my online shopping abilities, young Jim.”

“Never would dream of it, Tobes.” He exchanged a smile with his best friend, jumping a little when he heard the sudden clang of a dumpster lid being flung open.

Toby whirled around, mustering up the loudest whisper he could manage, “Wingman! We're supposed to be stealthy!”

“Sorry,” AAARRRGGHH!!! muttered as Jim and Toby approached. “Strong goblin smell,” the large troll pointed at the inside of the dumpster.

“And if any of the vile creatures were within earshot, they would have surely heard us,” Blinky crossed his arms in mild disapproval. “We seem to have been fortunate this time around, but do employ more caution in the future.”

AAARRRGGHH!!! shrugged in apology as he reached into the dumpster. Triumphanty, he pulled out a small, brown glob of -

“Ew, is that…?” Claire asked apprehensively, unable to completely finish her sentence.

“Poop,” AAARRRGGHH!!! grunted, sniffing his findings. Seemingly satisfied, he popped it into his mouth.

“Double-ew,” Claire cringed. Even Blinky made a disgusted face while AAARRRGGHH!!! contemplated his findings.

“Mmm… tastes like cat.” AAARRRGGHH!!! rummaged deeper in the dumpster until he pulled out a small, pink collar with a jingle bell attached. He licked it before continuing his analysis. “Not cat,” he glanced at Blinky in concern, his eyes widening, “Blood goblins.”

Blinky immediately gasped.

“Blood goblins?” Toby asked, abandoning his attempt to keep his voice down. “Wait, are those the blue ones, or the green ones?”

"Neither,” Blinky began, a worried tone creeping into his voice. “Contrary to their name, blood goblins are pure white.”

Jim’s blood ran cold, his heart seeming to stop in his chest. Memories flickered before him, memories of spindly, white hands poking and prodding him while he lay curled up on an unforgiving stone floor.

No… No, that can’t be…

“White?” Claire’s eyes went wide. “But the only place you can find white goblins is…”

“The Darklands,” Jim finished, his voice hushed. He immediately sought out a nearby crate to sit on, feeling his legs completely turn to jello beneath him. It was as if all the wind had been sucked right out of him, leaving only a cold, sickening feeling in the pit of his stomach. He grasped the rough, wooden edges of the crate, desperately hoping to maintain his grip on reality; but he could already feel the darkness settling over him like a familiar cloud.

Red eyes leered at him from all sides; thin, sneering mouths babbled their foreign curses at him. They lurked in the shadows, eagerly waiting for the guards to finish tossing him into his cell so that
they could enact their own twisted fun. He was, after all, the one human that had managed to sneak past them to steal a baby away from their nursery; oh, they would keep him alive as Gunmar instructed, but Jim feared he would pay dearly for his transgressions nonetheless.

A soft touch on the back of his hand brought him back to the present. “Jim?” When he opened his eyes, he found Claire kneeling on the ground in front of him, her features wracked with concern. “Jim, talk to us. Please.”

He took a shaky deep breath. “If… if they could get out, what if… what if Gunmar—”

“Nay, impossible,” Blinky cut him off, walking over to place a reassuring hand on Jim's shoulder. “If Gunmar had gotten out, we would know. There would be chaos around every corner, death and destruction on every doorstep. No… we would know.”

“There's gotta be another explanation. Maybe there's another Fetch or something,” Toby reasoned.

“Maybe,” Jim muttered, trying not to let his pessimism sound too obvious.

“We can worry about how the little poopers got here later,” Claire started, giving Jim's hand a small squeeze, “Right now, we need to figure out how to find these things before they cause any more trouble.”

“We don't find them, they find us,” Jim stated. “Once they're on your scent, you can't shake 'em. Believe me, I've tried.” He squeezed his eyes shut when a new pit of realization hit his gut. “Shit, they're gonna be coming after me.”

“Then why aren't they here now?” Toby asked.

Before Jim had a chance to respond, AAARRRGHH!!! pulled out something else from the dumpster. “Not good,” the troll said in alarm.

Everyone turned their attention to the pink plastic toy AAARRRGHH!!! was holding up. The doll’s limbs had been popped out of their sockets before its previous owner had discarded it.

Toby raised an eyebrow. “I mean, that's a crime against Sally Go-back dolls everywhere, but that's not really relevant to our current situation, Wingman.”

“Yes it is,” AAARRRGHH!!! insisted. “Your doll. Smells like Nana's cats.”

“Oh no,” Toby breathed as he rushed up to the dumpster, “Oh no oh no oh no oh no oh no oh no no no no…” He stood on his tiptoes, unsuccessfully attempting to get a look inside the dumpster. “AAARRRGHH!!!, is there anything else in there? What if they ate my Nana's cats? Oh god, what if they ate Nana?”

“Relax, TP, I'm sure your Nana is fine,” she said calmly, leaving Jim to stand at Toby's side. “For someone who's legally blind, she's pretty scrappy. She'd probably mistake them for some stray cats and try to feed them.”

“But this still means the demon goblins were in my house!” he responded, frantically waving at what was left of the Sally Go-back doll. “If anything happened to Nana…”

“We’ll go check on her the second we’re done here, okay?” Claire placed her hand on Toby’s arm in reassurance. “Any other clues in there, big guy?”

Jim watched, still seated on the nearby crate, as AAARRRGHH!!! continued to rummage around
inside the dumpster.

*Blood goblins in Arcadia. Blood goblins at Toby's house. Merlin's beard, can things get any worse?*

“More not good,” AAARRRGHHH!!'s voice echoed from within the dumpster.

*Shit.*

The large troll straightened up, holding aloft a tattered piece of red fabric. Blinky's, Toby's, and Claire's faces all fell at the sight, but Jim couldn't quite make out why from where he was sitting.

“Guys, I can't see. What is it?” he called to them.

“Gnome,” AAARRRGHHH!!! grunted.

“Or, at least, what was once the hat of said gnome,” Blinky clarified. AAARRRGHHH!!! dropped the red hat into Toby's outstretched hands.

“They… the goblins got Gnome Chompsky?” Toby’s voice cracked. “The little guy survives the Darklands, only to meet his end in a back alley dumpster…”

“We don't know that,” Claire tried to reason, “He could have just lost his hat. He might still be out there.”

AAARRRGHHH!!! sniffed the raggedy hat, sniffed the air a few times, then turned his attention back to the dumpster. “No… trail ends here.”

Blinky walked up next to AAARRRGHHH!!!, peering around him to take a look inside the dumpster. “Perhaps the little vermin got stuck - Oh. Oh dear. AAARRRGHHH!!!, my friend, do replace the lid of this infernal trash receptacle. No need for the children to see such a sight.”

“Wait, what's in there?” Toby started, moving as if to try and look inside the dumpster, “Is it Chompsky? What happened?” Claire held Toby back as AAARRRGHHH!!! swung the lid of the dumpster shut.

“Indeed, 'twas the gnome. Part of him, anyway,” Blinky stated, “I fear he did not survive his encounter with the blood goblins.”

“No…” Toby started sobbing softly, clutching the piece of fabric in his hands. Claire wrapped an arm around his back, trying to soothe the newest distressed member of their party.

A numb feeling wrapped around Jim's chest, weighing down his heart and his spirits.

*Gnome Chompsky… gone?*

*This wasn't supposed to happen. None of this was supposed to happen.*

Jim covered his face with his hands. “This is all my fault,” he muttered.

“Damn right, it is,” Toby growled through his tears.

“Whoa there, TP,” Claire cautioned. Her arm still on Toby’s back, now partially restraining in addition to consoleing, she turned to Jim, “Don't say that, Jim, it's not your fault.”

“Yes, it is. If I hadn't failed in the Darklands -”
“Failed? Ha!” Toby chuckled darkly, “Your first failure was going in there in the first place!”

Hearing those words come out of his best friend’s mouth, especially in that tone, was like a sucker punch to Jim's gut.

“Toby, now's not the time for this,” Claire protested as Toby brushed her away. “Remember what Blinky said -”

“I know what Blinky said. But this whole ‘healing’ thing is a multi-lane street, and it's about time I had my turn in the rant-mobile.”

“Oh, you’ve got something to say?” Jim got to his feet as he felt his annoyance level irrationally rising. “Then let's hear it.”

“Yeah? Well, you know what? You should have never, ever gone into the Darklands without us. Worst decision you've ever made, and I've seen you make some pretty shitty decisions over the years.” Toby started pacing towards Jim, leaving Claire and the two trolls stunned in shock.

“You know I did that to protect you! All of you!”

“Yeah, and look how great that's turned out so far!” Toby waved the torn gnome hat in Jim's face. “Jim, we trained together. We found the amulet together. We all have a stake in this game, whether you like it or not. You’re not the only one trying to protect the people you love and care about. You should have let us come with you!”

“And let you get tortured by Gunmar, too? Hell no!”

“You don't know that!” Toby's voice kept getting louder. “We’re stronger together, we could have helped you! Maybe even gotten in and out with Enrique before Gunmar ever realized we were there!”

“Or we could have all been captured! And Gunmar would have used you guys to get to me.”

“We're tough! We would have gotten through it together!”

“No, you wouldn't have, not without armor! Not the shit I went through!”

“Yeah?! Like what?”

“Hmmmm, gee, where to start? How about being a literal human punching bag for hundreds of soldiers? Ooh, or constantly being thrown around like a rag doll, that was fun!” Jim was vaguely aware of tears building in the corners of his eyes as he continued. “Getting chained up all the time, put in painfully uncomfortable positions, getting poked, prodded, kicked, and slapped, feeling like your dignity is being utterly stripped away, even as you're forced to keep fighting for your life, and oh yeah, how about having Gunmar get inside your head, both figuratively and literally?!” Jim gestured to his scar, practically shouting at his best friend.

Toby's face immediately fell. “Oh shit. Jim…”

“If you guys had been there… I only survived because Gunmar didn't want me dead. Not yet.” Jim's tears were flowing freely now as he started to choke on his words. “But you… I… I can take a beating, but I couldn't take losing one of you. Not again. But… now Chompsky…”

Toby closed the gap between them and embraced Jim. “Oh god, Jim, I’m so sorry.” He let Jim sob into his shoulder for a while until he spoke again. “I'm sorry I yelled. I… I was being insensitive. I
had no idea... It's just all so frustrating, you know? But you need to realize we're all in this together - we're all in danger together, Chompsky is proof of that - so you gotta keep us in the loop, man. Whatever happens is gonna happen, and I think I speak for all of us when I say I'd much rather face whatever that's gonna be head-on, as a team. Got it?"

Jim weakly nodded as he pulled away from Toby's embrace. It wasn't long before the other three walked over to them, looking at Jim with a mix of pity and concern. He hated it, but didn't have enough energy left to tell them off for it.

“Master Jim,” Blinky started, “Is it true? That Gunmar was able to penetrate your mind?”

“Only briefly, when he gave me this,” he said softly, pointing again to the scar spanning his face. “I haven't sensed him since then, but… I wasn't sure how to tell you guys.”

“That is most troubling news, I do wish you had spoken of it sooner,” Blinky frowned. “After this goblin business is wrapped up, we should inform Vendel post-haste.”

“Oh, um, he already knows. He sort of… weasled it out of me when he was talking with me a couple days ago. But we can't tell the Tribunal, they'll go completely crazy-town banana-pants if they find out.”

“Oh, great, because keeping even more secrets from the Tribunal won't backfire at all,” Toby quipped sarcastically.

“Hush, TP,” Claire glowered. She took a step closer to Jim; he flinched slightly when she reached up to caress his cheek. “Jim, we need to stop these goblins before things get any worse. Are you gonna be okay, or do you need to go home?”

“I don't want to go home,” he shook his head, “not until we track them down and avenge Chompsky.”

“I do wonder, however,” Blinky mused, “why it is the goblins targeted our pointy-headed companion if it is indeed Master Jim they are after.”

“He spent time in the Darklands, too,” Jim admitted. “Not as long as I did, but definitely long enough that they would have been on his scent.”

Claire's eyes widened in alarm as she realized something. “Jim, there was another person who spent time in the Darklands. Besides you and Chompsky.”

Jim’s stomach plummeted to somewhere around his kneecaps. “Nomura.”

“Well, that's okay, I'm sure Nomura can handle herself,” Toby said, somewhat relieved.

“She can,” Jim replied, feeling whatever color he had left drain from his face. “But Nomura is having tea with my mom, at my house, right now. And since the goblins definitely aren't here…”

“Cragglesnacks,” Blinky muttered. “That complicates matters greatly. I fear we must hasten to your dwelling immediately, Master Jim.”

Chapter End Notes
R.I.P Gnome Chomsky

And every time I think I'm going to let Jim catch a break I go and write stuff like this. What is wrong with me.

Next chapter's probably gonna be pretty long (and therefore will probably take a little longer to write, but we'll see). Because obviously we're about to have ourselves a Goblin Showdown (and some Nomura/Barbara interactions) and it's gonna be GREAT i hope
“I’m afraid my tea selection isn’t very expansive,” Barbara called from the kitchen. “I’ve got an herbal mint tea, a peach-infused white tea, and… lavender chamomile.”

“The white tea will do nicely,” Nomura responded.

Barbara grabbed the box of tea from the shelf. Pouring hot water into a couple of tea cups, she dropped a tea bag into each cup before bringing them out to the dining table. She set one down in front of Jim’s new history teacher. “Did you need any honey or sugar or…?”

“No, it’s fine just the way it is, thanks. Never really been a fan of sweet things, anyway.” Nomura winked as she steeped her tea. She took a sip after a few moments, a satisfied sigh escaping her lips over the edge of the cup, “Aahh, that’s nice. You don’t realize all the things you take for granted until you have to go without them for an extended period of time.”

“Tell me about it,” Barbara chuckled as she sat down across from her, “I think I missed Jim’s cooking almost as much as I missed him. I’m… a little selfishly looking forward to when he starts cooking again.”

Nomura raised an eyebrow at her. “You mean he hasn’t gotten back in the kitchen yet? I swear, at least once a week the boy would fantasize about the variety of meals he wished he could make. And eat. God, it was irritating.”

“That’s my Jim,” she smiled. “But you saw him earlier - he barely has enough stamina to make it up a flight of stairs. He’s already an accident waiting to happen, adding in the array of kitchen equipment that could burn, cut, or bruise him would be a recipe for disaster.”

“... Pun not intended?”

“Oh, uh… no, but that was pretty clever, huh?”

“Don’t get ahead of yourself,” Nomura brushed back a lock of dark hair from her face before taking another sip.

Barbara let the half-comfortable, half-awkward silence hang between them for a minute before launching her next question. “So… the Darklands?”

“You’re going to have to be more specific.”

“You were there? At the same time as my son?”

“I thought I had already made that blatantly clear, but yes. I was there. I was locked up in a cell
The thought of her son being held prisoner in a foreign dimension had always been so surreal; having someone else mention his imprisonment made it that much more heartbreakingly real. “Did… did Jim suffer a lot?”

“Do you want the sugar-coated version, or the version that will keep you up at night with worry?”

“I want the truth,” Barbara replied sternly.

“Of course. Well… I didn’t see much, being locked up and all, but from everything I heard he had quite the rough time. I won’t bore you with the details.”

“No, please do. I want to know.”

Nomura calmly set down her cup, “Let me rephrase that: I won’t tell you. Even if it’s only my second-hand account based on what I could hear, little Gynt’s experiences are his own to tell, not mine. … Where is he, by the way?”

“Trollmarket. Something about gathering intelligence on goblins.”

“And you let him go?”

“I mean, I couldn’t exactly stop him, could I?”

“You’re his mother. Of course you could.”

“I could try,” Barbara smiled sadly, “but he would just find some way to sneak out behind my back. I’d rather him feel comfortable enough to tell me where he’s going, that way I only have to worry a little instead of a lot.”

“So you’re only worried a little right now? Even given his current… condition?”

“That’s… not exactly what I meant. I’m definitely worried sick about him, but…” she took a steadying breath. “I’ve just been so worried for so long, it’s almost like I’m becoming numb to it. I don’t know. Like…” Barbara anxiously ran a finger along the rim of her cup. “There’s so much about this whole situation that’s completely out of my control. The double life, the magic, the fact that my son - my only child - is taking on evil forces I thought only existed in fairytales, all because some stupid hunk of magic metal called to him or whatnot... Whenever I think about it too long, it's downright terrifying. And frustrating. And the worst part is there's practically nothing I can do.”

She pushed her tea cup away, knotting her fingers together in front of her on the table. “I knew eventually he would grow up and I wouldn't be able to protect him forever, but this is definitely not what I had in mind.”

“Fate has a funny way of doing that, doesn't it?” Nomura smirked.

“It sure does,” Barbara sighed. “So what about you, then, Miss Nomura?”

“Please, call me Zelda. And again, you're going to have to be more specific.”

“Alright, Zelda, why is it that you aren't as obviously beat-up as my son? Did the evil trolls -”

“Gumm-Gumms.”

“Right, Gumm-Gumms. Did they target you less or something?”
“Mmm, not exactly. I mean, they definitely gave most of their attention to little Gynt, what with him being the Trollhunter and all.” Nomura paused to take another sip of her tea. “But I also happen to be a little more... resilient than your son. At least from a physical standpoint.”

Barbara peered at her warily from across the table, wondering what the slight-framed woman meant. Jim had already alluded to the fact that Nomura wasn't exactly human - not particularly the most settling of thoughts. But he also said he trusts her. And if Jim trusts her, the least she could do is give the strange woman a chance.

“Zelda, if you don't mind me asking… What are you, exactly?”

Nomura tilted her head to the side in amusement. “You don't already know?”

“Know what?”

“Huh. I could have sworn that, with how close you and Strickler had been...”

“Strickler who, now?”

“You... you don't...?” Realization flickered in Nomura’s eyes, “Of course, you don't remember!”

“Remember what?” Barbara pressed, feeling confused and mildly panicked. What could I have possibly forgotten?

Nomura chewed on her lip, looking as if she were debating something in her head. “Hm. Well, uh...” She nervously glanced somewhere over Barbara’s shoulder. And froze.

“Barbara,” she muttered urgently, slowly setting her cup down on the table, “whatever you do, don’t move.”

Barbara felt a jolt of adrenaline kick in, causing her heart to start beating wildly while she tried to sit perfectly still. Although she couldn't see whatever Nomura was carefully watching, every instinct in her body was screaming 'intruder!’ And, now that she wasn't focusing on carrying on a conversation, she could feel her cell phone vibrating like crazy in her pocket. Which meant one of two things - either the hospital was desperate for her to come in to work, or something was tripping the new security system. But with as serious as Nomura's expression was, she dared not move a muscle to confirm if it was the latter of the two scenarios. In a way, she already knew.

Suddenly afraid for her life, Barbara sent up a silent thanks that at least her son was well out of harm's way.

Nomura carefully reached over her shoulder as if she would somehow find a weapon there, still staring stonily at whatever was behind Barbara. “When I give the signal,” she growled through gritted teeth, “find a place to hide.”

“What's the signal?” she whispered.

“You'll know.”

Barbara's mind raced, immediately picturing the kitchen behind her and its arsenal of cookware. Even if she did run and hide, she wasn't about to do it unarmed.

There was a distant, raspy cackle behind her. “Waka chaka...”
Nomura yelled and there was a flash of light. Temporarily blinded, Barbara heard the woman's cry transition to a lower, more gravelly timbre, followed by the sound of a metal weapon being unsheathed. Barbara's sight returned just in time to see a curved scimitar flying through the air, whizzing past her head as it sunk into the unseen target behind her.

She blinked, taking in the sight of the tall, purple-ish pink troll that now stood in her dining room.

“What are you waiting for? Run!” it - no, she - shouted, waving at Barbara with one hand while the other gripped a second scimitar.

Barbara scrambled out of her chair, quickly whirling around to reach for the large frying pan she'd left out to dry on the counter. She spied Nomura's other weapon embedded in the lower half of the back door, surrounded by a glob of green goo that was slowly oozing onto the floor.

“What was that?!” she shrieked, brandishing the pan like a baseball bat as she scooted away from the table and closer to Nomura.

“Blood goblin,” Nomura hissed, “And they rarely travel alone.” As if summoned by her words, multiple pairs of eyes started materializing on the other side of the windows scattered around the first floor, accompanied by crooked toothy grins and spindly fingers trying to work their way inside any crack they could find. There had to at least be seven goblins surrounding them, if not more.

“Barbara, you need to find a safe place to hide. *Now.*”

Barbara shook her head, tightening her grip on the frying pan. “No. This is my home and I'm going to help defend it.”

“Fine. You watch the front door and the stairs, I'll take the ones coming in from the back and sides. And stay out of my way. *”

Barbara repositioned herself so that she was back-to-back with the troll woman. She set her sights on the front door, watching two pairs of beady eyes blink at her from the other side of the viewing window. She thought she heard a low snicker as the doorknob started rattling.

Damn, I should have locked the door.

“So, how do we fight these things, exactly?” She tried to keep the shakiness in her voice contained.

“Two rules,” Nomura replied, “Hit them with everything you've got, and don't let them surround you. Their strength comes from their numbers.”

Barbara exhaled slowly. “Alright, then.”

A window creaked as it was incrementally slid open somewhere off to the side. In front of her, the doorknob clicked as it was fully rotated.

Then the door swung open.

Barbara didn't have any time to think as two ghostly-white creatures the size of small dogs came crawling towards her. One leaped at her and she swatted at it with the frying pan, sending it flying with a satisfying clang. It smacked against a wall before tumbling to the ground, twitching as it staggered back to its feet.

The second goblin paused when it saw its companion soaring through the air, clearly reassessing the threat level of the human in front of it. Barbara took advantage of the creature's hesitation and swung down at it, treating the pan as if it were the reincarnated kitchen-friendly version of Mjölnir.
There was a crunching, squishing sort of sensation as the heavy-duty cookware flattened the goblin, causing it to burst like a slime-filled balloon. “Ugh,” she grunted while wiping green goo from her chin, taking note of the splattered goop covering the front of her hospital scrubs. “I hope this stuff washes out.”

Nomura merely chuckled in reply, the air filling with the sound of singing metal as she held off the main wave of goblins to the rear.

Two more goblins scuttled through the front door, and the one Barbara had sent flying was making its way back to her. Out of the corner of her eye, she spied a couple more goblins creeping down the banister.

“How many of these creeps are there?” Barbara wondered aloud in distress.

“Too many,” Nomura growled as she swatted at another goblin.

“That's… not good,” she panted, squashing one more goblin and sending another flying with a well-placed kick. But with every goblin she took out, it seemed like two more took its place. “If more keep coming…”

“Then we hope for a miracle,” Nomura stated, deftly cleaving another goblin down the middle.

Jim stumbled onto the front lawn of his house, followed shortly by the rest of his friends as they stepped through the portal. And it already looked like his worst fears were coming true.

“Oh no…” he gasped. Surrounding the perimeter of his house were at least two dozen bloodthirsty goblins, and that wasn't even counting any around the back that he couldn't see. Or any that had already made their way inside.

Jim's heart caught in his throat.

“Well don't just stand there, Jimbo!” Toby tugged at his arm. “Armor up! We gotta get in there and help!”

“Right,” he breathed, fishing the amulet out of his pocket. “For the doom of - !”

“Jim,” Claire interrupted, eyeing the handful of goblins that were starting to notice their presence. “Wrong one.”

“Whoops. Habit, I guess,” he chuckled nervously. “For the glory of Merlin, Daylight is mine to command!” He waited for the flash of blue light to envelop him.

But it never came.

“I said, for the glory of Merlin, Daylight is mine to command!”

Still nothing.

“Uh, is something wrong, Jim?” Toby questioned, pulling out his warhammer and testing its weight.

“I don't know!” Jim said in exasperation, holding his free hand against his temple as he glared at the amulet. “C’mon, you stupid hunk of junk, work!”

“Oh yeah, I'm sure that'll really get it going,” Toby rolled his eyes.
Blinky threw him a concerned glance. “Master Jim, if you cannot fight, then may I suggest -”

“No! I can fight!” Jim cut him off. “I have to, my mom’s in there!”

At that moment, something resembling a battle cry came from inside the house, followed by a muffled thwack. A splatter of green ooze appeared on the inside of one of the front windows.

“It appears that your mother is holding her own alongside Nomura,” Blinky commented. “But surely they require our assistance. AAARRRGHH!!! and I shall go around back, and you three should dispose of the miniature horde heading our way,” he nodded at the group of goblins that had broken away from the others to investigate the newcomers. “Claire, Tobias, do ensure that our Trollhunter does not get himself killed. Or kidnapped.” Before Jim could protest again, Blinky and AAARRRGHH!!! swiftly made their way to the back yard, squashing goblins as they went.

“Jim, just stay behind us,” Claire stated, holding out her staff in preparation for the goblins heading their way.

“But I can fight!”

“What are you going to do, glare at them?” Toby remarked. “You're still injured. And you're not wearing armor. I know algebra isn't your best subject, but do the math, Jimbo.”

“Ugh!” Jim grunted, shaking the amulet. “For the glory of Merlin, Daylight is mine to command. For the glory of Merlin, Daylight is mine to command. For the glory of Merlin -” He ducked as a goblin came hurtling at him before meeting the end of Toby’s hammer. Pain shot through his side at the effort. “C’mom, c’mom, come on!” he cried out, on the verge of tears. “What the hell is wrong?!”

“Jim,” Claire started, whacking a goblin away with her staff, “Maybe you should -”

“No!” he roared, “I can do this!”

He stared down one of the goblins still creeping towards them. Its beady, red eyes gave him a knowing look, its abnormally wide mouth smirking in a toothy grin. It chattered under its breath as if it were challenging Jim, daring him to take revenge for all the time he’d spent in captivity at their mercy.

Jim felt a terror-fueled rage bubble up within him.

“For the doom of Gunmar, Eclipse is mine to command!”

A familiar flash of red left Jim standing in his Eclipse armor, its glow casting shadows over Claire and Toby’s stunned expressions.

“Uh…” Toby stammered.

“Look out!” Jim shouted, swinging his sword just in time to catch a goblin that was aiming for his friend’s head. His side twinged in response, but was easily ignored thanks to the adrenaline pumping through his veins and the minor support his armor gave him.

Claire and Toby returned their focus to the advancing goblins, giving Jim space to stand between them as they faced the onslaught. “We are so talking about this later,” Claire commented, frowning as she summoned a small portal precisely so that a goblin was ripped in half.

“Fine, whatever,” Jim grumbled, vaporizing two more goblins with a sweep of his blade.
“Oh, hell no, don’t you dare start with the attitude again, mister,” she scolded.

“Less bickering,” Toby grunted as he tried to take a whack at a line of goblins with his hammer, “More fighting.”

“Sorry,” they replied in unison.

Their progress was definitely expedited thanks to the help of Jim’s magic blade; in no time, they had mowed down most of the goblins on the front lawn and made their way to the front door. Without hesitation, Jim pushed the door open wider and charged inside, Claire and Toby hot on his heels. He immediately spied his mother and Nomura positioned in the center of their first floor layout, trying to keep the encroaching ring of goblins at bay. With a primal yell, he cleared a path straight to them, easily vanquishing half a dozen of the monsters with a few strokes of his sword.

“Jim!” his mom exclaimed, pummeling a goblin with the flat end of one of their large skillets. “What are you doing here?”

“What does it look like I'm doing? I'm protecting you!”

“But your side -”

“You can chat later,” Nomura interrupted, taking advantage of the reinforcements to retrieve her second scimitar from across the room. “Right now, we fight!”

Toby gave the Changeling an appreciative glance as he started going to town on the clump of goblins nearest him.

The tide of the battle had clearly turned as the number of goblins inside the house gradually dwindled. And, from the occasional thud of goblins being thrown against the windows from the outside, it seemed as if Blinky and AAARRRGHH!!! were effectively decreasing the number outside the house as well. Before long, it was the blood goblins who were outnumbered and left cowering in a corner. And thanks to the efficiency of Jim's magic sword, even that stage was short-lived.

“I'll do a quick sweep upstairs, make sure none of the little boogers are still hiding up there,” Jim stated, wiping a smear of goblin goo from his cheek. “Tobes, Claire, you go check the basement. Nomura, see if Blinky and AAARRRGGHH!!! have things handled outside.”

“Aye-aye, captain,” Toby mock-saluted as they split up, leaving Dr. Lake standing quite disheveled in the middle of the hallway, her frying pan dripping with goblin guts.

“Wait, what do you want me to do?” she asked.

“Ummm,” he paused at the bottom of the stairs, “start doing dishes?”

“Not funny.”

“Sorry, just… wait here? And make sure nothing else tries to get inside?”

“Fine,” she huffed, “but if I hear anything go wrong, I'm coming up immediately.”

Jim gave her a quick smile and a nod before dashing up the stairs. He checked the bathroom and his mom’s room, ensuring that no blood goblins had decided to hide out in either room. Luckily nothing seemed to be out of place, save for a couple of open windows that he promptly latched shut.
His own room, however, was a different story.

Lounging on his desk was one last blood goblin, the reflection of the moonlight bathing it in an eerie glow. It was lazily rolling around his vial of sleeping draught between its fingers, smirking at Jim as he stepped into the room.

“Hey, put that down!” Jim hissed.

The goblin crooned some sort of sneering insult before tossing the glass vial across the room. Jim dove for it, catching it before it could shatter on the floor, and immediately regretted the action as he struggled to get back to his feet. All the while, the goblin grinned down at him from its perch.

“Not cool, I need this!” he grumbled, waving the vial to emphasize his words. Which was silly, really; it's not as if the goblin could -

It chuckled, staring him down with it's unearthly red eyes.

“Wait, you can understand me?”

“Uh-huh,” it nodded as it threw him a contemptuous smile.

Jim tossed the vial onto his mattress so that he could wield his Eclipse blade with both hands, pointing it at the goblin. In the distance, he heard his mom calling to him from downstairs. “Is everything okay up there, Jim?”

But Jim didn't answer her, keeping his focus trained on the intruder across from him. “How did you get out?” he muttered. “Did anything else escape from the Darklands?”

It let out a low cackle before responding. “Yeeessssss…”

“Who? Who else got out?” Jim could feel the panic rising in his chest. “Gunmar? Did Gunmar escape?!”

The goblin continued smiling at him while the sound of footsteps racing up the stairs echoed in the hallway.

“Answer me!”

He heard a gasp in the doorway. “Jim! Look out!” his mom exclaimed. The battle-dirtied pan still in her hand, he saw her winding up out of the corner of his eye.

“Wait, Mom, don't -!”

But his attempt to stop her was too late. The pan spun through the air and collided with the goblin’s midsection. Its momentum barely phased by the impact, the cookware continued its path out the open window, taking the goblin with it. A loud clattering noise followed. Both mother and son rushed to the window, looking down at the splattered remains of the creature where it had been caught between the frying pan and the sidewalk.

“Yuck,” his mom stuck out her tongue. “Those things sure do leave a mess, huh, kiddo?”

“Yeah, they do,” he sighed, still mulling over his unanswered question.

Did Gunmar escape the Darklands?

Oh god, if he did...
His mom turned to him and placed a hand on his armored shoulder. “Are you okay, Jim? You look like you've just seen a ghost.”

“I'm fine,” he insisted. “Just… tired, I guess.” He pinched the bridge of his nose, trying to will away the tension headache he felt coming on.

“Well then, how about we go downstairs and check in with the others?”

“Yeah, okay.”

They made their way down the stairs, finding Claire and Toby already setting to work cleaning up the mess left by the goblins. “The basement was clear,” Claire noted as she wrung out a rag into a trash bin they'd placed in the middle of the floor. “Anything upstairs?”

“We found one goblin,” Jim replied, letting his mom help him navigate the last couple of steps. The adrenaline rush was definitely wearing off. “But Mom took care of it.”

“Man, Dr. L., you're officially the coolest mom ever!” Toby exclaimed, temporarily breaking from his task of sweeping up some shattered glass.

“Thanks, Toby. And thank you both for helping clean up.”

“No problemo, Dr. L.” Toby wiped some sweat from his brow. “We literally do this all the time.”

Jim's mom chuckled as she set about putting furniture back in its place. She tilted her head when she spied some splatter marks on the wall that couldn't be completely wiped away. “Hmm. Looks like I might have to do some… re… decorating…” Jim watched her face twist in confusion, but whatever train of thought she had was derailed when Blinky came in through the front door.

“Barbara, I do believe this belongs to you,” he held out the trusty frying pan, only slightly dented from its flight out of the second story window.

“Oh, thanks, just put it in the sink. That sucker is going to need some serious disinfecting.”

Blinky nodded, stopping in his tracks when he spied Jim at the foot of the stairs. “Master Jim…”

“I know, I know, I'm wearing the Eclipse armor,” he sighed, sitting down on the steps.

“I was merely going to remark that you look in dire need of some rest,” Blinky started, both Claire and Toby pausing to look their way, “But now that we are on the subject…”

“Yeah, about that,” Claire chimed in. “Jim, what happened? Why couldn't you… you know, command Daylight?”

“I… I don't know!” he exclaimed, burying his face between his hands. “It wasn't listening to me! I… maybe I'm rusty or something.”

“Or maybe it's because you spent six months in the same suit of armor,” Nomura remarked as she appeared through the front door, still in her troll form. AAARRRGHH!!! poked his head in after her, not daring to fully enter the house for fear of adding to the amount of property damage. “Let's face it, little Gynt, after all that time you're simply more attuned to this armor. It may take some time to readjust.”

“Great,” Jim moaned, “something else that takes time.”

“Hold up,” his mom interrupted, “Jim has more than one set of armor?”
“Indeed,” Blinky turned to her. “His standard Trollhunter attire is actually silver and blue, imbued with the power of Daylight. The armor he wears now is a variation of sorts, meant to enhance strength and resilience in order to better face off against dangerous foes. This power, however - the power of Eclipse, as we call it - draws its strength from a mix of both light and dark forces.”

“Dark forces?” his mom furrowed her eyebrows. “Jim…”

“I swear, I'm fine,” he snapped. “I’m sure the amulet will sort itself out once I can get back to training in the Forge.”

*Though if Gunmar is running around somewhere in this dimension… there might not be time for that.*

Blinky gave him a wary look, watching as Jim released his transformation with a flash of red.

“Very well, then. Though I insist we inform Vendel of this newest development. In addition to the presence of blood goblins in Arcadia…” he sighed. “That is not a conversation I am looking forward to.” With that, he resumed his trek towards the kitchen.

“What's so bad about these blood goblins?” Barbara asked as she crossed her arms. “Besides the obvious mess they've made of my house.”

It was Nomura who spoke up to answer. “They're ruthless creatures, and this particular goblin variant only comes from one place,” she paused for dramatic effect, “the Darklands.”

Barbara gasped. “That's… not good, is it?”

“Not in the least.”

Toby abruptly stopped his cleaning efforts. “Crap! That reminds me, I need to go check on Nana and make sure she's okay! Jim, will you come with me?”

“Of course, Tobes,” he replied, lifting himself up with some effort. All the activity from earlier was finally catching up with him, and his cracked ribs were protesting vehemently every time he moved. He tried not to outwardly wince, but his mom immediately picked up on his tentative movements.

“And after you get back, it's bedrest for you, young man,” she softly chided, giving him a quick peck on the cheek as he passed. “I'm glad you and your friends came to the rescue in time, but now you seriously need to let your injuries finish healing.”

“I know, Mom,” he gave her a brief hug in return, “But I'd do it again in a heartbeat if it means making sure you're okay.”

“I know you would, honey. Now go, help Toby check on his grandma.” She smiled and ruffled his hair, letting him continue to where his best friend was waiting by the door.

They heard Blinky shout something from the kitchen. “Barbara, what is this 'Blech’ substance? It has a peculiar odor!”

“That's bleach, Blinky! And for the love of god, don't sniff it!” Jim's mom rushed off to the kitchen to intervene.

Claire giggled before turning to the two boys. “Text me if anything comes up. But I'm sure your Nana is fine, TP.”
“Yeah, you're probably right,” Toby admitted. “At this point, I'm more worried about what sort of disaster zone my room is gonna be. Because, well… you know.”

“Yeah,” she made a sympathetic face. “Well, I'd better get back to cleaning. All this goblin goo won't clean itself.” She picked up Toby's broom and offered it to Nomura. “Here, make yourself useful.”

“Watch it, Nuñez, I have the power to give you detention,” the Changeling sneered, taking the broom. “Lucky for you, I don't exactly have anything better to do right now. And Dr. Lake and I still haven't finished our little chat, yet.”

“AAaaalright then. C'mon, Jimbo, let's get going,” Toby stated, turning towards the door.

“Huh? Oh, yeah, right.” Jim followed Toby outside of the house, both of them giving AAAARRRGGGH!!! fist bumps as they walked past. By the time they reached the end of the front walkway, Jim was already gasping for breath. “Tobes, I -”

Immediately, Toby positioned himself right beside Jim so he could use him as a human crutch. “I'd offer to carry you, but let's be real. I'd just drop you,” he joked.

Jim chuckled. “Well, we might have to test that theory on the walk back. God, it was so much easier moving around when I was hyped up on adrenaline.”

“Hey, don't worry, I'm sure you'll heal in no time! Remember back in third grade when you fell off your bike into the canals and broke your arm? You were out of the cast a week sooner than the doctors originally said!”

“That was different, Tobes. Falling off my bike wasn't really that…”

“Traumatic?” Toby suggested as they continued across the street.

“Yeah. Traumatic.”

“Jim,” Toby sighed when they reached the walkway leading up to his house, “I'm sorry again about going off on you earlier.”

“No, Tobes, don't.” Jim stopped to turn and face him, taking a deep breath. “You… you have every right to be upset at me. I left. Without you guys. And now because of that, everything is all screwed up right now. I fucked it all up, and I am so, so sorry.”

“Apology… sort of accepted. 'Cause I'm still pretty pissed you ditched us. But I'll get over it. Eventually.” He shrugged. “But hey, it's not all bad! You did rescue Claire's little brother, after all!”

“I guess that's true. But at what cost? Chomsky…”

“Was a hero. Just like you.” Toby placed his hands reassuringly on Jim's elbows (reaching his shoulders was out of the question). “So, wanna see what's left in my room that we can remember the little guy by?”

“And check on your Nana, remember?” Jim half-smiled.

“Oh, right. Nana.”

As if on cue, the outline of Toby's grandma cast a shadow on one of the front windows. “Toby-pie,
is that you out there?” she called from inside. “Bring in the raccoon traps from the garage, will you? I swore I heard some of the little critters rummaging around upstairs earlier.”

“I told you she'd be fine,” Jim smirked as they opened the door.

Chapter End Notes

Holy crap this chapter did not want to end. On the bright side, with the way I decided to cut it I've already got a decent start on the next chapter. and who knows how long it'll take for me to write it because OMG SEASON 3 COMES OUT IN LESS THAN 2 DAYS AAAAAHHHHHHHHH

Where was Draal during all this, you ask? ...I have no fucking clue. Maybe he was out getting pizza or something.

Also, one of my favorite tropes is using completely ordinary items as weapons, especially frying pans thank you Tangled.
Chapter 20

Chapter Summary

Cleaning up.
mostly just a whole bunch of sweet and touching moments with the fam because BOY DO I NEED IT AFTER WATCHING SEASON 3

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

“Hey Nana!” Toby chipperly greeted his grandmother.

“Toby-pie! Who’s your new tall, dark, and handsome friend?” she squinted behind her large, round glasses. Jim felt a slight blush creep into his cheeks.

“Nana, it's just Jim,” Toby rolled his eyes.

She tilted her head to one side. “Can’t be. You said he was in the hospital.”

“I told you, they sent him home this past weekend.”

“Oh, they did? What a relief! How are you feeling, Jim? Would you like a cookie? I just finished making a batch.”

“Jim's pretty tired, actually, so we were just going to head up to my room -”

“But I would love a cookie, Nana Domzalski,” Jim interrupted. “Or maybe five.”

“Oh my! Just go ahead and take the whole plate, dears, and I'll get another batch started.”

So after thanking Nana profusely and finding the best way for Toby to balance the cookies in one hand while he helped Jim up the stairs with the other, the two eventually made it up to Toby’s room. And the sight was pretty much what they expected: books were strewn all over the floor, Toby's game console had a smear of green goo on one of its corners, and the dollhouse looked like a miniature tornado had ripped through it.

At least the little gnome had put up a fight during his last moments.

Feeling extremely weak now that the events of the day were catching up with him, Jim practically collapsed onto the edge of Toby's bed. Toby didn't look much better than Jim felt, his face draining of color after he set down the cookies by the bed and started sifting through the destruction. Jim gnawed on one of the baked treats while he watched his friend work.

“This looks like one of the buttons from Chompsky’s collection,” he muttered, placing a small, red disk in the palm of his hand. “Oh, and here's a piece of his little guitar… aaaaand here's the other half. And this must have been what the little guy was going to use to propose to the Sally doll,” Toby held aloft a small diamond ring. “Delusional fellow, but his heart was in the right place. ...hold up, I think this is…” he squinted at the ring and gasped. “This is my Nana’s ring! The little crook!”
Jim snorted, nearly choking on the second cookie he'd shoved in his mouth. “Good 'ol Chompsky. He always did have a knack for shiny things.”

Toby straightened up from the floor and sat beside Jim, looking down at the pieces of Chompsky's life in his hands. “It's hard to believe he's really gone…”

“I know, Tobes. I know.”

They sat in silence for a while before Toby spoke again. “Jim?”

“Yeah?”

“I… I know Chompsky's the first we've actually lost, but… well, we've had a lot of close calls.”

“Yeah, when AAARRRGGHH -”

“I'm not just talking about AAARRRGGHH!!!” Toby shook his head as he cut Jim off. “I… I mean you.”

“Me?”

“Jim, you've nearly died, like, ten times since you became the Trollhunter. First there was Bular, then that harpy-dragon-troll-thing, that incident in the woods with Nomura and the goblins, Angor Rot…” Toby listed. He continued, his voice barely above a whisper, “When Kanjigar reanimated AAARRRGGHH!!!, literally the first thing he said was 'we must make haste, or else James Lake Jr. will die.'”

“Tobes, I -”

“Let me finish. Please.” He looked at Jim, tears glistening in the corners of his eyes. “You said you chose to go into the Darklands alone because you couldn't bear the thought of losing any of us. Well… Jim, if we lost you… I don't know what I'd do. You've been my best friend for practically all my life. I'd be lost without you. And I'm pretty sure I'm not the only one who feels that way.”

“Tobes…” Any other words Jim might have had got caught in his throat. He tightly embraced his friend, not caring about the sharp pain in his side.

After a long moment, Jim eventually pulled back to hold Toby at arm's length before continuing, “God, I'm so sorry, Tobes. I… I never…”

_I never stopped to think that my life would be worth anything to someone else._

“But hey, you're back now,” Toby sniffled slightly, wiping his nose on his sleeve. “And you're… well, you're alive. And I'm alive. Chompsky, not so much… but… yeah.”

“Yeah.”

Toby sighed as he stood up from the bed, stretching a little. “Well, whaddya say I take you back home? This will take forever to clean up, and I don't wanna bore you to death.” His eyes immediately went wide, “Shit, that was a horrible choice of words.”

Jim giggled, grabbing another cookie from the plate. “I mean, I'm fine hanging here for a little while longer. Or at least until I've eaten all your nana's homemade cookies.”

“You do know that the only thing homemade about those is the fact that they were baked here at home? She literally just pulls them out of the Pillsbury package and pops them in the oven.”
“Hey, I don't care where they come from so long as it means I get to eat chocolate chip cookies!”

The laughter of the two boys filled the room, something that the walls of Toby's bedroom had not experienced for many, many months.

“Alright, Dr. Lake, I think that's the last of the goop in here!” Claire called from the main hallway.

Barbara wiped the sweat from her forehead, pausing to survey the kitchen. The counters were wiped down, the infamous frying pan was marinating in a bath of hot soapy water in the sink, and she was just about done sweeping the floor.

Cleaning up a battle zone was hard work.

“Great, thanks, Claire!” she called back, leaning her broom against the wall. “Blinky, how's the outside looking?”

The troll’s head appeared by the kitchen window, followed by his large, mossy companion. “Like a perfectly normal suburban lawn, with no evidence of any shenanigans or funny business.”

“Goblins not funny,” AAARRRGGHH!!! protested.

“'Tis merely a figure of speech, my dear friend. Though one must admit, despite their ruthless nature, the cretins do have disproportionately skinny limbs.”

Claire walked into the kitchen, wiping her hands on a rag. “I should probably head home. Honestly, I'm surprised my parents haven't sent the neighborhood watch out looking for me yet.”

“Of course,” Barbara agreed, holding out her hand to take the rag from the girl. “You've been a big help, unlike other people…” she threw a glare in the direction of the dining room, where Nomura had quit cleaning long ago in favor of sitting down with a new cup of tea. She still had yet to transform back into a human.

“I told you, cleaning up after goblins isn't my thing,” she remarked, taking a sip of tea. “Besides, you all were doing such a fine job, I didn't want to get in your way.”

“Sure you did,” Barbara scowled. “And are you planning on staying like that the rest of the evening?”

“Not really. Just until those two leave,” she jerked her chin in the direction of Blinky and AAARRRGGHH!!! “It's fun to make them nervous.”

Claire gave the troll woman a wary glance. “Yeah, there's a reason for that.” She turned back to Barbara, “Did you want me to check in on Toby and Jim? I thought they would have been back by now.”

“No, it's fine, Claire. I'm sure Jim will be back soon, and if anything, he's only across the street.”

A much easier place to reach than a completely different dimension.

“Okay then. See you later, Dr. Lake!” with that, the girl summoned a portal and disappeared into thin air.

“We must away, as well,” Blinky said on the other side of the window. “As much as I would like to delay it, I must speak with Vendel about what has transpired this evening.” He motioned for Barbara to come closer. “Barbara,” he whispered through the window, “be wary of the
“Changeling.”

“Changeling?”

“Nomura. Though she has proven herself to be an ally in recent events, she has a… history. I implore you, do be careful.”

“I will. But if Jim trusts her, how bad can she be?” she asked.

“Keep in mind that Master Jim's judgement has not been the keenest as of late.”

“Of course. But until she gives me any reason to suspect otherwise, Nomura is my guest and I will treat her as such.”

“Very well.” Blinky then brought his voice back up to a normal volume, “So long, then, Barbara. And do give Jim our regards when he returns.”

Blinky and AAARRRGGHH!!! wandered off, leaving Barbara once again alone with Nomura. As she turned to face the troll-changeling-woman, she caught a flash of purple light. Nomura was giving her an amused look as she sipped her tea, the cup much better suited for her current human hands rather than her claws.

“Good god, I thought they'd never leave,” Nomura stated.

“If Blinky could somehow move his library to my basement, I think he might actually consider living here,” Barbara mused, walking over to join her at the table. “Why were you so desperate for them to leave?”

“I told you, we have a conversation to finish. And I thought it best we do that alone.”

“Right. So… where were we?”

“Well, before we were so rudely interrupted by the goblins, I think he might actually consider telling you that I'm a Changeling,” Nomura smirked. “But instead you ended up getting a first-hand demonstration.”

“Right. But I still don't really know what that means, other than apparently you can turn into a tall, pink troll.”

“I mean, that's pretty much the gist of it.”

“Huh. Well then…” At a loss for words, Barbara began tracing the grain of the table with her finger.

Sighing, Nomura set down her cup and reached across the table, placing a hand over Barbara's to stop her from fidgeting. “Are you okay, Barbara?”

“Me? Oh, I'm fine. Just…”

“Still worried about your son.”

Barbara nodded.

Nomura leaned back in her chair. “He'll be alright, you know. He’s pretty tough, for a kid. Eventually the wounds he bears, both externally and internally, will heal.”

“I… I know. I’m just worried that he’s being forced to grow up way too fast,” she mumbled,
staring down at the table. “He shouldn’t have to be this… Trollhunter. He shouldn’t have to bear such a heavy burden. He’s only sixteen.”

“And soon he’ll be seventeen, then eighteen, and then he’ll be off to college or whatever anyway,” Nomura stated matter-of-factly. “Children grow up and make their own decisions. It’s what they do. Who are we to stop them from shouldering the weight of the world, if that’s what they so choose?”

Barbara shook her head. “I don’t want to stop him. Not that I could, anyway. But I do want to support him, it’s just… I’m still not sure how to do that.”

“You’ll figure it out,” the Changeling smiled. She finished her cup of tea and stood up, her chair sliding across the hardwood floor. “You’re a great mother, Barbara. And you’ve done a great job raising your son. Don’t let anyone ever tell you otherwise.”

“Thanks, Miss No- uh, Zelda,” she corrected herself, standing up to walk Nomura to the door. “Though I doubt Jim will be back at school tomorrow.”

“Then we’ll simply send his schoolwork home with his friends so he doesn’t get too far behind. But do make sure our Trollhunter gets some rest. If there’s one thing teachers hate, it’s when students fall asleep during our lectures.” Nomura’s face twisted into a cross between a smirk and a scowl.

Barbara chuckled. “Alright, I’ll try. With any luck, Jim will be well-rested and back on his feet in a few days.”

“I do hope so,” she frowned. “If tonight’s events are any indication, I fear there may be more trouble brewing under our feet than we realize. And until little Gynt is back in full fighting condition…”

“Then we just have to be extra careful.”

“Indeed,” Nomura nodded, stepping out through the doorway. “Good night, Barbara. And if you ever need to talk, about anything, just give me a call.” With that, the Changeling walked away from the house and disappeared into the shadows of the night.

Barbara barely had time to close the door and turn around when she was startled by the creaking of the basement door.

“Barbara?” Draal’s head appeared from around the hallway corner. “Who were you talking with? And why does your cave stink of chemicals?”

“Draal!” she sighed in relief, walking towards him. “Boy, we sure could have used your help a couple hours ago. We had a bit of a… goblin problem.”

“A battle? With goblins? Here?!” his eyes went wide. “And I missed it?”

“You sure did, big guy. Where were you?” she crossed her arms, giving him the same look she’d given Jim many times in the past whenever she caught him out past curfew.

“Performing maintenance on the Forge, fixing a few last things so it is ready for the Trollhunter’s return,” he paused before sheepishly adding, “… and doing some, uh, test runs.”

“I know I don’t have any authority over you, but since you do live in my basement it would be nice to know when you’re going to be gone for extended periods of time. Especially if we end up
getting unexpected visitors again, like tonight.”

“I apologize, Barbara. Was… was there any damage?”

“Nothing that a few coats of paint can’t fix. But mostly there was just blood goblin guts everywhere that we had to clean up. Everyone made it out safe, though.”

“Pardon,” a concerned look crept over the troll’s features. “Did you say ‘blood goblin’?”

“Um, yeah?”

His face fell. “By Deya’s grace… that’s not good.”

“That’s what Nomura said, too.”

“Nomura? She was here?” his eyes lit up in a mix of hopefulness and anguish.

“Um, yeah, she came over for some tea before everything went down,” she raised an eyebrow at him. “I take it you know her?”

“In a manner of speaking. We have a… history.”

“And that’s what Blinky said! What, did you all fight each other in the past or something?”

“Well… yes. And no. Nomura and I, we were… as you say, romantically involved. But that was many years ago.”

“Oh,” she softly gasped.

“It is probably for the best, then, that I was not here earlier.”

“Probably… she might come over again sometime, though. Would that be okay with you?”

“Yes. Believe it or not, I am capable of being a civilized troll even if I am under the same roof as a past flame.” The blue troll looked down at his hands, nervously tapping the tips of his prosthetic fingers against his regular ones. “And it… might be nice, to see her again.”

“Good to know,” Barbara remarked as she made her way towards the kitchen, intent on finishing cleaning her trusty frying pan.

Draal continued standing in the hallway, watching her as she went about her work. After a few moments, he finally spoke, “Barbara, where is the young Trollhunter?”

“Across the street at Toby’s. They went over to check on his Nana a while ago, but I expect he’ll be back soon. Why, do you need to talk with him?”

“Oh, no. No, not at all. I was just curious.” He stood there awkwardly for another moment before speaking again. “Well, I will be downstairs, then. If you need me.”

“Alright, Draal.”

On that note, the troll promptly retreated to the basement, leaving Barbara alone in the kitchen.

Goblins, Gumm-Gumms, changeling troll-people…

What sort of mess have we gotten ourselves into now?
After finishing in the kitchen, Barbara retired to the couch. She turned on the TV (Gun Robot again? Seriously?) and found herself dozing off by the time she finally heard a knock on the door. She got up to answer it after stretching out her back, finding Toby on the other side struggling to keep a very exhausted-looking Jim upright.

“Dr. L… a little help…”

She quickly swooped in to position herself under Jim’s free shoulder, taking over for Toby and guiding her son inside the house. She helped him navigate to the couch and get situated near one of the armrests while Toby leaned over the back of the couch to catch his breath.

“It’s very hard… to hold up… your best friend… when he’s over six feet tall,” he panted.

“Are you two alright? And how’s your grandmother? Is she okay?”

Toby waved his hand. “Yeah, we’re fine. Nana’s fine. My room was a mess. But I cleaned it up. Jim watched. And ate a lot of cookies.”

“You know, you should have called if you needed help getting him back here,” she threw Toby one of her Mom Looks.

“I know. I thought we could make it, but we got halfway across the street and his knees started giving out. At that point, my hands were a little preoccupied making sure he didn’t eat asphalt.”

“Guys, I’m right here,” Jim scowled, “Just because I’m having trouble walking doesn’t mean I can’t talk for myself.”

“Sorry, kiddo,” she turned to him, taking note of the dark bags under his eyes. It was definitely past his bedtime. “How are you feeling?”

“Tired. Exhausted. And I think you’ll have to take a look at my bandages, it looks like at least one of them is seeping again.” Jim unzipped his sweater so he could pull it to the side, revealing a spot that now stained his t-shirt on the left side of his chest.

“Doesn’t surprise me, with all the running around you did earlier. And your side?”

“Hurts like hell. So, the usual.”

“Alright then, let’s get you upstairs so I can take a look at those and get you off to bed.”

“Well, since it looks like you’ve got things handled, I’ll be heading home now,” Toby commented, turning towards the door. “See you in the morning, Jimbo?”

“Umm,” he glanced at her before answering his friend, “Probably not, Tobes. I don’t think I’ll be making it to school in the morning. Not with everything that happened today.”

“That's probably for the best. Wouldn't want you falling asleep in history class again! Anyways, goodnight everybody!”

“Goodnight, Toby,” Barbara smiled as she waved him out the door. “So, kiddo,” she started, “ready to try going up the stairs?”

“Sure. You're probably going to have to do most of the work, though. God, my legs feel like jello. And lead. At the same time.”

“That’s what happens when you overexert yourself, honey.” She stationed herself next to the couch,
crouching down so that she could get a better angle to help lift him. “Alright, on the count of three. One, two… three!”

With some effort she managed to get Jim off the couch and standing upright. They slowly walked over to the stairs and started their combined ascent, Jim trying his best to grab onto the handrails to help support his weight. Eventually, after pausing a couple of times to catch a breather and readjust their grips, the duo successfully made it to the second floor. She led him to the bathroom, setting him down on the closed toilet lid before pulling out some supplies from the cabinet.

“Okay, kiddo, you're going to have to remove your shirt,” she stated. She held out her hand as he stripped, taking the stained t-shirt so she could start pretreating as soon as they were done. When she caught sight of his bruised and battered torso, she had to stop herself from gasping out loud. As a whole he seemed to be making progress, as the diminishing appearance of his assorted bruises, cuts, and scrapes seemed to suggest; but the bruise covering his cracked ribs was as mottled-looking as ever, and the gash on his upper chest and a few on his other side had split open. “Jim…”

“I know, I know, I'm a mess.”

“That's an understatement. Maybe I should take you in for stitches…”

“No! Uh,” he cleared his throat, “I mean, the bandages have been working just fine. I don't think they were rated for goblin-slaying, that's all.”

Barbara chewed on her lower lip as she knelt beside him and started cleaning him up with a washcloth. “Hmmm. I still don't like the way these look. At least you're not bleeding too much.” She stood up to grab the roll of gauze, pausing to muss Jim's hair.

That's when her fingers found something unpleasantly slimy.

“Eww, gross, Jim! You've got goblin guts in your hair!” she shrieked.

He cringed. “Aw, man…”

“You, mister, need a shower before I finish bandaging you up.” She took a second glance at him. “Well, or maybe a bath. That way you don't have to stand. Think you can manage that? Do you need me to help at all?”

He rolled his eyes. “Mom, I'm not a baby. I don't need help taking a bath.”

“Oh yeah? Stand up, then,” she smirked and took a step back, folding her arms across her chest.

“Oh,” a mild flash of panic crossed Jim's face. Grabbing onto the edge of the sink for stability, he slowly lifted himself up…

And promptly sat back down.

He threw a pleading look her way, “Help?”

“I thought you didn't need help.”

“Fine, I was wrong. I need help. I've learned my lesson. Now can you help me get clean so I can go to bed, please?”

“Of course, kiddo.”
Jim stared up at his bedroom ceiling, refreshed from his bath and relieved to finally be in bed. The slight movement of air from his ceiling fan tickled his bare chest while his mom put the finishing touches on his bandages.

“Almost done, kiddo,” she murmured, ripping off a piece of tape with her teeth and pressing it against his skin. “I'll go get you some water and some painkillers. Do you need anything else?”

“Um, I don't think so... Oh! The sleeping potion. I think I last left it at the foot of my bed.”

She peered at the edge of his bed until she found the vial. Picking it up, she put it in her pocket and turned to Jim, “I'll give this to you once I'm back.”

“C’mon, you don't trust me?” he protested.

“Considering the last time you took this you nearly slept for an eternity? No. Now just sit tight, I'll be right back.” She smoothed out a section of his hair before exiting the room.

God, you overdose on a magical potion one time... She has a point, though, I probably wouldn't trust myself, either.

Jim could already feel the sweet embrace of sleep calling to him. He had no doubt he'd have any trouble falling asleep - but staying asleep, well, that was another matter entirely. And after everything that had happened today...

Chompsky, gone.

Blood goblins in Arcadia.

And Gunmar... could he really have escaped from the Darklands? Or was that goblin just trying to stoke my paranoia? It never really got a chance to answer my question...

Jim shuddered, trying to focus on his slow, measured breathing in an attempt to keep the dread creeping into his veins at bay. But he could still feel his chest tightening, as if Gunmar himself was wrapping his claws around him and squeezing all his air out. He wasn't even aware of the soft footfalls of his mother coming back up the stairs.

“Alright, kiddo, I'm back,” she announced, “Here's your - woah. Jim, honey, are you alright?”

He whimpered in response.

She immediately set down the water, pill bottle, and vial on the desk and knelt beside his bed. She gently cupped the side of his face and grasped one of his hands. “Shhhhh, it'll be alright. You're going to be alright. Just breathe with me, okay? Breathe in... hold it for a second... now breathe out... Good, again. Breathe in...”

He followed his mother's instructions, carefully regulating his breathing until the overwhelming anxiety gradually passed. He met her gaze and breathed a sigh of relief, “Thanks, Mom.”

“Of course, honey.” She gave him a little smile before reaching for the container of painkillers. Measuring out a dose, she gave it to Jim and helped him into a sitting position. He gratefully swallowed the pills, chasing them down with some water. “I might have to go in for the night shift tonight,” she commented, pulling out the vial of sleeping draught from her pocket. “The hospital already tried calling me a couple of times, and if they call again I don't know that I'll be able to say no. Will you be okay, kiddo?”
Jim nodded as he took the vial. “Yeah, I should be fine. So long as this stuff works, I think I'll be knocked out all night.”

“Let’s hope that's the case, then. But if anything happens, promise you'll call immediately. Okay?”

“Sure, of course, Mom.”

His mom carefully watched him as he took four sips from the vial, his nose assaulted by the potion’s floral aroma. Hopefully that would be enough for at least a solid eight hours of sleep, maybe even a little extra. God knows he could use it.

She took the vial back, placing it on the opposite side of the desk before rearranging his sheets. She gave him a brief kiss on the forehead before walking to the doorway and turning off the lights.

“Goodnight, kiddo.”

“Goodnight, Mom.”

Chapter End Notes

Raise your hand if you've been personally victimized by Trollhunters Part 3. *raises hand*

I don't know about you, but I still have way too many feels from season 3, so this was one of my solutions for dealing with it. Mostly a filler chapter, but I hope y'all liked it. Though it's primary purpose, even before S3 came out, was to get us from point A to point B. With point B being the cliffhanger of "Jim is about to fall asleep again." gee, what could i possibly be plotting next? muahahaha
Chapter 21

Chapter Summary

For the night is dark and full of terrors...
... and cuddles.

Chapter Notes

** look out - some spoilers for season 3 ahead **

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Jim raced around a corner, only to meet another dead end. His ragged breathing echoed off the stone walls.

“Come now, Trollhunter,” a voice boomed in the distance, “Why must you keep running?”

Quickly backtracking his steps to the last juncture, Jim started sprinting down the other corridor. His armor jostled against the cobbled floor, its red glow illuminating his path forward with its steady glow.

“I will find you eventually. You cannot escape me.”

He kept running, ignoring the stitch in his side. If he could just make it out of this maze…

“Fool! You cannot outrun your fate!”

Jim gritted his teeth, refraining from shouting back and revealing his location.

Watch me try.

Rounding a few more corners, the passageway around him finally started getting wider. Eventually it led him to a chamber, its walls lined with paintings. Only, these were no ordinary paintings: these ones were moving. Jim slowed his pace so that he could observe them, trying to determine if they were depictions of the past, present, or future.

The first, Killahead Bridge. The portal between worlds crackled as hordes of Gumm-Gumm soldiers streamed through. Lightning lit up the sky, casting eerie shadows along the ground.

The next, a pillar of fire ripping through the center of Arcadia. It towered over the city, a swirling cloud of red and black smoke that cast a shadow over everything - even the sun. Destruction lined the streets as people and trolls alike were thrown to the mercy of the unnatural conjuration.

Jim nearly choked when he thought he spied some familiar figures scattered amongst the casualties.

“As I said,” came a voice from behind him, “You cannot escape your fate.”
Jim whirled around, face-to-face with the devil himself. “No. No, the future is not set in stone. These are lies, nothing more,” he spat, attempting to quell the sense of hopelessness and panic building within him.

The shadow with one eye merely chuckled. “True, the future may still be in flux. But the past and the present are very much real.”

It spun Jim around, forcing him to lay eyes on a new painting. This one was painfully familiar, one of many scenes he did not want to relive. But he found himself unable to look away as he watched a lone figure in red, ringed by enemy forces, get caught by the edge of the Decimaar Blade before shrieking and crumbling to the ground.

His scar burned in sympathy.

Then the scene quickly changed - again, he saw Killahead Bridge. But this time, only a few figures emerged from the gateway before shuffling off to hide in the woods, followed shortly by a Gyre bursting through the portal and knocking over the bridge.

“No… no, it can’t be,” Jim moaned.

“Why would I lie to you, Trollhunter?”

“I can think of a few reasons.”

“How… plucky of you.” It guided Jim in front of a new frame and spun him around. “But have you considered that you are the one being untruthful? Lying to your friends, lying to yourself…”

Jim found himself looking into a mirror, his reflection startling him at first. Unconsciously, he ran a gloved hand along his scar, the cool metal extremely welcome against his suddenly feverish skin. Gunmar loomed behind him, his single blue eye gleaming as it watched Jim. Then, without warning, Jim’s reflection in the mirror began to shift, starting at his scar and moving outward. His skin became blue, horns sprouted from his head, and fangs grew to put the finishing touches on a very wild, very trollish visage. His stature grew, and one of his armor’s gauntlets vanished to reveal an inhuman four-fingered hand.

Startled, Jim looked down, only to find his hands hadn’t changed. Nothing had changed. Nothing, that is, except for the bubble of inexplicable fear rising in his chest.

“No…” he groaned. “No, what… what is the meaning of this?”

The Dark One gave a booming laugh. “You shall see, Trollhunter…”

“You shall see.”

Jim woke with a start. Struggling to breathe, he clawed at his chest, trying in vain to pull the amulet loose. But he remained trapped in his Eclipse Armor, suffocating under its weight. Scratching and scraping, his fingers couldn't seem to find any purchase.

“No… no… let me go!”

But his transformation refused to release. Frustrated and panicked, he writhed and flailed until he fell off his bed, crying out as he crumpled to a heap on his floor.
“Go away… just go away …”

Reduced to sobs, he lay there on the floor for several minutes, feeling as if the weight of the world were pinning him down. Eventually, a small beacon bearing the hope of comfort broke through his clouded thoughts.

Mom.

Willing himself to move, he started half-crawling, half-dragging himself along the floor until he reached the door. His armor knocked against the hardwood with every movement, calling forth the recent memory of his nightmare to the forefront of his mind. Struggling to stand up, he grappled with the doorknob before stumbling into the hallway.

Still gasping for breath, he traversed the few steps between his room and his mother’s, falling against her closed door.

“Mom?” he choked. When he got no response, he started frantically glancing around before his eyes landed on a sticky note affixed to the door. Shakily, he snatched it and tried to make sense of the writing.

_Gone to hospital. Call if you need me._

...

_She’s… not here?_

Feeling lost and overcome by a terror he couldn't explain, Jim wobbled back to his room and collapsed onto his bed. Crying soundlessly, he clumsily reached for his cell phone. He hated to call his mom while she was at work, but he didn't want to be alone right now.

Correction: he _needed_ to not be alone right now.

Shaking, he started scrolling through his contact list.

_I need…_

But before he could reach the picture of his mom, he paused.

_Claire._

Feeling as if he were moving in a haze, his thumb hovered over the little green call symbol. He hesitated.

Then pressed the button.

The few seconds of waiting while it rang felt like an eternity. But, in reality, it wasn't long before a very groggy, but very concerned, voice came through the speaker of the phone.

“Jim? Is that you?”

He silently nodded, unable to call upon any words or form any sort of sentence. He quickly realized the stupidity of it - _idiot, she can’t see you_ - but somehow he still failed to make a sound.

“Jim, is everything alright? Are you okay?”

This time a sound escaped his lips. That is, if you can call a gurgling, moaning sort of cry that
sounds reminiscent of a drowning cat a sound.

The sleepiness in Claire's voice instantly vanished. “Shit. Alright, I'm coming over. I'll be there in a couple seconds.”

And, true to her word, mere seconds after his screen went blank a portal opened up in the middle of his room. Claire stepped through, pajamas and all, and urgently rushed to Jim's side. He awkwardly clamored for her as soon as she sat on the edge of his bed, twisting himself so that he could practically throw himself into her lap.

Some of the tightness in his chest immediately dissipated when he felt a pair of arms wrap around him in return. He cried openly in her embrace, her oversized t-shirt muffling the sound of his loud, heaving sobs.

“Shhhh, it's okay, Jim. It's okay, I'm here,” she soothed, doing her best to console him through the shell of his armor. “I take it your mom is at work?”

He nodded.

“And you had another nightmare?”

Again he nodded, a little more forcefully this time.

He felt one of her hands wander up to the back of his head, her fingers threading through his hair and tracing circles against his scalp.

“It was just a dream. You're safe now. I've got you.”

His only response was his continued sobbing into her shoulder.

They sat like that for a few minutes, with Claire doing her best to calm him by muttering little encouragements in his ear while she held him. It helped a bit, but he found her mere presence was the biggest contributing factor to the gradual steadying of his pulse. He pressed deeper into her embrace, burying himself in her scent.

“Ow,” she hissed, but made no attempt to push him away. “Jim, your armor…”

Right. This damn armor.

He tried to will away the Eclipse armor. But it still wouldn't budge.

“It's not… I can't…” he gasped, his face mostly hidden by her shoulder.

“Talk to me, Jim,” she murmured against his cheek. “What's wrong?”

“It's… it's stuck.”

“Wait, your… your armor won't come off?”

He nodded, letting out another sob.

“It’s alright, it's probably just reacting to your emotions. Just… try to take deep breaths, okay?”

Shaking as he took a deep breath, he slowly exhaled and tried to clear his swarming thoughts.

But Gunmar.
The forest. The bridge.

Arcadia.

Me...

What the hell is going on?

Claire held him tighter when his shoulders shook. “Jim, breathe. Focus on that. Just that. Breathe in… breathe out…”

He took another breath, paying attention to the way it filled his lungs. How it carried the clean, comforting scent of Claire with it. He let the air back out, waiting until it felt like all of it had evacuated his lungs before attempting to breathe in again. The thrumming of his pulse in his ears started to quiet down.

A flash of red illuminated his room, and the armor was finally gone. Instantly, he was aware of the sensation of Claire's hands against the skin of his back. He felt cold, too cold, as the sweat coating his back began to evaporate; but Claire felt so, so warm. With a shuddering sigh, he sank even further into her arms, ignoring the mild protesting from his ribs.

“Woah, there,” she cautioned, “I may be pretty strong, but I'm not gonna be able to hold you up for much longer.”

He tilted his head so he could read her expression, finding nothing but compassion. The knot that had started twisting his heartstrings immediately relaxed.

A faint blush colored her cheeks, “I think a, uh, change in position might be in order.” Gently coaxing him off her lap, she guided him so that he was lying back down on the bed. Reeling from the loss of her touch, it wasn't long before Jim felt her hesitantly crawl over and lay down alongside him.

Now it was even easier to bury himself in her embrace.

He drew her close, circling his hands around her waist as he nestled his head under her chin. She reciprocated in kind, one hand cradling his head while the other traced the muscles of his upper back.

He wished they could stay like this forever; wrapped in each other's arms, safe from all the dark forces that conspired against them.

He shivered as another small sob escaped him.

“It's okay,” she murmured, “it was just a nightmare.”

“But it seemed so real,” he sniffed.

“Tell me about it, then. What makes it so realistic?”

“I... I don't know. It's mostly just a feeling,” he mumbled, pressing even closer against her. God, she was so soft. “I... I think Gunmar is trying to mess with my head.”

“You do? Is it... because of...” she trailed off, pulling slightly away so she could study his face. Specifically, the narrow gash that marred his features.

“I think so, yeah.”
She sighed and held him tighter. Stroking his hair, she whispered, “Tell me more?”

“Claire, I -”

“Please?”

Jim took a sharp breath. “I… think Gunmar got out of the Darklands. It…” he paused to steady himself. “In my dream, he showed me a scene of some shadows passing through the Bridge right before we did. One of them had horns that looked like Gunmar’s.”

“You really think so? It's not just some ploy to make you more paranoid?” Her voice was laced with concern.

“I… don't know. Either way, he's definitely got me all fucked up,” he laughed darkly.

“Jim! Don't say that!”

“But it’s true! I'm a fucking mess!”

“No. No, you're not. You're just healing, you've been through a lot.”

“But I don't feel like I'm healing!” he cried, trembling as he clutched the bedsheets behind Claire. “I feel broken. Useless.”

“You weren't useless tonight! You probably took out, like, a solid quarter of those goblins all on your own.” She tried to soothe him by rubbing his back, but his frustration continued to build.

“But I was practically useless afterwards! Toby had to help me walk across the street, my mom had to help me take a bath like a fucking two-year-old because I couldn't even get in the tub on my own! Useless!”

“No, not useless. Healing.”

“Ugh!” He could feel tears welling up in the corners of his eyes.

“Jim, please, just calm down. Breathe.”

The tears were flowing now, spilling from his eyes and soaking into Claire's shirt.

“Jim…” she started softly, putting a little distance between them so she could look him in the eyes. She cupped either side of his face with her hands, gently wiping away any tears that fell within range of her thumbs. “Jim, you aren't useless. You're a hero. Sure, maybe you're a little broken right now, and heaven knows you've made some pretty dumb decisions in the past -”

“Hey,” he scowled.

“But you'll get through this,” she continued. “You will heal. Because even if Gunmar tries to mess with your head, he can't mess with this.” Her hand wandered down to his chest, resting over the bandaged area.

“My bandages?”

“No, doofus. Your heart.”

“Oh.”
She smiled at him. “You've got a heart of gold, Jim Lake. And no one can take that away from you, no matter what you go through.”

He smiled through his tears as he hugged her. “You really think that?”

“Of course,” she briefly kissed the top of his head. “Though the sooner you can heal, the better.”

“Agreed.”

“And to do that, ” she started extricating herself from his arms, “you need to get plenty of rest.”

His eyes went wide. “Wait, no, don't -”

“Jim, I should really get back home. You may have the day off, but I still have school in the morning.”

“But…” without warning, his panic came back in full force. “The potion didn't work and I don't want to be left alone!”

Already halfway sitting up, Claire's eyebrows furrowed as she looked down at him. “What's that? Slower this time.”

“I don't think the potion is working. Not without chugging half the bottle again,” he said in alarm. Then, softly, he added, “And I really don't want to be left alone right now.”

Claire sighed, clearly considering some things in her head. “Well… I could stay with you. Just for tonight. To keep you company and… maybe help keep the nightmares away.”

Jim's face lit up. “Really?”

“Sure, I - eep!” she squealed when he tugged her back down beside him.

“Thank you,” he murmured as he snuggled into her side.

“Yeah, whatever,” she kissed him on the cheek, smiling against his skin. “Just go to sleep.”

Claire had set an early alarm on her phone - just in case - so she could make it back to her own room before her usual school alarm went off. But somehow, she'd managed to wake up on her own before even that. Not that she was about to complain; she felt pretty well-rested, and now she had roughly half an hour to simply lie in bed.

Next to Jim.

Her heart skipped a beat.

The first rays of morning light beginning to stream through the window washed over his sleeping form, highlighting the outline of his muscles and casting shadows over the imperfections in his skin. There were... a lot of shadows. But if anything, the many marks he bore made him that much more beautiful in her eyes.

Careful to avoid his injured rib cage, she timidly traced a line of small scars running along his torso that looked suspiciously similar to the gaps between the plates of his armor. She hoped that they were the result of chafing and blisters, but a nagging feeling told her that something much more sinister had caused the damage. Because, as his bruises and bandaged cuts and scrapes attested to, even a magic suit of armor wasn't impervious to all attacks.
Claire sighed, letting her hand wander farther up Jim's chest until she could feel his steady heartbeat and the slow rise and fall of his breathing. She thought she spied a smile playing on Jim's face; this was by far the most relaxed she'd seen him since his return from the Darklands.

Well, except for the time he literally tried to sleep forever. He was pretty peaceful-looking then, too.

She smiled a little at the thought. Not that she wanted to live through that again, but the whole kissing part of that ordeal… she'd be lying if she said she didn't enjoy it.

Her gaze settled on his face, suddenly drawn to his extremely kissable lips.

*Pull yourself together, Claire, now's not the time for this. Right now he needs sleep. Kissing can come later.*

Her heart fluttered at the thought.

Then her heart nearly stopped when the door to his room creaked open.

It opened barely wide enough so that Jim's mom, who had presumably just gotten back from her shift at the hospital, could poke her head in to check on her son. And discover that he wasn't alone.

Silently, Claire met Dr. Lake's gaze from across the room. The older woman's eyes watched her not with disapproval, but rather a mix of shock and confusion. So as to not disturb Jim, Claire mouthed the words, 'I'll explain later.'

Dr. Lake nodded. Looking back and forth between the two of them, taking note of their current position and Jim’s lack of shirt, the confusion on her face morphed into a sly smile.

“No, it's not like - !” Claire started, immediately cutting herself off with a small gasp. Jim's mom brought a hand up to her mouth in an attempt to keep herself from snickering out loud.

Meanwhile, Jim softly moaned and rolled onto his side, grinning in his sleep and apparently oblivious to Claire's minor outburst. He wrapped himself around her, pulling himself close. Very close.

Oh boy, was he close.

The surprise on Claire's face must have shown, as Jim's mom immediately looked like she was on the verge of bursting with laughter. She quickly backed out of the room and closed the door, followed by the sound of muffled laughter coming from the other side of the wall.

Claire could feel her face burning with embarrassment.

*Great. Now we're going to get teased for this for, like, a week.*

But as she turned her full attention back towards Jim, she found her embarrassment and general awkwardness already melting away. His expression was so gentle, so… very much Jim. She had a sudden urge to squeeze him tight and never let go. Instead, she settled for tenderly combing through his hair with one hand while the other found a comfortable place to rest on his back. Jim sighed at the contact, somehow finding a way to snuggle even closer against her.

*Damn it, why does he have to be so cute?*

The moment Claire glanced at the clock was when, of course, the alarm on her phone started going
off. She desperately reached for it on the desk, hoping to silence it before Jim could stir. But it turned out Jim made a very effective obstacle - his broader shoulders were impossible to reach around given their current position.

“Five more minutes, Mom…” he mumbled, his eyes still closed.

Claire kept trying to reach her phone, but the alarm only continued to grow louder as she kept failing to grab the device. “Damn it,” she whispered.

Jim's eyes fluttered open. He spoke, groggy from sleep, “Wait… that's not my alarm.”

“It's mine, silly,” she murmured in his ear, “and I can't reach it because you're in the way.”

Wordlessly, he freed one of his arms and reached around behind him, groping around for the source of the alarm. Finally grabbing it, he pressed it into her waiting hand and immediately resumed his previous position. “Don't go,” he whined.

“I have to. If I don't get home to turn my school alarm off, well… let's just say you won't have to worry about Gunmar anymore.”

“How so?”

“My dad will literally kill you.”

“Oh.” Despite the warning, Jim refused to release his hold on her.

Claire sighed as she stroked his cheek. “Did you sleep well, at least?”

“Actually, yeah. I think… having you here, it definitely helped.”

She smiled. “Good.”

“So, uh…” he began sheepishly, “Could you maybe… come back tonight?”

Her pulse quickened ever so slightly. “I… um…” she looked at him, noting the hopefulness filling his stare. “If it really helps keep away the nightmares, then sure. Of course,” she sighed. “I'll just need to figure out what cover story to tell my parents.”

*Cover story... just a different word for lying.*

Claire wanted nothing more than to tell her parents the truth. About everything. But there was no way they'd understand.

Jim beamed at her, hugging her tight. “Thank you. So much.”

“Mnhmm,” she hummed, quickly kissing him on the cheek. It had the desired effect of painting a dopey grin on his face. “But seriously, I need to get going. *Now.*”

“But -”

“Jim.”

“Fine,” he pouted, relaxing his hold just enough so that Claire could untangle herself from beside him. She crawled off the bed, turning to look at him as she lifted up the Shadow Staff.

“I'll see you later. Promise me you'll get plenty of rest today?” she prompted.
“I’ll try.”

“Good.” She summoned a portal in the middle of his room. Before stepping through, she glanced over her shoulder with a mischievous smirk, “Oh, by the way… your Mom came home from work and checked in on you, like, thirty minutes ago. And she totally knows I slept over last night.”

She got the satisfaction of watching his face turn bright pink right before she vanished through the portal.

Chapter End Notes

can you tell i’m still having feelings about season 3???

I have literally been itching to write this chapter since I first started this fic, but I had to wait until it fit organically into the plot. You have no idea how much I’ve been Suffering over here.

Next up: I stop stalling and try to remember what I was doing with the plot.
Chapter 22

Chapter Summary

New stones, new powers.
and new ways to induce SUFFERING

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Jim sat on the stone table, watching with bated breath as Vendel paced silently around the cave. Jim’s hands gripped the edge of the table for support, a nervous energy buzzing at the edges of his awareness.

Abruptly, Vendel stopped in his tracks, the glow of the Heartstone exaggerating the creases on his wizened face. “And you are certain of what you saw in your dreams?” the old troll questioned, peering at him with an unreadable expression.

“Well, um, not really,” Jim stammered, “and I’d call them nightmares, not dreams, but -”

“But 'tis a recurring vision, yes?”

“Um, yeah, pretty much. For the past three nights now, ever since the, uh, goblin incident,” Jim bit his lip. “Vendel, what does it mean?”

He gave Jim a tired look. “It means you should have come to me sooner.”

“Sorry, but my mom had me on strict bedrest! I haven’t even been allowed to go back to school yet!”

“I am well aware. But that is no excuse for keeping me in the dark on the matter,” his gaze immediately darted over to Blinky, who had been surprisingly quiet during the conversation so far. “Blinkous, how is it that you can speak so many words on a daily basis yet fail to relay such an important message?”

Blinky started to speak up, “My apologies, Vendel, I -”

“It’s not Blinky’s fault,” Jim interrupted. “I didn’t even tell him until this morning. I… I wasn’t really sure until then.”

The pattern of the past couple nights had been the same: each night he’d go to bed curled up next to Claire, but as soon as he fell asleep there would be a nightmare waiting for him. He’d wake up in a panic, Claire would make quick work of calming him down, and then he’d fall back asleep and slumber peacefully the rest of the night while wrapped in her embrace. Then in the morning, as daylight began brightening the world, Jim’s thoughts would darken with the unshakable feeling that Gunmar had somehow managed to escape from the Darklands.

“Wasn’t sure of what, exactly? That your vividly realistic dreams bore any sort of significance?” Vendel rolled his eyes as he started rummaging around his shelves. “Now, it is possible, as you said, that your visions are nothing more than a seed planted by Gunmar to heighten your paranoia,
but there is the very real possibility that Gunmar is no longer confined within the Darklands. Therefore, it is imperative we begin preparations now.” He ducked down out of Jim's line of sight as he reached for something.

“But… well, look at me!” Jim gestured. “I'm nowhere near being back in fighting condition yet!”

Granted, Jim was definitely feeling a little more whole after his uneventful past couple of days spent at home; his mom didn't have to layer on the gauze quite as thick now, and his ribs, though still painful as hell, finally felt like they were slowly stitching themselves back together. Not that he could actually feel that happening, but it was rather encouraging to at least imagine.

And it was definitely more encouraging than his nightmares as of late.

Vendel straightened up to look at Jim. “You weren't exactly a warrior when you first came to us, either. As you humans put it, desperate times call for desperate measures.” Without further ado, Vendel brought a small chest over to the table and set it down with a thud beside Jim.

Upon seeing the box, Blinky immediately flitted over to join them at the table. “Vendel!” he gasped, “Surely Master Jim is not yet ready for such power!”

“He wields the Triumbric stones, does he not?” Vendel raised an eyebrow at the four-armed troll.

“Affirmative. But -”

“Then I am sure our Trollhunter can handle another powerup. Maybe even two.”

“Umm, powerup?” Jim queried. “What exactly is in that box?”

Vendel gave him a mischievous smile. “Your ‘periodic table’ you humans have is… amusing. But what if I told you that there are more elements in this world than you can possibly imagine?”

“I'd file a complaint against my school’s science department.”

Vendel let out a booming laugh, “Oh my! No need for such drastic measures, young Trollhunter, but do hold onto that sense of humor. Where was I?... Ah, yes: in the same way you have added the Triumbric stones to your amulet, other elemental stones can also be used to grant you new abilities. The right one could give you a distinct advantage when it comes time to face Gunmar.” Vendel opened the lid of the box, revealing a glittering rainbow of small stones resting inside. “Ideally you would find your own element to cut to shape as it suits you, but, since time is of the essence, these precious stones used by Trollhunters past will make for a good start.”

Jim couldn't help but drop his jaw at the assortment of shining elements. If Toby could see this, he'd probably faint. “What do they do?”

“Some grant increased speed, greater strength, the ability to walk in broad daylight -”

“Uh, I think I’m good with that one,” Jim chuckled.

“Then we shall see how good you are with the rest,” Vendel mused, closing the box. “However, this room is not the appropriate place for running any sort of trials. Blinkous, go fire up the Forge.”


“Is on the mend, and I'm sure he is itching to do something other than sit around on his bottom all day,” Vendel retorted. The old troll wasn't necessarily wrong, but...
“I… I don't know,” Jim stammered. “My mom has threatened to put me in a full body cast if I do anything to hurt my ribs again.”

“Then we shall simply have to ensure that does not happen,” Vendel winked.

“It's not fair!” Toby pouted, setting down his lunch tray. “Jim gets to go hang out in Trollmarket while we're stuck here in school?”

“TP,” Claire started, “it's not like he's spending all day there, he just needed to go talk to Vendel about his nightmares.”

Toby huffed a little before digging in to his pile of lumpy mashed potatoes. Then he looked back up at Claire, quickly donning a sympathetic expression, “The nightmares are that bad, huh?”

Claire poked at a chicken nugget. At least, she was pretty sure it was chicken. “Yeah. Jim keeps trying to play them off as no big deal, but I think they're getting worse,” she sighed. “Last night was the worst yet, I was up for a couple of hours just trying to get him to calm down.”

“Oh, really? Just ‘calming him down’?” Toby wiggled his eyebrows at her.

“Toby! I'm serious!” Claire could feel the heat rising in her cheeks.

And, as fate would have it, that was the moment Darcy finished going through the lunch line and walked over to their table. “Oooh, what are we talking about that's making Claire-bear’s face bright pink?” she set down her tray and sidled up next to Toby. “Is it her nightly escapades with a certain tall, dark-haired boy?”

“Darcy!” Claire sputtered, her eyes widening. “But how -? I'm not… we're not -!”

“Girl. You ask me to cover for you, with no explanation, multiple nights in a row. And, well, this right here is a pretty self-explanatory Exhibit B,” she gestured across the table at an extremely flustered Claire. “The math practically does itself.”

“But it's not like that! At all! Jim still has a lot of, um, anxiety left over from his... disease. So I help him fall asleep. That's it.”

“Uh-huh. I'm sure you do,” Darcy winked.

“It's nothing like that, I swear!”

“Hey, whatever you consensually do at night is up to you. But if I could connect the dots, even if the picture is as innocent as you say, you can bet your ass half the school is already gossiping about their own version.”

“Ugh,” Claire moaned, burying her face in her hands. “If my parents find out…”

“Claire, if you really are just helping Jim with his anxiety, why don't you tell your parents the truth? I'm sure they'd understand.”

“No way, you've met my parents. My mom would be eternally disappointed in me, and my dad would most definitely try to kill Jim. They already don't like him.”

“I don't know, I still think you should talk to them.” She turned to look at Toby, “What do you think, TP?”
“Ummmm,” Toby nervously looked back and forth between Claire and Darcy. “I… agree with Darcy. Claire, you should really let your parents know - about helping with Jim's anxiety, that is. After all, it's not like Jim's mom doesn't already know.”

“Hold up,” Darcy interrupted, “Dr. Lake knows? Then just have her talk to your parents! She's, you know, a doctor! They'll definitely listen to her!”

“That's, uh, actually not a bad idea,” Claire mused. “Fine, I'll see if Dr. Lake will talk to them later. It would be nice to not have to keep sneaking in and out of my own house.”

“So, what’s up first?” Jim asked, standing with his hands on his hips in the middle of the Hero’s Forge.

“First, you don your armor,” Vendel stated. “Then we shall decide which element you should, as you say, take for a spin.”

“Okay then,” a nervous lump formed in the back of Jim’s throat. Would he be able to summon Daylight this time? “For the glory of -”

“No, the other one.”

Jim tried not to look too relieved when he recited the other incantation. “For the doom of Gunmar, Eclipse is mine to command.” The familiar sequence of red light flashed, leaving Jim standing in the magic armor that, at this point, felt like a second skin.

Blinky pulled a small, red stone from the box. “Perhaps Master Jim should try this one first?”

Vendel took it from his hand and held it up to the light. “Ah, yes. I do believe this one belonged to Nimaeya the Nimble. With this, she navigated all manners of terrain, even vertical surfaces.”

“Wait, so I’ll be able to climb walls with that? Just like Spiderman?”

“Indeed, if you can wield it. Though I know not of this human spider you refer to,” Vendel raised an eyebrow at him.

“Oh, Spiderman’s a superhero. You know, from comic books and movies and stuff. He’s not real, of course, but he’s pretty cool. You see, he got bitten by a radioactive spider in a lab, and then he got super strength and the ability to climb up walls and Spidey Senses and -”

“Sounds absolutely ridiculous,” Blinky interrupted, rolling his eyes. “Radioactive spiders. Everyone knows that only insects of the genus *periplaneta* can successfully survive significant amounts of radioactive isotope exposure.”

“If you two are finished,” Vendel glared at them, “Jim, if you would please, place the stone inside your amulet.”

Jim accepted the stone from Vendel and twisted the amulet off his chest, revealing the hidden multi-chambered compartment. The amulet whirred after he placed the stone inside and re-affixed it to his breastplate. “I don't feel any different,” he noted. “How will I know if it even works?”

Vendel pulled the lever beside him, causing the center platform of the Forge to start towering over them. “We shall find out soon enough. Try to climb up to the Soothscryer. *Without* using any of your weapons.”
Jim casually cracked his neck and began lightly jogging over to the tower of stone, his blood pumping with exhilaration. *I'm back in the Forge! I'm training again! Man, it feels good to be back!*

... *And ouch, it hurts to run. Okay, slowing down...*

Jim slowed to a brisk walk, quickly finding the impact from trying to run was not agreeing whatsoever with his ribs. And he probably shouldn't push his still-slightly-atrophied muscles to their full limits yet, as he wanted to make sure he had plenty of strength to take some of these new powers for a test drive.

He hesitantly placed his palms on the stone pillar, followed by his left foot. Then the right. The amulet gave off a quick pulse of light, and Jim found he was firmly attached to the surface. “Haha!” he exclaimed, “I'm not falling off!”

“But you are not climbing, either, Master Jim,” Blinky called out. “Go on, try to reach the top!”

Jim made steady progress up the rock, fluidly moving one limb after the other and finding that, magically, his hands and feet stuck to the surface every time. Just like Spiderman. *Wait ’til Tobes hears about this!*

He made it maybe twenty feet up the pillar before he heard Blinky say something else; though he couldn't quite make out what his mentor was trying to tell him, his words getting lost as they echoed across the cavernous space. Jim glanced back over his shoulder, “Huh? What's that, Blinky?”

“As I was saying -”

Abruptly, Jim's Spiderman-like grip on the rock surface slipped. “Oh no,” he gulped, flailing out to try and get some sort of purchase on the wall. But whatever magic had been keeping him in place had suddenly vanished, leaving Jim to plummet back down to ground level. He landed on his back, hard, feeling the wind rush out of his lungs. He'd be feeling that later, that's for sure.

“- do not let your concentration slip,” Blinky finished with a cringe. “Master Jim, are you alright?”

Jim, still lying sprawled on his back, responded with a thumbs-up sign. “I think I'll take that full-body cast now,” he gasped.

“Oh dear…” Blinky rushed over and helped Jim get back on his feet. “Perhaps a different element is in order?”

“Yes, please,” Jim's side twinged with pain as he straightened up. “Maybe something a little closer to the ground, this time?” He removed the Spiderman Stone from his amulet and handed it back to Vendel.

“That would probably be for the best,” Vendel remarked, placing the gemstone back in its slot. He squinted at the rest of the elements. “Hmmm… ah, yes, this one might be more appropriate.” He delicately pulled out a multi-faceted, light purple stone.

Blinky’s eyes lit up. “The Cernentia Stone! Ergaal the Evasive used its power to stay one step ahead of the enemy and dodge many an attack! … That is, until Bular cut off his foot. And then his head,” he made a concerned face as he pressed a hand to his throat.

“Oh, that’s reassuring.” Nevertheless, Jim took the stone from Vendel and inserted it into the amulet. He took a few steps backwards, putting some distance between himself and the two trolls.
“So, what now? Are you guys gonna try to hit me or something?”

“Oh, not us, Master Jim,” Blinky said with a smile. “AAARRRGGHH!!!”

Wait, AAARRRGGHH!?!? But I don’t see -

Jim’s only warning was the slight shifting of a loose stone behind him; to be honest, it wasn’t much of a warning at all. Because a split second later something heavy impacted Jim’s back, knocking him forward and onto the ground faster than the combined force of all the vindictive dodgeballs Steve Palchuck had ever thrown at him. He was briefly aware of his helmet appearing at the last second to shield his face from colliding with the ground.

And then everything went pitch-black.

Jim lay on the ground, his head reeling from the force of the haymaker. His helmet flickered before dissolving back into the aether.

“Useless fleshbag!” Gunmar spat. Jim felt the floor shake as he stomped over, followed by a massive hand coming down and encircling his neck, cracking the stone beneath him with its force. The world around him shifted as he was lifted high into the air.

Gunmar held Jim up at arm’s length, his claw torturously crushing Jim’s windpipe through the protection of his chainmail. Dots swam in front of Jim as the corners of his vision began fading to black. He frantically pumped his legs, his hands scraping at Gunmar’s stony grip, desperate for any sort of leverage that would give him an inch to breathe. But the more he struggled, the tighter Gunmar’s fist squeezed.

“Where is the bridge, Trollhunter?!” the Black One roared, “I tire of waiting for your allies to come retrieve you! Do they not care about your fate?”

“I… don’t… know…” he gasped, unable to suck in enough air to fill his lungs.

But the troll raised a good point - where were his friends? He had absolutely no idea how long it had been now, but surely they hadn’t forgotten about him... Had they?

No… no way, Toby would stage a one-man rescue mission all by himself if he could.

Then the realization finally hit him, sinking into his gut with a heavy, sickening feeling:

Even if Killabee Bridge wasn’t completely destroyed, only a Trollhunter can open it.

And the world’s only Trollhunter was currently stuck in the Darklands, imprisoned by Gunmar.

And there wouldn’t be another Trollhunter until…

If Jim had any air left, he would have used it at that moment to sob at the top of his lungs. But instead, all he could muster was a strangled whine.

I’m not going to make it out of the Darklands alive.

“Perhaps,” Dictatious interrupted, “there is a way to heighten his allies’ sense of urgency.”

“And what would you suggest?” Gunmar growled, whipping Jim around like a rag doll as he turned to face his council.

“There is still a Fetch located in Trollmarket. So let us send something small through. Something
“to remind them of their Trollhunter.”

Their conversation grew more distant as Jim slipped further and further into the cold sea of unconsciousness.

“But the armor prot-ts the whel-... we won’t b-... cut off anything sma-... to fit...”

“The helm-... a lock of hair cou-...”

Jim was swallowed by a void as all light, sound, and feeling disappeared from his senses.

...

When he came to, his first awareness was of his face being pressed against the cold floor.

Then, of spider-like limbs crawling all over him.

A sharp tug on the back of his head jerked him upwards, his strained yelp never quite making its way out of his throat.

There was a faint slicing sound. The force pulling on the back of his head immediately disappeared, and his face abruptly crashed back down to the stone surface below. Everything stung.

Some indistinct chattering took place, followed by a low chuckle as Gunmar himself knelt down next to Jim. He unceremoniously turned Jim’s head, forcing him to look at the small trophy clutched in his grip: a clump of Jim’s hair, tangled and matted with dried blood. “Let us see if this spurs your friends to act with more haste,” the troll sneered.

“Or else, the next thing I send through the Fetch will be your head.”

Jim gasped as his eyes flew open, taking in the sight of the lofty ceiling of Hero’s Forge.

“Master Jim! Are you alright?” Blinky was kneeling over him, all six eyes peering down at him with great concern.

Jim coughed, flinching when his side flared up in pain. “I... I’ve been better.”

“Sorry, Jim,” AAARRRGGHH!!! apologized. “Thought stone would work.”

“It’s okay... you didn’t mean it,” he wheezed, the air slowly coming back into his lungs. AAARRRGGGH!!! helped him sit up, one of the troll’s giant hands supporting his back so he wouldn’t fall backwards.

Jim ran a hand through his hair, lingering on the back of his head where he half-expected to find an unevenly trimmed section. But his fingers found nothing out of the ordinary, only the barely perceptible scrapes and scabs that lay hidden beneath his hairline. Jim squeezed his eyes shut as a shudder ran up his spine. He tried to blink away the tears building behind his eyelids, but a couple managed to escape and roll down his cheeks.

“Master Jim,” Blinky started, even more tenderly this time, “what is troubling you?”

“Nothing, Blinky. I’ll be fine.”

“Master Jim -”
“I said, I’ll be fine,” Jim frowned, still keeping his eyes closed.

*I’m in Trollmarket. In the Hero’s Forge. Not in the Darklands. I’ll be fine.*

“Very well,” Blinky muttered, crestfallen. “I believe it is time for us to take you back home to your mother.”

Jim nodded, wiping tears from his cheeks with the palm of his hand. Blinky stood back as AAARRRGGHH!!! helped Jim get back up on his feet. He exhaled as he released his armor, tucking the amulet away in the pocket of his jeans. His side was practically screaming with pain - so much for taking it easy.

Vendel took a few steps closer to the trio, the chest of elements tucked under his arm. “Indeed. I think our Trollhunter has had enough for today.”

“You think?” Jim croaked. “I’ve managed to undo, like, three days worth of healing in one fell swoop!” To emphasize his point, Jim jerked up his sweater and undershirt to reveal his bruised side; fresh splotches of purple were already spreading across his ribcage, covering up the dull greens and yellows from before. “Make that five days,” he instinctively poked at his side, hissing at the light contact. “Ouch…”

“Oh dear,” Vendel remarked, furrowing his brow at the sight of Jim's side. “That is quite the array of colors. No matter - some Quagawump mud should help set it right.”

“I’m sorry, what?”

“Quagawump mud,” Vendel repeated. “Supposedly it does wonders for the skin, though it is more well-known for its remarkable healing properties.”

“It… can heal me?” Jim wasn’t sure if he wanted to faint or punch something.

“It will help speed the process along,” Vendel continued, glancing back and forth between Jim and Blinky. “I fear it won’t do much for any sort of scar, but it does wonders for cuts, scrapes, bruises, and broken bones.”

“Seriously?”

“Of course. Without Quagawump mud, over half the population of Florida would be extinct by now.” Vendel scowled at Blinky. “Blinkous Galadrigal, surely you did not forget about such a thing?”

Jim glanced sideways at Blinky, noticing his flabbergasted expression. “…! Of course not! I, uh…” the troll slumped his shoulders. “Yes. I am ashamed to admit that, amidst the past week’s flurry of activity, I had utterly forgotten the medicinal properties of Quagawump mud.”

“Blinky!” Jim whined.

“I do apologize, Master Jim. I… have failed you.” He looked down at the floor, clasping both sets of hands together.

“No, Blinky, you haven’t… you could never fail me,” Jim reassured, placing a hand on Blinky’s shoulder. “But I really wish someone could have mentioned this sooner.” He looked over at Vendel. “We don’t happen to have any Quagawump mud here, do we?”

“I have a spare jar in the healing dwell, as a matter of fact,” Vendel stated. “Come, we shall apply
it to your side before we send you home. It won't be enough to completely heal you, but it should at least hide the fact that we tried to break your fragile human body today."

Jim gave Vendel a quizzical look.

"Your mother is a force to be reckoned with, James Lake Jr.," the leader of Trollmarket explained, "and I honestly fear what wrath she would bring down upon us lest she discover our carelessness."

"Fair point," Jim smirked. He gratefully leaned against Blinky for support as they made their way out of the Forge.

"Again, I apologize profusely, Master Jim," Blinky started, "I should have remembered -"

"Hey," Jim interrupted, turning to meet his eyes, "it's fine, Blinky, really. Even you can't know everything all the time." He flashed Blinky a reassuring smile.

And not one of them noticed when the amulet glowed from the depths of Jim's pocket.

Chapter End Notes

*reclines in chair and chuckles darkly* I love a good cliffhanger, don't you? ;)

I definitely went back and forth for a while trying to decide if I was going to include the Quagawump mud stuff, or if I was going to go a different direction. In the end, I figured it's about time for me to ease up on Jim's physical pain... for now.

I also decided I couldn't pass up the chance to poke fun at Florida. Heh.
“Ah, little Gynt, good to see you back in class. Can I trust you will not fall asleep during my lecture today?”

Jim gave Nomura a sheepish look as he walked past the history teacher’s desk. “Yeah, um, I’m doing better. Sleep-wise, at least. Sort of.”

“Good. I must say, you do look a little healthier than you did earlier in the week. Still extremely pale,” she smirked, “but definitely less zombie-like.”

“Um, thanks? Uh,” he lowered his voice, anxiously running his hands along the strap of his messenger bag, “Could… could I talk to you after class?”

“Something troubling you, little Gynt?” Nomura tilted her head to the side.

“Well, yeah. I already talked with Vendel about it yesterday, but… I dunno. I kind of want to know what you think.”

“About what?”

“My… nightmares. I keep having them. I’m pretty sure they mean something, and Vendel does, too, but… well, you and I were both… you know...”

She frowned. “I already told you, I don’t get nightmares like you do.”

“I know! I just… I thought… maybe...”

“Fine,” she sighed, “If it gets you to stop babbling, you can talk to me about it after class. But right now you should take your seat - the bell’s about to ring, and I have a lot I want to cover today.”

“Thanks, Nom- uh, Miss Nomura,” he smiled, making his way to the open window seat next to Claire and Toby. He settled into the chair, taking out a notebook and pencil.

Poor Gynt.

“Huh?” Jim turned sideways towards Claire. “Did you say something?”

She looked back at him with confusion. “Um, no? Are you okay, Jim? You’ve been hearing things all morning.”

“Oh, I’m fine. Guess I’m just jittery today.”
Claire pursed her lips. *Sure you are.*

“I swear, I’m fine!”

Her brow furrowed. “Wait, but -” her thought got interrupted by the bell. She threw him one last bewildered look before turning towards the front of the room, chewing on her lower lip.

Jim blinked and tried to clear his mind. That was… odd. And seemingly odd things like that had been happening all day.

**Great. I’ve finally cracked.**

“Alright, class, time to get started,” Nomura announced over the last few straggling conversations. “Who can tell me what first comes to mind when I say the word ‘myth’?” she surveyed the silent room, waiting for someone to raise their hand. “Anybody? Need I remind you that participation is part of your grade for this course? There are no wrong answers.”

Steve Palchuck raised his hand.

“Yes, Mr. Palchuck?”

“It’s a myth that the cafeteria serves edible food,” he snarked. There were a few snickers from around the classroom.

“Ah. I rescind my prior comment; apparently there are wrong answers,” Nomura retorted with a smile. The snickering in the room got a little louder as Steve slumped back in his seat. “Myths,” she continued, pulling down the projector screen, “are stories. Legends. Tales passed down, whether by written word or word of mouth, from generation to generation. Usually they are exaggerated, describing fantastical feats that we believe could never have happened.

“And yet,” her green eyes gleamed, “behind every myth is an element of truth. So, if you’ll open your textbooks to page twenty-three…”

Jim tried to pay attention to the lesson. Honestly, he did. But it was near impossible to focus on learning about the Trojan War when an indistinguishable buzzing kept bumping up against the edges of his mind.

*Did I have too much caffeine this morning? I only had two cups, but maybe that wasn’t such a good idea after all... On the bright side, at least I’m not falling asleep in the middle of class! That’s... progress? I guess?*

The bell signifying the end of class couldn’t come soon enough. But when it finally did, Jim hastily put his books back in his bag. The sooner he could eat lunch, the better - food usually helped in situations like this, right?

He got up from his chair, turning to his friends, “I’ll catch up with you guys in the cafeteria - I wanted to talk to Nomura real quick about… stuff.”

Toby gave him a wary look, his line of sight flickering between Jim and Nomura, “Um, alright then, Jimbo. I guess we’ll save you a seat.”

“Don’t take too long, okay? Mary was going to give us more details during lunch about the trip to the beach,” Claire said.

“Wait, what trip?”
“Were you even listening this morning?” Claire teased. “A camp-out at the beach. After school today. Pretty much everyone in our class is going. Sort of a ‘done-with-the-first-week-of-school-and-summer’s-officially-over’ kind of thing. Remember?”

“Oh, uh… I don’t know if that’s a good idea… for, you know, me,” Jim started nervously waving his hands around. “Just, with all my issues and everything going on right now I probably shouldn’t leave town…”

“You’re also in desperate need of sunlight, my dude,” Toby commented. “You’re even more pale than that one summer we stayed inside the whole time playing Gunrobot three.”

“But I can get sunlight by sitting outside at home!”

“But the beach will be more fun,” Claire insisted. “And it’s only a thirty minute drive outside of town.”

The three of them all turned when they heard a cough from the front of the room; Nomura was leaning against her desk watching them impatiently. The rest of the classroom had already emptied out.

“We’ll discuss this more at lunch,” Claire promised, giving Jim a quick kiss on the cheek before heading towards the door with Toby.

“Um, have fun talking with Miss Nomura!” Toby waved.

_I still don’t trust her._

“… wait, what was -?” he tried to call out to his friends, but they were already out of earshot. And yet… somehow he had heard Toby say something?

_God, today is turning out to be weird._

_Well, weirder than normal._

_Considering my life, that’s saying something._

“So, little Gynt,” the Changeling started, shutting the door to discourage any inadvertent eavesdropping, “your nightmares?”

Jim relocated to the front of the room, sitting on top of one of the desks and setting his bag down on the floor. “Yeah, um,” he gulped as he tried to collect his thoughts, “the past few nights, my nightmares have pretty much all been focused on the same thing.”

“And that thing is…?”

“Gunmar escaping through Killhead Bridge. Right before we did.”

Nomura’s eyes narrowed. “So what, you’re worried your dreams might be true?”

“I… maybe. I’m not entirely sure,” he bit down on the inside of his cheek. “Vendel seems to think so. He also thinks that this,” he gestured at his scar, “somehow ties my mind to Gunmar’s.”

“You got that courtesy of the Decimaar Blade, correct?” Nomura raised an eyebrow at him. “So I’d say that last statement is pretty plausible.”

“So what if the stuff I’m seeing is just meant to freak me out or something?”
“Hmm… possibly. Gunmar has never been one to specialize in mind games, but with Dictatious constantly whispering in his ear…” she started pacing in front of her desk as she thought aloud. “And those Blood Goblins we encountered Monday night definitely weren’t a good sign. Though you and I both witnessed the bridge crumbling to pieces after we passed through - well, you were out cold by then, I guess, but the rest of us saw… and what could Gunmar gain by messing with your head so much?” Nomura abruptly stopped in her tracks. “Maybe it’s a trap. To get you to go back to the remains of the bridge, only to inadvertently open the portal and let Gunmar out.”

Jim’s eyes widened. “I… I never thought of that.”

Nomura’s brow furrowed, “Of course you didn't. But still, someone should go investigate. Do a sweep of the area around the bridge to check for anything out of the ordinary, maybe at least a clue as to how many goblins got loose. It’s been a week since we escaped, but with any luck the tracks aren’t cold yet.”

“We could go after school today to check it out,” Jim suggested.

“Oh no, not we ,” Nomura corrected. “You and that amulet are going nowhere near that bridge. Not if it could be a trap.” She stared thoughtfully into space for a moment before speaking again, “Perhaps Draal would be interested in accompanying me. For old time’s sake.”

“Wouldn’t that be weird? What with your… history?”

“Our past is complicated, yes, but I would rather have him there in case we encounter anything out of the ordinary. His skill as a warrior is unparalleled, and there is no one I trust more to have at my side,” she gave Jim a once-over, “though you are becoming a close second, little Gynt.”

Jim couldn’t help but smile at the compliment.

“I will let you know if we find anything,” Nomura stated, seemingly making up her mind about going on her self-imposed mission that evening. “Meanwhile, you and your friends have fun at the beach with the rest of your classmates.”

“Oh, uh, I don’t know that -”

“Nonsense. You should go. Enjoy this time with your friends. If Gunmar is plotting to escape - or, Ga-Huel forbid, has already escaped - your days of ‘fun in the sun’ might be numbered.”

Jim nodded, flashing Nomura a smile as he picked up his book bag and headed towards the door. “Thanks, Nomura. For everything.”

“Yeah, whatever.”

“Mom, we’re not even going to be here twenty-four hours! There’s no way we’re going to use this much sunscreen!” Jim protested, holding a bag with half-a-dozen squeeze bottles of sunscreen while Toby and Claire helped unload the rest of their supplies from his mom’s car.

“Jim, you haven’t spent time outside in over six months. I don’t want to come back tomorrow and find you redder than a lobster,” she playfully scowled. “Remember, you need to reapply at least every two hours, if not more.”

“We’ll make sure he’s covered, Dr. L.,” Toby promised, slinging the bag with their tent over his
shoulder. He pulled out his phone and entered something into his screen, his tongue sticking out the corner of his mouth as he concentrated. “There!” he announced triumphantly, “One hour and thirty minutes until the alarm goes off to slather sunscreen on Jim again.”

“And don't forget yourselves,” Barbara added, passing the last couple of bags to Claire. “Call if you need anything. The hospital changed my schedule last-minute and gave me the night off, so if you need me to come back early or -”

“I think we’ll manage, Mom,” Jim smiled.

“Okay then, kiddo,” she stood on her tiptoes to kiss him on the forehead before walking around the car to the driver’s seat. “Have fun, kids!” she waved.

“Bye, Dr. L!” Toby called back. They watched as Dr. Lake’s car rolled along the gravel path that led back out to the main road. Once she rounded the corner and was out of sight, he turned to the other two, “Well, what are we waiting for? Everyone else is already here!” Toby happily started heading down the pathway towards the campgrounds, Jim and Claire following closely at his heels.

Jim could already feel the fresh breeze blowing in from the ocean, carrying with it the taste of salt and a slight fishy scent. This part of the state park was heavily shaded by trees, but the sun was making its best effort to peek through the leafy barrier and bathe them in its warmth. He inhaled deeply, letting the tranquility of it all wash over the tightness lurking in his chest. It felt good - everything here felt so fresh, so alive.

So different than the Darklands and its stale decay.

He was startled when fingers wrapped around his free hand. Glancing to the side, he found Claire looking up at him with a patient expression.

“What's on your mind?” she asked.

“Nothing,” he lightly squeezed her hand, “just happy to be here.”

“You frown when you're happy?”

“No, of course not! It's… I... I dunno. It's hard to explain.”

“Jim...”

“I'm fine. Really. It's just really bright out here. You know, compared to… well, um...”


It wasn't long before they arrived at the campsite. They staked out an open spot next to Eli’s tent (his was the easiest to pick out in a crowd - it was the only one with portable solar panels set up around the perimeter). Toby immediately set to work unpacking the tent, spreading the poles, fabric, and other equipment onto the grass, while Claire pressed a bag with their large beach blanket into Jim's arms.

“You go on ahead and find a nice spot on the beach with the others,” Claire smiled, brushing a stray wisp of hair behind her ear. “TP and I will join you once we get everything set up here.”

“I don't need help, Claire, I got this!” Toby protested. As if to prove his point, he deftly started assembling the main support poles, only to have one of the pieces flex and whack the side of his
“Stupid tent…”

“Yeah, no, I'm helping,” Claire teased before kneeling on the ground by Toby. “We'll catch up with you soon, Jim - go start soaking up some vitamin D.”

“Oh, um, okay,” he mumbled as he revectored towards the beach, shuffling towards the sound of crashing waves and cheerful people and away from Toby's curses upon camping and all things outdoorsy. He watched as the dirt and gravel path beneath his feet gradually transitioned to sand, aware of the thinning trees and increased sunlight bearing down on him. Once he reached the end of the path, he saw the soft, sandy shoreline sprawling before him, giving way to a foamy blue-green sea that stretched out past the horizon. His classmates were spread across the beach, some laying out on the sand, others splashing around in the surf, and a few of the more athletically inclined students were starting up a game of volleyball.

Overall, a very warm and cheerful scene.

But something inexplicably cold and heavy had coiled around Jim's heart, squeezing tighter and tighter with every step he took away from his friends. He stood rooted at the edge of the path, suddenly wanting nothing more than to flee back to the shady campground to Claire and Toby, but somehow his legs were too numb and wobbly to obey any sort of command.

And that's when people started to notice his presence, pausing their activities to look his way.

*Is that... Jim?*

*What's he doing?*

*He looks like he's going to pass out.*

*What's wrong with him?*

*Why is he standing there alone?*

Too many people. Too many sets of eyes, all focused on him. Watching him like he was some sort of spectacle.

Just like the Gumm-Gumms had.

Though he lacked physical restraints, it was as if his own body was holding him prisoner, refusing to move and holding him hostage to the ever increasing stares around him. He trembled as his pulse started beating faster and faster, all the while struggling to breathe. Frozen in place, he clutched the bags he was carrying to his chest, praying they would be a good enough armor-substitute to keep his actual armor from making an appearance; he could already sense the amulet humming in the back pocket of his swim trunks.

*Holy shit, what's wrong with Jim?*

*Seriously, what the hell is wrong with me?!*

A little ways away, a figure got up from sunbathing and started walking his way.

*No. No no no, stay away.*

As the figure got closer, his brain slowly pieced together that it was a familiar figure. A friendly figure. A Darci. She looked at him with concern and understanding. “Jim,” she started softly, “do
you want to come sit by me? Or do you want to go find Toby and Claire?”

He watched her like a deer in headlights, struggling to form any sort of vocal response. He could still sense everyone staring at him; their curiosity was a buzzing cloud of thoughts and theories that threatened to suffocate him where he stood.

Darci must have been aware of the staring, too, for she quickly looked back over her shoulder to glare at their classmates. Jim could feel the murmurs and mutterings swirling around in his head begin to fade away.

“How about we go sit down, okay?” she said gently, tentatively placing a hand on his shoulder to guide him in the right direction. He flinched at the contact.

*It's okay. Darci is a friend. Pull yourself together, Jimbo.*

He eventually nodded and let her lead him over towards the spot she had gotten up from, somehow managing to cross the sand despite his jello-like limbs. There were a few other blankets and chairs set up besides Darci's, but those were currently left unattended by their owners. Darci motioned for him to sit down, and Jim gratefully joined her on one of the blankets and immediately curled his knees up to his chest, abandoning the bags he was carrying on the sand beside them.

“I'll go ahead and set up your stuff,” she stated. “You just focus on breathing, okay?

He nodded again, reveling in the slight security Darci’s blanket was providing. Still curled up, he rolled over onto his uninjured side and felt the warmth of the fabric against his cheek. The sun beat down on the other half of his face, and he was aware of sweat starting to gather underneath his t-shirt. He laid like that for a while, vaguely aware of Darci coming back over to sit beside him once she'd finished her task.

She sighed as she stretched out on the blanket, positioning herself so she could see Jim's face. “Your mom sure packed you a lot of sunscreen, huh?” her tone was light and conversational.

“Yeah,” he replied timidly. “She thinks I'm going to burn to a crisp out here.”

“I don't blame her. She *is* a doctor, after all, and, let's face it, you're pretty pale right now.”

“Ugh, everyone keeps saying that!” he moaned, burying his face in his hands.

“I mean, it's true,” she giggled. “But hey, I only meant it in a teasing, caring sort of way, alright? Everyone knows you've had a pretty shitty time these past few months.”

*That's an incredibly accurate understatement.*

Darci continued talking, changing the subject slightly. “You know, I've spent a lot more time with Toby lately, and it seems like half the time all he wants to talk about is you.”

“Sorry.”

“No, don't be sorry. It's kinda sweet, actually, how much he cares about you. And don't even get me started about Claire,” Jim pulled his hands away from his face in time to see her wink at him. “You've got some really good friends, Lake, don't forget that.”

“I won't,” he smiled, but not feeling secure enough yet to uncurl from his fetal position. A comfortable silence fell between them, interrupted only by the cheers and moans accompanying the ongoing volleyball game - it seemed like everyone's attention was now turned towards the sporting
event rather than Jim. Eventually, after what seemed like an eternity later, he stretched out on his back, his long legs extending past the edge of the blanket. Kicking off his flip-flops, he enjoyed the feeling of the soft sand as he wriggled his toes in it. He cleared his throat before speaking again, “Um, Darci?”

“Yeah?”

“Thanks. For, um… saving me? I, uh… I don't really know what happened, but -”

“No problem. That sort of thing happened to my mom all the time after she got back from her first deployment.”

“Oh,” Jim's eyes went wide, “I… I didn't know.”

“It's cool, I don't talk about it much. She does special ops stuff for the Air Force now, anyway, so there's not really a lot to talk about.”

“Seriously? That's really cool, Darci!”

“Yeah,” she grinned, “she's pretty awesome.”

“Awesome sauce, you mean,” a third voice interjected, approaching their spot on the sand.

“Toby-pie!” Darci exclaimed, quickly getting to her feet so she could hug him. “Took you long enough!”

“Yeah, TP had a few… disagreements with the tent,” Claire smirked as she came into view.

“How's the sunlight, Jim?”

“Oh, it's… nice.”

She knelt down beside him, combing her fingers through his hair as she leaned over him. “Do you wanna come with me to see how nice the water is?”

“I… I dunno. I kinda want to stay here for a bit, if… if that's alright.”

“Then I’ll stay here with you,” Claire smiled and laid down next to him on the blanket.

“Works for me!” Toby announced, peering into one of their cooler bags. “According to my stomach, it’s about time for my early afternoon burrito, anyway.”

“Actually, TP,” Darci said, interrupting his burrito search, “I kind of want to go swimming.”

“Okay, have fun - oof! Hey!” Toby rubbed his arm where Darci had jabbed him with her elbow. “What was that for?”

Darci’s only response was a cough and a not-so-subtle head jerk in Jim and Claire’s direction.

“Oh. Ohh. Right. I’ll go with you,” he straightened up and motioned towards the shoreline. “After you, milady.”

“Why thank you, TP.” Before trekking off towards the surf, Darci winked back at Jim, “Have fun, you two.”

*Ha, it doesn’t take much to get that boy to blush.*
“Wait, what?” Jim called out, but Toby and Darci were already well on their way to the water. On reflex he covered his cheeks with his hands, unsure if the warmth he felt was due to the sun or his apparently rosy complexion.

Claire turned on her side to look at him. “She told us to have fun, silly.”

“I know! But I thought I heard… nevermind.”

“Heard what?”

“Nothing,” he insisted. “I guess I’m just tired enough that I’m hearing things.”

Claire’s expression told him she wasn’t convinced, but she dropped the subject in favor of scooting close enough to kiss him on the cheek. “Do you need to take a nap, then?”

“Oh my god, I’m not a five year old! Besides, falling asleep out here is practically asking for a sunburn.”

“You forget, Toby set a sunscreen alarm,” she stated, resting her head on his shoulder. “And after last night, I wouldn’t say no to a nap myself.”

The recollection of last night's nightmare episode suddenly came crashing back to the forefront of his memory - not only had Claire stayed up with him for a couple of hours trying to get him to relax, but during the height of his nightmare he’d actually tried to lash out at her in his sleep. It had been a rough night, to say the least.

“Shit, I’m so sorry, Claire,” he apologized. “You shouldn't have to -”

“Shhhh,” she shushed, placing a finger over his lips. “I don't mind, really.”

“But I -”

“Shhh.”

“But -”

She briefly planted a kiss on his lips, effectively cutting him off. When she pulled away, Jim made his best attempt to pout; turns out it's extremely difficult to look upset while you're smiling like an idiot.

“Now,” she smirked, looking extremely pleased with herself, “I believe we were about to take a nap?” Without waiting for a response, she nestled in between his arm and his side.

“I guess so,” he grinned, wrapping his arm around her shoulders and holding her close. A part of Jim nagged at him, warning him that sleep could bring nightmares and the potential for him to make a spectacle of himself in front of their fellow classmates. But his eyelids grew heavier with each minute spent under the warm sun, and eventually the calm embrace of sleep overtook him.

⋯

“Jim.”

“Hmmm?”

“Jimbo.”
“Mmm,” Jim moaned, keeping his eyes shut.

“Jimmy-Jam.”

“What, Tobes?”

“Wake up.”

“I am awake.”

“But your eyes are closed.”

Jim opened one eye to glare at his best friend. “Happy?”

“Eh, sure. Guess what time it is?”

“No.”

“Geez, someone woke up on the wrong side of the sand!”

“Don't take it personally, TP,” Claire chimed in, her voice slightly muffled against Jim's side, “Jim gets grumpy when he doesn't want to wake up.” He felt her shift beside him and kiss him on the nose. Jim attempted to scrunch his face in annoyance, but the only thing that resulted in was a round of giggles from all three of them.

“But seriously, Jimbo,” Toby continued, “it's sunscreen time.”

“Ugh, fine,” Jim conceded, slowly extricating himself from underneath Claire and sitting up. Toby handed him a bottle of sunscreen before heading over to the cooler, and Jim immediately set to work reapplying it to his face.

“Wait, Jim, your…” Claire hesitated.

“What?”

“The lotion is collecting in your scar and it looks weird.”

“Oh, um…”

“Here, I'll help.” She reached over and started smoothing her fingers along his scar, working the sunscreen into his skin. He took a sharp breath when she pressed into the deeper portion of the scar on his cheek. “Crap, sorry,” she hissed, “did that hurt?”

“No, it just felt kinda weird,” he answered.

“Oh,” she continued working on his face, ensuring that he was covered with the protective lotion. “Um, did you want to go swimming now? I think Darci's still by the water.”

“Sure, I guess.”

“Then, uh… do you want me to get your back?”

“Huh?”

“Unless you were planning on wearing your t-shirt in the water? 'Cause that's fine, too.”

“Oh, right. Um, yes?”
“Yes, you're going to keep your shirt on?”

“No, uh, I'm gonna take it off. So yes, I could use your help.”

Off to the side, Toby snickered while he chewed on a burrito. “Good call, Jimbo. Otherwise you're gonna have a ridiculous farmer's tan going on.”

“I also don't want weird salt stains on my shirt,” he reasoned, peeling his t-shirt off and throwing it into the bag with the rest of the sunscreen.

**Holy. Guacamole.**

“Huh? Did you say something, Claire?” he glanced sideways at her.

“Nope!” she squeaked, snatching the bottle from his hands. She quickly got to work slathering sunscreen on his back and shoulders, the shock of the cool lotion raising temporary goose bumps along his skin.

**Damn, when did he get so much muscle tone?**

“Seriously? Claire, you've seen me shirtless pretty much all week.”

“But I haven't really gotten a good look at your ba- Wait. Jim,” she paused, “I… I thought I thought that.”

“Well, you thought it pretty loudly.”

At this point, Toby became more interested in their conversation than his afternoon snack. “Um, Jim? What did you hear Claire say?”

“That I've got muscles, apparently,” he shrugged.

“Well, firstly, **hell yeah** you do,” Toby confirmed. “Seriously. Sign me up for the next extended stay in the Darklands.”

Jim glared at Toby.

“Kidding! But… Jimbo, I didn't hear Claire say *any* of that.”

“Maybe you’re too far away.”

“Or maybe I *never said it in the first place* ,” Claire peered around his shoulder, frowning. “Hold on… You've been hearing things all day, right?”

Jim warily nodded.

“What if the stuff you've been hearing has been our *thoughts* ?”

“Oh man, that would be awesome-sauce!” Toby exclaimed. “Quick, I'm thinking of a number between one and ten.”

“Tobes, 'kittens’ isn't a number,” Jim rolled his eyes.

“Woah,” Toby's eyes went wide. “Dude, it's like you've got super powers!”

“Right, because having a magical suit of armor and a glowing sword doesn't count.”
“Or he's a really lucky guesser,” Claire huffed, looking at him with scepticism.

Jim couldn't help the shit-eating grin he flashed Claire, “Oh, so knowing you were thinking about my muscles was a lucky guess?”

She scowled at him. “But there's gotta be an explanation, right? Do you think it has something to do with your scar?”

“I… don't think so,” Jim replied. “Because why would it have taken this long to show up?”

“Should we call Blinky?” she asked.

“I don't know!” he threw his hands up in the air. “What's he gonna do over the phone, anyway?”

“Maybe tell you to chill out, for one,” Toby stated.

“I am chill! I'm so chill, I'm crispy!”

“Yeah, no,” Toby took another bite of burrito. “Mm, but you will be crispy if you don't finish putting sunscreen on.”

“Ugh, can we focus on one problem at a time, please?”

“Jim,” Claire said in a level tone, “you just focus on trying to figure out what might be causing this, and in the meantime I'll make sure you're covered.”

“Oh, I bet you will,” Toby winked.

“Guys, seriously,” Jim groaned, running his hands through his hair, “I have no idea why the hell I'm hearing voices in my head and it's really starting to freak me out.”

“Well,” Claire reasoned, applying more lotion to his shoulders, “you first noticed it this morning, right? So do you think it's related to your nightmare last night?”

“No,” Jim adamantly replied. “No, that has nothing to do with this.”

Are you sure?

How do you know?

“I just know, okay?” he insisted. Abruptly, he shrugged off Claire and got to his feet. “I… I need to go for a swim or something. Alone. To try to clear my head.”

“But Jim,” Claire protested, “I haven't finished -”

“I won't be gone long. I promise,” he threw her a pleading glance. “Just… give me ten or fifteen minutes? Please?”

“Fine,” she said with a resigned look.

But don't blame us if you get sunburned.

Jim didn't respond to the afterthought, instead turning and swiftly trudging towards the water. The sand was uncomfortably warm beneath his feet, but not nearly as uncomfortable as the thoughts continuously bumping up against his own.
I’m kinda worried about Jimbo.

Maybe if I get far enough away from everyone...

Woah, where’s Lake going in such a rush?

... gotta clear my head...

Damn, talk about ruggedly handsome.

... figure out what’s going on...

Forget volleyball, I wanna play with -

GET OUT OF MY HEAD GET OUT OF MY HEAD GET OUT OF MY HEAD!

Jim covered his ears, as if somehow that would block out all the voices, and picked up his pace.

If I can just make it to that empty area over there...

“Jim?”

Leave me alone.

“Jim, are you okay?” It took Jim a moment to realize it was an actual voice talking to him and not one of the disembodied ones inside his head. Still covering his ears, Jim did a brief scan of his surroundings and saw Darci standing a little off to the side at the edge of the surf. She was watching him carefully for some sort of response. “Where’s Toby and Claire?” she continued.

“Um, back... back at...” he took a sharp breath, “Ineedtobeenalone. For a minute.”

“Ah, got it. I'll stay right here and keep watch, then, okay?”

Jim nodded. She politely backed up a little and turned around, staring down anyone looking in Jim's direction. He could already feel the extraneous voices fading away.

Thank Merlin’s beard for Darci Scott.

Jim wandered out into the water until it was barely ankle-deep and promptly sat down in the surf. He hissed when he felt something hard underneath him, “Ouch, stupid rock...” Reaching down, he searched for the source of physical discomfort.

And found the amulet in his back pocket.

“Great, now I can say this thing is a literal pain in the ass.”

He pulled the amulet out and held it in his lap, watching as the low waves rose and fell over its surface. The amulet glowed dimly, its blue hue nearly lost against the water.

“So what, is this somehow your fault?” And here I go again, carrying on conversations with inanimate objects. Cool.

In response, the amulet vibrated slightly and let out small blue sparks.

“Ugh, I was being sarcastic! Stupid magic metal paperweight.” Frustrated, Jim chucked the amulet out to sea, hearing the satisfying plunk of it sinking below the surface.
Mere seconds later, the amulet washed back up onto his lap.

“Of course.”

This time the amulet sputtered as he held it.

“God, what's wrong with you? I seriously don't have time for this, I've already got enough shit to deal with - yeowch!” he yelped, tossing the amulet to the side after it flared up again.

“Everything okay out there, Jim?” Darci called over her shoulder.

“Yep! Yeah, perfectly fine, no problems here!”

That didn't sound too convincing.

Jim watched the amulet, partially wedged in the sand beside him, pulse in time to Darci’s voice. Well, more accurately, Darci’s thought.

Damn it. It is the amulet's fault.

... but why? And how?

Jim gingerly picked up the amulet again, turning it over to examine it.

Maybe it's got a screw loose or something? But that still wouldn't explain why I'm hearing people's thoughts...

C’mon, Jim, think. What did you do differently in the past twenty-four hours that could have -

He gasped.

Training in Hero's Forge. The power-up stones. One of them must have gotten left inside the amulet.

Jim grabbed the back plate and twisted, trying to reveal the hidden compartment inside. But the amulet wouldn't budge, it's face flickering and sparking just as it had done before.

Shit. I guess it's time to call Blinky.

Chapter End Notes

Wellll, that took longer than expected to write. And it isn't how I originally envisioned the chapter would go, but... *shrugs* There was also a scene I wrote between Barbara and Claire's mom, but this chapter was already getting pretty long and I didn't feel happy enough with it as a whole to include it. I might post it on my tumblr later this week, though, just for funsies - if I do, I'll try to put a link to it here.

Update: The deleted scene can be found here.

Also, I swear I've had it written down for a couple months now that I wanted an excuse to send the gang to the beach, because heaven knows our boy is in desperate need of sunlight while he can still get it. That being said, there also happens to be this fantastic Summer Happy Fun Time AU that y'all should go check out if you haven't
already. Seriously. Go read it.
Chapter Summary

Nothing goes according to plan.
So. You know. The usual.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

“I do not understand, Master Jim. I would hardly classify this as a problem.”

“It's a huge problem, Blinky!” Jim moaned, flopping backwards onto the beach blanket next to Claire. He shifted the phone against his ear before continuing, “I can barely keep my own thoughts in line, there's no way I can process the thoughts of everyone within a fifty foot radius, too!”

“With training, such an ability could serve useful in the fight against Gunmar, or, dare I say, even grant you an advantage!” Blinky continued. “Just think, if you could know Gunmar's moves ahead of time -”

“No way, Blinky. I told you, my own head is already plenty messed up right now, thank you very much.”

“But Master Jim -”

“Look, I've already got nightmares and paranoia, I really don't want this shit thrown into the mix, too,” he pleaded, glancing sideways at Claire. “I don't think I'll be able to tell the difference between what's real and what's not.”

“Very well,” Blinky sighed on the other end of the phone. “Though I believe your judgment to be poor, following your instincts has not failed you yet.”

It's definitely come close to failing me a few times, though...

“So, how do I get this thing out of the amulet?”

“If the amulet has not allowed you to retrieve the stone from within,” Blinky explained, “then the Cernentia stone must still be in use. Simply put, you must stop using the stone in order for the amulet to release it as per usual.”

“And how am I supposed to do that?” Jim moaned. “I don't even know how I'm using it in the first place!”

“That, I do not know. I shall have to investigate the matter. In the meantime, I suggest you keep a healthy distance between you and any other being with conscious thought.”

Jim surveyed the populated beach. “Oh yeah, that won't be a problem,” he rolled his eyes. The sarcasm was lost on Blinky. “Excellent. I shall call when I have an update.”
“Thanks, Blink,” Jim said before ending the call. He slid his phone back into the side pocket of one of their waterproof totes then resumed his previous position, sprawled out on his back under the sun. Looking up at the sky, he stated to Claire, “So, Blinky said I should be antisocial right now.”

“I could hear your conversation, and that is not what he said,” she teased, taking one of his hands.

“Oh, so I should waltz over to the volleyball game instead? I'm sure being around all those people will definitely help me get this stupid stone out of the amulet.”

“No, silly. But... I think I might have an idea.”

He turned his head to look at her. “Really?”

“No, I never actually have an idea when I say 'I have an idea,’” she replied flatly, scowling cutely before continuing, “Feeling up for a long walk down the beach?”

“But who’s gonna watch our stuff?”

“Toby and Darci, duh.” Claire sat up and waved down their friends, and mere moments later Toby and Darci were sauntering up to their spot in the sand.

“What's up, guys?” Toby asked, “You done chatting with your therapist, Jimbo?”

“Um, yeah. Claire and I are gonna go take a walk, could you watch the stuff?”

“Sure!” Toby’s glance darted between their bags, the blanket, and Darci.

Boy, will I.

“Tobes!” Jim exclaimed.


“Get out of here, you two,” Darci smiled, “We'll hold down the fort.”

I'm sure they will.

“Claire!” Jim hissed. Seriously, was everyone's mind in the gutter today?

“Sorry,” she whispered back as she helped him to his feet. Then she spoke a little louder to the rest of the group, “We shouldn't be gone too long, maybe only a half hour or so.”

Oh, is that all?

Jim wasn't sure if it was Toby or Darci he’d heard in his head. Maybe both. God, the sooner he could get this stone out of the amulet, the better.

Claire took his hand and started leading him across the sand, away from all their fellow classmates.

“So, where are we going?” Jim asked.

I told you, for a walk. So we can get you away from anyone who might see you and start... thinking things.
Jim couldn't help but blush a little. “Well, what you're doing isn't exactly helping, either.”

She smirked at him. *I promise I'll stop. Eventually. You gotta admit, this is kinda fun.*

“I think we have different definitions of the word 'fun.'”

*What, you don't like having a one-way telepathic connection with me?*

“I honestly, no. It's… weird. Please stop?”

“All right, sorry,” she apologized. “I'll try to keep my thoughts to myself.”

“Thanks.”

They continued down the beach in silence, the commotion from their classmates slowly fading into the distance as they walked further and further away. The swarm of errant thoughts wasn't nearly as obtrusive to Jim's mind, but he could still sense an annoying buzzing at the edges of his awareness that refused to go away.

“So,” he said eventually, breaking the verbal silence, “is your plan to just keep walking, or…?”

Claire lightly squeezed his hand. “Nope, there's more. … Ah! And that spot over there near those rocks should do the trick!”

Jim followed where she was pointing and found a reasonably-sized semicircle of large rocks. It looked like anyone inside the natural barrier would be shielded from the world on all sides except for the opening facing the sea.

And it was completely secluded.

Already sweaty from being out under the warm sun, Jim's palms suddenly became *extra* sweaty.

*Oh shit, did she bring me out here to -*

“Jim?” Claire gave him a concerned glance. “You okay?”

“Um… uh… did you… are we…”

“Ohmigod, Jim!” she sputtered. “Whatever you're thinking, no. Oh god, no. I mean, for starters, all this sand? It may feel soft now, but it can be coarse and irritating and literally get *everywhere* -”

“Okay, I get the picture!” he cut her off. With a moan, he covered his face with his free hand. “God, I'm an idiot.”

“Jim, you're not an idiot. Just… extremely distracted right now.”

*Sure, that's one way to put it.*

“So, uh,” he stammered, “what is the next part of your plan?”

She dragged him over to the secluded space between the rocks and stated, “We're going to meditate.”

“Wait, what?”

Claire sighed, “Every month, my mom drags me to these 'mother and daughter' yoga classes. At
first I thought it was kind of dumb, but some of the stretches and breathing techniques are actually pretty useful. I figured we could try it to help clear your mind.”

“Oh. That's… a good idea, actually.”

“Of course it is,” she smirked. “Now, come stand over here and face the water… Good. Stand up straight, feet a little bit closer together…” she nudged one of his feet. “Now hold your hands up in front of you like so - like you're praying or something, not maniacally plotting world domination,” she giggled and reached over to adjust just hands.

“Oh, well that takes all the fun out of it, then!” he teased.

“Hey, do you want to try to get the stone out of the amulet or not?”

“Yes. Sorry. Though that reminds me…” digging into his back pocket, he pulled out the amulet and placed it in front of him on the sand. The metal disk glowed and flickered dimly, surely a sign that the mind-reading stone was still active.

“Oh. So now just pretend like you're trying to stand as tall as you can and take deep breaths. In… and out…”

Jim followed her instructions, making it a point to focus solely on his breathing; each breath felt like it carried a little bit of his anxieties with it as it left his lungs. Even if this didn't help get the stone out of the amulet, at least it would do wonders for his overall sanity.

*Note to self: if I'm ever Gunmar's prisoner again, I need to try to do some yoga in my cell.*

*Second note to self: stop making notes to self.*


He centered back in on the breathing exercise, feeling an unsettling calm creep through his veins. There was something… off about it. He couldn't quite put his finger on it. But it definitely wasn't relaxing, that's for sure.

“Ugh,” he groaned out loud, “Claire, I don't think this is working… Claire?”

He glanced sideways at her, noticing she was staring wide-eyed at the waves off in the distance. Everything about her posture was stiff, like she wanted to flee but just. Couldn't.

It was an expression he recognized all too well.

“Claire?” he repeated softly, “What's wrong?”

She didn't answer, still frozen with fear. The unsettling feeling Jim had been experiencing morphed into an overwhelming chill, weighing down his veins with an icy nervousness.

*Oh great, and what fresh hell is this?*

Attempting to shrug off the sensation, Jim returned his attention to Claire. He gently stroked her shoulder, “Claire? Do you need to sit down or something?” Despite the warm sun beating down on them, she was shivering under his touch, clutching her hands to her chest as if trying to muffle her silently racing pulse.

The amulet started flickering with more intensity, casting a mix of blue and red light onto the surface of the surrounding rocks.
Then, abruptly, a memory barreled into Jim’s consciousness.

*Water.*

*Water everywhere.*

*Pouring in through cracks and holes in the container. Steadily rising, covering the floor. Echoing as it lapped against the metal walls.*

*The last few wooden crates stood defiantly against the element, refusing to budge from their spot on the floor.*

*She needed those crates.*

*Needed them to save Jim.*

*But the water…*

*It was still rising.*

*And it kept rising, rising until there there was less and less air to breathe.*

*Soon there wouldn’t be any air left.*

*Only water.*

*And darkness.*

Jim gasped, breathing heavily as he recalled his surroundings. Somehow he had ended up on his knees in the sand, his arms protectively curled around Claire. Her face was pressed to his chest and he could feel her shudder into his embrace. The amulet still lay in the sand, glowing threateningly.

*Had he just… experienced one of her memories?*

He quashed that thought for now, as all his instincts were kicking into overdrive and currently centering on one thing: *Claire.*

“Claire,” he murmured, holding her close as he rubbed her back, “I’ve got you. You’re safe. It's okay. I’ve got you…”

She made a somewhat strangled noise, a hybrid of a cry and an attempt to talk.

“Shhhh, it's okay.”

“It's *not* okay,” she choked out, her voice muffled against him.

Jim silently continued to hold her, tracing soothing circles across her back. Once her breathing started to even out again, he murmured in her ear, “Claire, why didn't you tell me?”

“Tell you what?” she sniffed.

“That you almost drowned when you saved the pieces of the bridge.”

He felt a shiver run up her spine. “Wait… how…?”

“I saw. Your memory, I... I think it was that damn gemstone again.”
“Oh no,” she moaned, pulling away from him slightly. “No no no, you weren’t supposed to -”

“Know? Why not? If I had known earlier… see, I knew we shouldn’t have come to the beach! We should have just stayed home.”

She pulled away further, frowning at him. “This is why I didn’t want you to know. Because you’re freaking out.”

“I’m freaking out? Claire, you just had a panic attack!”

“And I can handle it! I’ve been handling it for months now! I don’t need you swooping in, telling me what you think I should do, just because you think you need to protect me!”

“But I do need to protect you! If anything happened to you -”

“Believe it or not, I can take care of myself, Jim! No magic amulet required!”

The sound of their argument rang off the surface of the rocks around them before falling dead on the sand.

She got to her feet in a huff. “I’m going back to the others. I… we can talk later.”

“Wait, Claire, don’t -”

But she was already storming off, hugging herself as she walked away.

Jim cried out in frustration and punched the sand on either side of the amulet.

“Tell me again, Nomura, why this could not wait until nightfall,” Draal grunted, dodging another stray sunbeam that had made its way through the canopy of leaves overhead.

“Because we have already waited too long. We should have investigated Killahead Bridge the day after our return.”

“Exactly. So what difference would a few more hours have made?”

“Potentially, the difference between life and death,” she stated solemnly.

“Still have a flair for dramatics, I see?” he peered sideways at her.

“Merely speaking from personal experience.”

“From the Darklands? Or from our days when we were a little younger and a lot more reckless?” Draal grinned mischievously.

“That implies you aren’t just as reckless and boneheaded today as you were all those years ago,” she teased, shoving his shoulder slightly.

The blue troll laughed in response, “Ah, Nomura. I will admit, I was nervous about agreeing to go on this mission with you. But I’m glad I did. Feels sort of like old times again.”

“Indeed,” she smiled back. “I think that’s the bridge over there.”

They walked out into a large, shady clearing in the woods. Strewn about on the grass was the rubble of the Killahead Bridge - though it was plain to see the relic was dormant, as the amulet was
surely miles away by now, the sight still sent a chill down Nomura's spine.

The sooner they could get a good look and get out of here, the better.

“What are we looking for again?” Draal asked.

“Any sign that something besides us crossed over,” she answered, getting down on all fours to look under the nearby shrubbery. “Those pesky blood goblins got through somehow. And little Gynt fears something bigger might have followed suit.”

Draal gave her a confused look. “Little Gynt -? Ah. Jim. Right. I suppose that makes sense, the Trollhunter has been having nightmares all week…”

“He told you, too?”

“Tell? No. I live in their basement, remember? Every night I hear his screams.” Draal started methodically sifting through some of the rubble, completely unaware of how disturbing his comment sounded out-of-context. Or even in-context. “Did he… mention what he fears the ‘something bigger’ to be?”

“I'll give you one guess.”

Draal hissed, “In that case, I do not need a guess.”

They both flinched when they heard the sound of a branch snapping in the distance.

“Nomura,” Draal growled lowly, “was that you?”

“No.” She calmly reached over her shoulder, locating the scimitars on her back.

Slowly making their way towards the other opposite side of the clearing, they exchanged a series of looks and subtle gestures, settling into their familiar pre-battle cadence:

*I'll go high and left.

*You go down the middle.

*Hit them hard and hit them fast.

*And I'll knock them out when they least expect it.

*Steady.

*Wait for my signal.

With any luck, the originator of the sound was a simple woodland creature. Hopefully a deer. Deer made for excellent snacks.

But with the way things were going, Nomura doubted that luck would be on their side.

Their pace quickened when they heard another crack, this one louder than the first. Nomura leapt up into the nearest tree to get a different vantage point, continuing to move from branch to branch.

Roughly fifty yards away was a towering oak tree, perhaps one of the oldest trees in the forest. It was located directly underneath a cliff, one that had been carved into a road over the years. It looked like some unfortunate soul had gone through the barrier and over the edge; a rather
nondescript Volkswagen Beetle was currently caught high up in the branches. The car shifted a little in its precarious perch, causing another crack to ring out through the air.

Below her, Nomura could see Draal had curled into a ball and was speeding along on the ground towards the tree. Her own path was slightly slower, as she was making an effort to avoid creating any unnecessary noise that would give away her location. From this distance she tried to study the scene of the crash, searching for the driver and any survivors; she thought she could see some sort of shadow hanging in the tree, but it could have just been a trick of the waning light. She wouldn't know until she was closer.

Draal had already reached the base of the tree and was circling it, trying to get a better view of the automobile suspended above him. He stumbled slightly when his foot caught on a tree root.

She squinted.

No… not a tree root.

A footprint.

The shadow in the tree shifted again.

Nomura didn't even have time to shout a warning before the shadow started descending on Draal. Luckily, the blue troll picked up on the rustling of leaves overhead and was able to dodge the initial attack. He turned and started throwing punches at the assailant, growling when he immediately recognized who it was.

“So, it is true,” Draal grunted, “You are out.”

“And you are a long way from Trollmarket,” Gunmar sneered, licking the remnants of his early evening meal from his lips.

Nomura hurtled through the last stretch of treetop as quickly and silently as she could, diving down towards the grappling trolls with her swords drawn. Gunmar turned at the last second to block her attack with a single arm, her blades barely leaving nicks on his forearm.

“And I see you've made a friend,” Gunmar continued, coolly keeping both troll and changeling at bay as they unleashed their flurry of attacks. “You both should have fled while you had the chance. I know for a fact at least one of you specializes in that maneuver.” The look he gave Nomura instantly raised her hackles.

Draal attempted to ram Gunmar with his horns. “I do not run,” he proclaimed in defiance, “I am Draal. Friend and protector of James Lake, the Bular Slayer!”

Nomura noticed the gleam that flared up in Gunmar's eye at the mention of his slain son. “Protector of the young Trollhunter? Hmmm,” Gunmar's smile was filled with malice as he summoned his blade. “Perhaps you'd like to deliver a message for me, then.”

The Decimaar Blade glinted with the last rays of the setting sun as it sliced through the air.

Chapter End Notes

Why have just one angsty cliffhanger when you can have two??
haha omfg what have i done
...but for real. not sure if I’m entirely pleased with how the pacing ended up for this chapter, but... eh. it is what it is

Originally only the second part of this chapter was supposed to be angsty. But then *someone* gave me a wonderfully horribly angsty idea about Claire and being around water, so... yeah. You're welcome.

Also, if any of y'all are interested, I've started up another AU fic. This one's completely different, as I've decided to take our beloved Trollhunters characters and drop them into A Galaxy Far, Far Away, with a plot and everything. Have I caught your interest? Then check it out here. (I've also got a couple doodles on my tumblr to go with it)
Consider this beach party officially "crashed."

Claire leaned back on her elbows, watching as the sun began to dip below the horizon and into the sea. Things were starting to quiet down on the beach; the volleyball game had ended a while ago, so now most of their classmates were either going back to the campgrounds to start making s’mores or lingering around to watch the sunset. The soft red light reflecting off the surface of the water was utterly breathtaking. And heartbreakingly romantic.

Claire made no effort to suppress her sigh, glancing at Darci and Toby cuddled up side-by-side on the adjacent beach blanket. Darci instinctively turned her head at the sound, “Um, Claire-bear?”

“How?”

“It's getting late. Do you think Jim got lost?”

Claire shrugged, “He should know the way back. It's a beach. You just walk along the shore.”

“But what if something happened to him?” Darci frowned.

“She's got a point, Claire,” Toby added, “Jim’s a magnet for trouble. And he's been gone all afternoon. I know you had a fight or whatever, but I think we need to go find him.”

“I… yeah, you're right,” she conceded. Sighing again, she got up and brushed the sand off her shorts.

“Wait, Claire,” Toby started, scrambling to his feet, “I'll come with you.”

“Really?”

“Yeah. That way, if Jim managed to hurt himself, you won't have to carry him back all by yourself,” he winked. “Darci, will you be okay?”

“Oh, definitely,” she smiled. “I'll go ahead and start putting our stuff away so we won't have to drag it back to camp in the dark.” She dug Toby's phone out from one of the bags and tossed it at him, “Call when you find Jim?”

“Will do.” Toby pocketed the phone and turned to Claire, “Shall we?”

She nodded, and the duo began trekking across the beach in the same direction Claire had taken Jim earlier. Once they were a little ways away from their starting point, Toby spoke again, “So… first you refuse to tell Jim about your water problem, then you get angry at him once he figures it out. Claire, what's up with that?”
“I… Ugh! I don’t know!” she said as she rubbed her temples. “I was going to tell him, Iswear, but… he just got so worked up about it so fast before I even had a chance to say anything…”


“Yeah, but -”

“Claire. It's his default setting. He gets all mother-y and overprotective towards anyone he cares about.”

“I know. It's just…” She hissed out between her teeth before continuing. “I don't need protection. I can take care of myself. I always have.”

Toby looked at her with sympathy, “I know you can. And I'm sure Jim knows that, too.”

“Then why did he overreact so much?”

“Again, this is Jim we're talking about,” Toby quirked an eyebrow at her. “He's gonna overreact. And you have every right to tell him to take it down a few pegs. God knows I've done that myself plenty of times over the years,” he chuckled. “And after that, if he still doesn't listen, that's usually a good time to get mad at him. That, I've only had to do a couple times,” he smiled a little as he stooped down to pick up a small shell that was peeking out of the sand.

“I guess. It's just… His whole 'overprotective hero' thing is what got us here in the first place, and he seems to be conveniently forgetting that. Not that we can change anything that's happened, but…”

“I know. Trust me, I'm just as frustrated about it as you are,” he commented, tossing the shell away into the surf. “And I'm not trying to justify his behavior, but… maybe next time you should talk to him before you completely go off on him. At least for this kind of stuff.”

Claire rolled her eyes, “Thanks, I'll try to keep that in mind.” Then she paused briefly when she recognized their surroundings. “TP, look! Over there,” she pointed to the rock formation up ahead, “That's where I left him.”

The pair quickened their pace, rushing up to the semicircle of rocks. They found a figure in the middle of them sitting cross-legged on the sand with his eyes closed.

“Jim!” Toby exclaimed, “Dude, you're alright!”

Jim opened one eye. “Of course I'm alright, Tobes.” Then he opened his other eye, his gaze settling warily on Claire. Her heart momentarily lurched in her chest.

“In that case, I'm gonna be over here for a bit,” Toby announced, pointing vaguely outside of the natural enclosure. “So I can, uh, call Darci. Yeah. That's why.”

Frowning a little at her not-so-subtle friend as he left the two of them alone, Claire turned her attention back to Jim. “I, uh,” she started, rocking on her heels, “I'm sorry for storming off on you.”

“It's fine,” he muttered, looking intently at the amulet where it still lay on the sand in front of him. “You had every right. I wasn't respecting your boundaries. Not that this stupid amulet was any help whatsoever,” he scowled at the inanimate object. Then his gaze returned to Claire, “But I wish you would have told me sooner. About your fear of water.”
Sighing, she knelt down on the sand in front of him, noting the redness Jim’s skin had taken on from being exposed to the sun for so long. “Honestly, I didn't think the beach would freak me out. I think it was the combination of watching the waves while being surrounded by these rocks,” she gestured. When he raised a questioning eyebrow, she further explained, “Small spaces that make me feel trapped also freak me out.”

“I can appreciate that,” he smiled sadly.

*Shit. Here I am, going on about my problems to someone who was literally imprisoned for months. Shit shit shit.*

Jim's eyes widened in concern, “Claire, please. Don't trivialize what you're going through just because of me.”

“But that's why I didn't want to tell you,” she admitted softly. “You've already got a lot of shit you’re dealing with. You shouldn't have to deal with my silly problems, too.”

“Silly? Claire, almost drowning is kind of a big deal.” He reached over and took her hand, “But no matter what it is, it would be big deal to me. Because you matter to me. You've been so supportive of me over this past week, I just want to return the favor.”

“That’s… sweet. Just, promise me you won't go overboard and go into ‘overprotective hero’ mode again?”

He chuckled, “I'll try. But I don't think I can promise that.”

“Jim.”

“Hey, sorry that I like to be overly concerned with my friends’ problems rather than deal with my own.”

“Oh, so that's your excuse?” she smirked. “That’s definitely not healthy behavior.”

“Who ever said I had healthy coping mechanisms?”

“I mean, your mom's a doctor and all, so I thought that would be implied.”

“I’m a teenager. Why would I listen to my mother?”

“Because you're you,” she smiled, leaning over to kiss him on the cheek.

Jim instantly beamed. “So… uh, does that mean we're good?”

She nodded, “Yeah. We're good.”

He slowly got to his feet, helping Claire up before bending over to pick up the amulet.

“So, I take it the gemstone thing is still stuck in there?” she asked.

“Yes. I tried to do the breathing techniques you were telling me about, but I couldn't get anything to work,” he sighed. “Any word from Blinky?”

“No, not yet. Want to try calling him again?”

Jim shook his head. “No, he would have let us know if he'd found anything. Guess I'll just have to try to survive the night.”
“We could call your mom, you know. She could come pick us up, and—”

“No. I want to stay. I don't want your guys’ fun to be cut short because of me.”

Toby’s head appeared around the edge of the rocks. “Good. Because I, for one, am enjoying myself. Whaddaya say we head back so we can roast some marshmallows?” He squinted at Jim, “Though we might not need a campfire, Jim’s already looking pretty red and crispy.”

“Aw, man,” Jim groaned, tenderly touching his sunburnt cheek, “my mom’s gonna ground me for this.”

“She'll ground all of us,” Claire commented. “We literally had one job. Damn, I should have come for you sooner…”

“Hey, it's okay,” he said, taking her hand and smiling softly, “I'm just glad you came back at all.”

Shit. I didn't even -

“Claire. Seriously. It's fine.”

“Ooh, did you just read her mind again?” Toby said excitedly. “Do me next!”

“Tobes, that's not how- oh god, why would you even think something like that?!” Jim's face twisted in disgust while Toby started giggling maniacally.

“If you two are done,” Claire rolled her eyes, “we really should be heading back.”

“Yes, yes we should,” Toby agreed. A sly smile crossed his face.

“Come on, Tobes, seriously?” Jim whined. “Could you at least try to keep your thoughts to yourself?”

“Now where would be the fun in that?”

Jim hissed as Claire applied more aloe gel to his shoulders and upper back. Apparently his mom had expected him to get sunburnt anyway and packed a bottle of the soothing substance in with their other emergency medical supplies. “I'm getting a sense of deja vu,” he commented.

“Maybe it's because I can't seem to keep my hands off you today,” she teased, kissing him on his cheek that had yet to be slathered in gel. Jim's sunburn effectively hid his blush.

“Hey, did it sound like I was complaining?”

The two of them were currently alone in the tent; Toby had gone with Darci to join one of the merry campfires their classmates had started up. Or, at least, that's what they'd said - Jim partly suspected the two had wandered off to their own secluded spot, but he also knew Toby's intense love of toasted marshmallows wouldn't keep him away from the campfires for long. Either way, Jim was grateful for the alone time with Claire, even if it was tinged with an unspoken awkwardness that hadn't fully gone away from the day’s earlier events.

An awkwardness that, thanks to the amulet, he could practically feel radiating from Claire.

“Claire?”

“Mmm?” she hummed as she continued smoothing aloe over his skin.
“We're... we're cool, right?”

“I mean, we're hiding out in a tent while the rest of our classmates are outside having fun, so I guess it depends on your definition of cool.”

“That's... not what I meant,” he turned his head so he could peer over his shoulder. “I mean us. You and me. I know what happened earlier was kind of a big deal, and...”

“Jim. It's fine. We're fine,” she insisted. “I'm here helping you with your sunburn, aren't I?”

“Well, yeah, but...” he paused to take a breath, unsure if he really wanted to broach the subject, “Claire, I can literally sense your awkwardness. If there's something I still managed to screw up...”

“Trust me, it's not you,” she cut him off. Then, thoughtfully, she added, “Well... it's sort of you. But mostly the amulet.”

He threw her a questioning glance.

Claire laughed, “I'm trying really hard right now not to think about how attractive you are without a shirt on. And... other things.”

“Oh,” he grinned shyly. “Well, so long as I'm still stuck with the stone, that's the kind of thought I wouldn't mind hearing.”

“You might not mind, but I'm pretty sure I'd die of embarrassment.”

“... So, that's it then? No awkwardness left over from earlier?”

“Jim,” she started, scooting around so that she could better study his expression, “I told you, we're fine. Sure, we had a fight, but we worked through it. That's what couples do.”

“... Couples?” his heart skipped a beat.

“Couples, partners,” she listed matter-of-factly, “in our case, boyfriend and girlfriend -”

“You... I'm... boyfriend?” Jim stammered.

“Well, duh. Unless you have a problem with that?”

“No! Definitely not!” He attempted to keep his excitement somewhat restrained, “It's... well, you've never called me your boyfriend before.”

“I guess there's a first time for everything,” she smiled, tucking a loose strand of hair behind her ear.

“Well... is it okay if I kiss my, uh, girlfriend?” he asked, enjoying the shape of the word as it stumbled off his tongue.


In response, Claire shifted her position so that she was in front of him. Threading her fingers into his hair, she swiftly pulled him in close for a kiss. A deep kiss. He ignored how his skin stung at every point of contact between them, instead enjoying the feeling of having her so close. And how her hair smelled like the sea breeze. And how sweet and comforting she tasted.

Lost in the moment, he almost missed the rustling at the tent’s entrance. With no desire to break
off the kiss right that second, Jim figured Toby would simply end up teasing them about this the rest of the evening. He could live with that.

The voice he heard in his head, however, was definitively not Toby.

_Ugh... disgusting._

Quickly pulling away from Claire, Jim whirled to face the entrance of the tent.

“Oh please, don't stop on my account,” Nomura growled, dragging her _very trollish_ form into the tent and collapsing onto the ground. One of her shoulders looked like it was dislocated, but Jim had a nagging feeling that the limb wasn't the source of her pained expression.

“Nomura!” Claire exclaimed, quickly bringing her volume down to a less obvious level, “What are you doing here? Someone could have seen you!”

“That's the least of our problems right now,” the changeling replied, giving Jim a serious look. He felt all of his internal organs plummet to his feet.

_Oh no._

“Nomura,” Jim started softly, swallowing the lump in his throat, “What... what happened? Did you find...?”

She nodded solemnly before popping her dislocated shoulder back into position. “I'm afraid so.”

His blood froze over at the confirmation, numbing every sensation in his body except that of his pounding heartbeat.

“Could someone catch me up?” Claire interjected, fear creeping into her expression as she turned to Nomura. “What's going on?”

“Draal and I went to examine Killahead Bridge this afternoon. What with little Gynt’s growing worries and the appearance of blood goblins earlier this week, it was a mission that was long overdue.”

“And I take it... you found...?”

“That the Trollhunter's dreams have become our living nightmare,” Nomura answered.

“No...” Claire whispered in shock. “It... it can't be...” She covered her mouth with one hand, reaching with the other to grab Jim’s. He was barely aware of her fingers interlocking with his, giving him a single sensation to focus on while the rest of his senses felt like they'd quit working altogether.

It was one thing to endure the nightmares every night. But to find out those horrors were no longer constrained to just his unconsciousness...

_Gunmar._

_He's going to be looking for me._

... _Idiot. It's been a whole week since the Darklands. He should already be looking for me._

_Then why hasn't he come for me yet?_
What is he up to?

What is Gunmar planning?

“...Jim?” Claire nudged him. “Jim, are you okay?”

“I’m… fine,” he breathed, turning his attention back to Nomura. The changeling was inspecting the array of cuts and scratches she'd collected up and down her arms. “Nomura, are you okay? Did… did Gunmar…?”

“I’ve had worse,” she sighed. “But these were not the work of Gunmar. At least, not directly.” Looking up, she met Jim’s gaze with a heavy expression before softly adding, “Draal… wasn't as lucky.”

Claire tightened her grip on his hand, “Is he…? Did Gunmar…?”

Is Draal still alive?

When Claire's unspoken thought entered his mind, Jim nearly lost it. Thankfully, Nomura spoke up again before he could dwell too long on the thought.

“Draal still lives. But I fear he has suffered a fate far worse than death.”

“How so?” Claire asked quietly.

Nomura's eyes settled on Jim before answering, “He has been touched by the Decimaar Blade.”

As if in response, Jim’s scar flared up, briefly feeling as if metal were once again slicing across his face. He squeezed his eyes shut to try and will the burning sensation away.

“He’ll be okay, though, right?” he heard Claire wonder aloud, “Can't we bring him back?”

“It's not that simple,” Nomura lamented, “His will now belongs to Gunmar. And the only known cure… is death.”

“No!” Claire gasped, “There has to be another way! After all, Jim is -”

“Jim’s case is different. At least, I believe it is different,” Jim opened his eyes in time to see Nomura scrutinizing him. “Little Gynt was only physically struck by the blade; Draal, however, has been affected by its magical power.”

“Well, if it's magic, then there's got to be a way to break the spell!”

“I already told you the solution. Death.”

“Draal’s death, or Gunmar's?” Claire persisted, her voice getting louder.

“Does it matter?” Nomura sneered, “Gunmar has been freed from the Darklands. We're all doomed anyway!”

“That's not true! There's still hope! If we all join together we stand a fighting chance!”

“But tonight we have lost one from our numbers! How many more must fall before you realize there is no hope?”

“Enough!” Jim interrupted, rubbing his temples in an attempt to ease his growing headache. “Will
you two stop bickering? It's getting us nowhere!"

“I agree,” Nomura stated. Jim sensed Claire stiffen beside him. “I didn't come here to fight, only to warn you.”

Sure you did.

“Claire,” he said sternly, “please.”

Slightly taken aback, Claire turned to him, “Well, then what do you want to do?”

“I… I'll call my mom and tell her to pick us up. We need to get back to Trollmarket. Now.”

“Ugh, I knew I shouldn’t have left my Shadow Staff at home!” Claire groaned as she handed Jim his phone. “And you might want to tell her we have an extra passenger,” she jerked her chin in Nomura's direction.

“If I'm that much of a burden,” Nomura rolled her eyes, “then I can walk home myself.”

“Nonsense, you're obviously injured,” Jim commented as he dialed his mom's number. “I'm amazed you made it out here in the first place.”

“Fear is an excellent motivator. And this was the fastest way I could think of to get in contact with you.”

“Hm. Remind me to give you my phone number after this,” he stated before hearing his mom pick up on the other side. “Uh, hey, Mom.”

“Jim! Is everything alright?” the concern in his mom's voice was apparent despite the somewhat poor connection.

“Um, not… exactly. Could you come pick us up?”

“Honey, what's wrong? Are you okay?”

“I'm fine, Mom. I mean, I got a little crispy, but I'm fine. I think.” Jim could practically feel his mom’s disapproving glare through the phone. “It's… um, I'll explain later. But I need to come home so I can go to Trollmarket.”

“Trollmarket? Jim, please tell me what's going on.”

“I'll explain later, I promise. So, you'll come get us?”

“Of course. I'll be there in about twenty minutes.”

“But, um, isn't it supposed to be a thirty-minute drive out here?”

His mom gave a little chuckle, “Yes, yes it is.”

“Uh, okay then,” he replied, about to end the call. “Oh, I almost forgot! We’ll have an extra passenger on the way back.”

“An extra passenger?”

“Nomura.”
“Nomura?! Jim, what -?”

“Again, I'll explain later.”

He heard his mom sigh, “Alright then, I'll see you soon.”

“Thanks, Mom. I love you.”

“Love you, too, kiddo.”

Lowering the phone, Jim looked at Claire and Nomura, “Well, I guess we should go find Toby and fill him in on the situation. And Nomura, you should probably try to change back into a human before someone -”

The entrance of the tent rustled again, making way for Darci's head to peek in through the flaps. 

Oh no.

“Hey, lovebirds!” she called, “You gonna join us for some s'mores, or -” Everyone froze as Darci laid eyes on the magenta troll in their midst. “What… what the…” she stammered, looking back and forth between Nomura and her friends. “What is that?!”

“Oh…” Jim started. But before he had a chance to explain anything, there was a flash of light as Nomura switched to her human form.

Miss Nomura?! What the…?

Darci’s thought was cut off when she collapsed onto the floor of the tent, unconscious.

Jim cursed under his breath, “Shit.”

Chapter End Notes

Sorry for the extremely delayed update, y'all - life got busier than I expected. (if you want my full rambling explanation, check out my tumblr)

Buckle your seat belts, y'all, 'cause the next few chapters are about to get wild if I actually stick to the outline in my notes. Heheheh.
Chapter 26

Chapter Summary

*Will somebody let me see the light within the dark trees shadows?*

Chapter Notes

Maybe one of these days I'll get back to a more frequent update schedule.

But for now... Well, ya get what ya get. ;)

Laughter rang out from the nearest campfire, the glow of the flickering flames illuminating the blissfully ignorant expressions of Jim's fellow classmates.

*If only they knew what lurked in the dark...*

Hidden behind a shrubbery about thirty feet from the fire, Jim picked up a pebble and hurled it in Toby's direction. The small rock successfully hit his best friend square in the middle of his back.

"Ow, hey!" Toby looked around as he tried to rub his back. "Mary, did you see who did that?"

"You've lost it, TP, I didn't see anything. Do we need to cut you off from the marshmallows already?"

"No! But I thought I felt-"

Jim threw another pebble, this time hitting the back of Toby's head. Toby whirled around, his sights landing on the patch of underbrush Jim had concealed himself in.

"I'll, uh, be right back," he said, narrowing his eyes.

"Hey, while you're up," Mary started as she stuck a fresh marshmallow onto her skewer, "could you go look for Darci? She was supposed to go find Jim and Claire, but she hasn't come back yet."

"Yup! Yeah, I'll try to find her..." he trailed off as he slowly backed away from the campfire, turning towards the bush and brandishing his marshmallow skewer in front of him like a rapier.

"Psst, Tobes!" Jim whispered once he was finally within earshot.

"Aah! Who goes there!" Toby pointed the skewer at the bush. "I've got a skewer and I'm not afraid to use it!"

"Shhhh, Tobes, it's me! Jim!"

"Jim?" he immediately lowered the makeshift weapon. "What are you doing hiding in a bush?"
“I didn't want anyone to see me!” he explained as Toby navigated his way around the shrubbery. “If they can't see me, then they won't send any thoughts my way.”

“Okaaay, I can get behind that. But next time could you just text me or something? Those rocks kinda hurt, man.”

“Oh, right. Sorry.”

“So, what's up? Where's Claire and Darci?” Toby's eyes went wide, “Oh no, they're not gossiping about us, are they?”

“Um, I doubt that,” Jim replied, recalling the scene he had just left.

“Jim Jim Jim, my naïve friend,” Toby clapped him on the shoulder, causing Jim to wince. “If two girls are left alone, they're going to start gossiping. It's how the universe works.”

“First, Tobes, I don't think that's actually a thing.”

“Trust me, it's a thing.”

Jim rolled his eyes, “But more importantly, we need to get back to the tent. Now.”

“Why? What's so urgent that you're interrupting my intake of toasted marshmallows?”

“Um, a couple things,” he said, straightening up out of his crouched position. “For one, Nomura's here.”

“Nomura? Didn't she get the 'no teachers allowed' memo?”

Jim continued, “Well, the thing is, Darci saw her. In her… other form.”

Toby gasped, “Oh man. How'd she react?”

“Not good. She fainted. I think she's still out cold.”

“Shit, I guess we need a cover story for when she wakes up.”

“Don’t worry, Claire's already on it.”

Darci blinked slowly as she opened her eyes, finding herself flat on her back and staring at the ceiling of the tent. She spotted Claire hovering at the edge of her field of view, doing that thing where she chews on her lower lip when she's super nervous about something. As far as she could tell, they were alone. Not that Darci could really see much - it was getting dark, and the world around her was trying to trick her into thinking everything was spinning. Her head throbbed, one of the few things that felt obnoxiously real in whatever sea of surrealism she had stumbled into.

So much for a relaxing trip to the beach with her friends.

“Darci, how… how are you feeling?” Claire asked timidly while her vision gradually came further into focus.

“Mmm… confused.” she started, meeting her friend's concerned stare. “And my head kind of hurts.”

“That was a, um, pretty hard fall you had there. You must have whacked your head when you fell.”
“Funny, I don't remember falling.” Physically, Darci felt fine; her headache was more of an internal, thinking-induced headache rather than an ‘ouch-I-hit-my-skull-on-the-ground’ sort of ache.

“Well, obviously you wouldn’t remember. Because you hit your head.”

“Well, no. I don't think that's it.”

“Of course it is! And you were muttering really strange things while you were out cold, something about pink monsters. You sure do have some weird dreams, Darci.”


She had no clue what was going on, that was for sure. But she knew it most definitely had not been a dream.

Tired of listening to Claire try to spin her clumsy lies, Darci sat up and glared at her. “Bullshit, Claire. I know I saw something. I’m just… not sure what.”

“I don't know what you're talking about.”

“Miss Nuñez, give it up already,,” interrupted a grouchy voice from the corner of the tent. It sounded like Ms. Nomura, though it was hard to actually see her since that particular corner of the tent was conveniently obscured in shadow. “Miss Scott is a bright girl. And, with as much as she hangs around what's-his-face, she was bound to find out sooner or later. Might as well tell her now and get it over with.” Ms. Nomura stepped out of the shadows, gingerly holding her right elbow. The dim lighting revealed a series of cuts all over the history teacher's arms, as if she'd been recently attacked by something.

It wasn't a reassuring sight to find in your friends’ tent, to say the least.

But there was something else, something Darci was desperately trying to remember. Something about Ms. Nomura…

Claire glanced between Ms. Nomura and Darci, doubling down on her lip-chewing before her gaze finally settled on Darci. With an air of resignation, she began, “Darci, I'm going to tell you something. Something amazingly unbelievable. And you can't tell anyone about it, not Mary, not your parents… nobody.”

“Not even Toby?”

“Well, uh, TP already knows,” Claire admitted. “And me and Jim, of course. Actually, this all kind of started with Jim…” She took a deep breath, her next words gushing out of her mouth like a word-vomit waterfall, “You see… trolls and goblins and stuff are real and they live under Arcadia and Jim’s the Trollhunter and we help him protect the good trolls and humans from the really really bad trolls and -”

“Um, I'm sorry, what now? Trolls?”

“Trolls,” she nodded. “They're real.”

Huh.

Trolls.
It’s outlandish.

Completely ridiculous.

Utterly *impossible*.

And yet…

It might explain some things. Like the occasional odd growling sounds that came from Arcadia’s streets at night. Eli Pepperjack’s rantings, ravings, and blurry photos. And perhaps other things that she hadn’t even thought to question before.

*Hell, let’s see where this goes.*

“Is… Ms. Nomura one of them? A troll, I mean?” Darci asked, forming a mental side-by-side image of their new history teacher and the strange pink creature that was slowly becoming clearer in her mind. The one she’d definitely seen before passing out.

“Sort of. She’s a changeling. Which means she can change between human and troll form,” Claire explained.

“Um, okaaay… I’m gonna pretend that makes perfect sense for now.” Darci could already feel her headache building, and with it a rising internal debate on whether or not one of her best friends was actually on some sort of hallucinogenic drug.

But considering their new history teacher was somehow in on it, that theory seemed pretty unlikely.

“Um, you mentioned Jim?” Darci hesitantly asked, trying to focus in on one of the more tangible aspects of Claire's gibberish. “What’s he got to do with this?”

“He's the Trollhunter,” she stated, as if somehow that explained everything.

“So… he hunts trolls? Like, uh, Ms. Nomura?”

“Not… exactly. He's more like a magical knight.”

“A magical knight… that hunts trolls?” This was starting to sound more and more like some sort of LARP-ing thing. Maybe a LARP-ing club? And Ms. Nomura was the faculty advisor? That made a little more sense. Maybe. At least, more sense than the drugs theory.

“He only hunts the bad trolls,” Claire continued, as if she were merely explaining the rules of a new card game. “The good ones, he protects. The same goes for humans, too, of course.”

“Of *course* ,” Darci sarcastically agreed. “So… I assume Ms. Nomura's one of the good trolls?”

“That's, uh, complicated.”

“I'm still here, you know,” Ms. Nomura sneered. “And it's not *that* complicated. I'm on the same side as you, and that's what's important.”

Darci blinked at Claire, “Girl, are you sure you didn't hit your head? This all sounds pretty ridiculous.”

“I know it's hard to believe. When Jim first tried to tell me I thought he was crazy, but…” thoughtfully, Claire looked over at Ms. Nomura. “Perhaps a demonstration would help?”
“Fine,” Ms. Nomura rolled her eyes, clearly irritated. There was a flash of crackling pink light, and when it cleared Ms. Nomura was no longer in the tent. Instead, a tall, fierce-looking creature crouched in the spot where their teacher had stood. Dark, stringy hair fell over the creature’s shoulders and back, a contrast to the bold purplish-pink color of its skin and clothes. Its color palette was reminiscent of the outfit Ms. Nomura typically wore, and the creature shared the same set of injuries along its arms.

Presumably, the thing Darci was looking at was a troll. And, apparently, their history teacher.

Darci didn't know if she should be amazed or frightened. So she settled on bewildered and a little bit nauseous.

“Is show-and-tell time over yet?” Ms. Nomura sighed. “In case you've forgotten, Miss Nuñez, we have some important matters to attend to. And I'm pretty sure your tent won't pack itself.”

“Shoot, right,” Claire hissed, quickly kneeling to start putting away the sleeping bags.

“Um, excuse me?” Darci sputtered. “You drop all this weird stuff on me, and now you're packing up to leave?”

“I'm so sorry, Darci, it's just… we have something to take care of back in Arcadia.”

“A ‘troll’ thing?”

“Um, yeah.”

“So are you gonna tell me what that thing is, or…?”

Claire paused mid-fold and looked Darci in the eye, “You've already got a lot to process. I don't want to overwhelm you.”

“Well, it's a little late for that, so you might as well go ahead and spill the beans.”

“I… um…”

“I'll tell her,” Ms. Nomura interjected. “You keep packing, Nuñez.” The tent briefly flashed pink again as Ms. Nomura turned back into her human form. Settling along one side if the tent, she motioned for Darci to join her.

Releasing a nervous breath she hadn't realized she'd been holding, Darci sat down next to their change-thing-teacher-troll and watched Claire resume bustling around the tent. Every few seconds or so Claire would throw a wary look their way, but didn't interrupt as Ms. Nomura started telling her tale.

“Let’s see, where to begin…”

“So, uh,” Toby started, kicking a small pebble along their path, “what's Nomura even doing here in the first place?”

“That’s… the other thing,” Jim took a deep breath. “She and Draal went to check out Killahead earlier, and… he paused to steady himself, “Gunmar is out.”

Toby inhaled sharply, “For real?”

Jim nodded.
Oh no. Ohhh no. That's bad. Really bad. Holy shit, this is bad.

"You're telling me."

"Jim. What are we gonna do?"

He looked at Toby, "Right now, we need to get back to Trollmarket. My mom will be here soon to pick us up, so we need to get everything packed."

"Aw man, this was supposed to be our mini-vacation!" Toby moaned, kicking at a nearby tree branch on the ground. "Damn Gunmar and his stupid Gumm-Gumms!"

"Shhh, keep your voice down, Tobes! Someone could hear you!"

"Right, because the empty tent of Steve Palchuck has ears," he rolled his eyes and gestured to the dark tent beside them. "Besides, it's not like anyone will actually know what we're talking about."

"I'm serious, Tobes," he scowled. "Let's get moving, we still have to get to the other side of the campgrounds."

Spoilsport.

"Hey, I heard that!"

I know.

"God, Tobes, could you knock it off?"

I could. But you have separated me from the ooey gooey goodness that is toasted marshmallows.

"For a good reason!"

Well, yeah, but it doesn't change the fact that I'm a little hangry. Which is only being exaggerated by my growing urge to stress eat.

"And I have a headache from listening to everyone's thoughts all day. So please, stop."

Whatever.

"Tobes."

You're cranky when you have magic mind-reading powers, you know that?

The hairs on the back of Jim’s neck prickled - the universal reaction to feeling as if you're being watched. He quickly glanced behind him, but saw nothing else besides the shrinking glow of their classmates' campfires. But his goosebumps didn't go away. In fact, the chilling sensation was spreading from his neck down to his arms.

Giving me the silent treatment now? Well, two can play at that game!

"Tobes, stop."

"Fine. If that's how it's gonna be, then I'll just -" 

"Seriously, Tobes. Stop." Jim grabbed him by the shoulder to halt him in his tracks.

"Jimbo, what -?"
“Shhhh.” He continued scanning their surroundings, eyes darting to every shadow cast by every rock, tent, and tree. “Do you feel that?”

“How clammy your hand is? Yeah, I can feel it through my t-shirt.”

“No, it's… something doesn't feel right.”

Toby's expression quickly sobered, “Woah, are you okay, dude? Do you feel a panic attack or something coming on?”

“No, that's not it...” Jim said distractedly, extending his visual search to the treeline at the edge of the grounds, easily at least fifty feet away. “This is... different. Kind of an impending sense of doom sort of feeling.” He squinted, trying to see what lurked behind the cover of the pines.

“Dude, that probably means your anxiety is messing with you. Or you're about to have a heart attack.”

A rustling branch caught Jim’s eye.

_Trollhunter._

“Jimbo? Are you even listening to me?”

“Huh?”

“Are you okay?”

“I'm fine,” he waved Toby off, still keeping his sights glued on the treeline.

“You sure? 'Cause somehow you're looking paler than usual right now, which is quite a feat considering your sunburn.”

“I told you, I'm fine,” he insisted. “But you’re sure you don't feel anything? Nothing out-of-the-ordinary?”

“Only a growing concern for my best friend.”

Another branch rustled. Jim swore he could see a large shape lurking behind the trees.

_What are you waiting for, Trollhunter?_

Jim’s chest felt like it was slowly being squeezed from the inside by a large claw. He _knew_ that voice. Whether it was inside his head, outside his head, or in his nightmares.

_It's too soon._

“Tobes,” he started, keeping his voice as measured as possible, “Go on and head back to the tent without me. I'll catch up in a minute.”

“Um… I'm gonna say ‘no’ to that one,” Toby crossed his arms. “No way in hell am I leaving you alone. In a strange place. In the dark.”

“Do you have your Warhammer?”

“What? No, it's at home. Who brings a hammer on a camping trip? Wait, nevermind, a lot of people do but that's not the point.” He looked quizzically at Jim, “And why, may I ask, is this
Jim fished the amulet out of his back pocket. Its face was dimly glowing in time with his stuttering heartbeat. As the light reflected off of Toby's concerned features, his friend gasped, “Oh no. That can't be good.”

“Not necessarily. It's been glowing all day whenever I hear someone's thoughts.”

“But… I'm not…”

“I know, Tobes. But I think something, or someone, in those trees over there is.” He pointed to the edge of the forest, not quite at the same spot he'd seen movement.

“And I take it you don't think whatever it is... is friendly?”


“But I can still help! I can -”

Jim shook his head, “No, Tobes. I need you to go back to the tent. Finish helping Claire. If for some reason I'm not back by the time my mom gets here… well, you'll know where to start looking.”

“I don't like this, Jim.”

“I'll be fine, Tobes,” he tried to reassure his friend. “I'll just check out those trees real quick before joining you at the tent. I'll be right behind you, I swear.”

*Trollhunter.*

“Nope. Nuh-uh. Not leaving,” Toby insisted. “I'll find some rocks to throw or something.”

*I grow impatient, Trollhunter.*

Jim covered his face with his free hand and groaned, wishing his friend would listen and his headache would go away.

*Toby can't follow me. He's going to get hurt.*

... I'm about to regret this.

“Some rocks?” Jim retorted, still keeping his face covered. “You think that, if whatever's hiding in there isn't friendly, that some rocks are going to help?”

“I mean, it's better than nothing! And it worked with Angor’s golems back in the spring.”

“And what happens when you run out of rocks?”

“I'll find more! Or a big stick or something! C'mon, Jimbo, we're a team!”

“Without your Warhammer, you’ll only get in my way,” Jim said coldly. “If whatever's in there is a pack of goblins or a Gumm-Gumm or, god forbid, worse, I can't do my job as Trollhunter if I have to worry about you constantly getting underfoot and in the line of fire.”

The look Toby gave Jim practically wrenched his heart right out of his chest. “That… *that's* what you think? That I *get in the way?*”
Jim looked away, returning his gaze to the treeline. Mostly to hide the tears starting to well up in the corners of his eyes. “Go back to the tent, Tobes.”

“Fine, I will,” Toby spat. “I’ll just go get in Claire's way. She doesn’t seem to mind.”

Jim heard Toby begin stomping through the dirt and grass; only then did he turn to watch his friend as he stormed off. “And what's that supposed to mean?” he called out.

Toby's only response was to hold up his middle fingers as he continued walking away.

With a sigh, Jim looked down at the amulet. That had been… painful, to say the least. But less painful than if something ended up happening to Toby.

The amulet pulsed again.

**So, Trollhunter?**

He looked back up at the trees, quickly narrowing in on the section where he'd seen movement. Taking a deep breath, he slowly started walking in that direction. Each footstep felt heavy, almost final. As if this were his own march to the scaffold.

*C'mon, Jim... you don't really know for sure what's out there waiting for you.*

And yet, somehow he **knew**. Even if it wasn't exactly what he thought it would be, he knew for sure it wouldn't be good.

“So, let me get this straight,” Darci started, “Jim went into these so-called Darklands to rescue your little brother and ended up trapped there for **six months**?”

Claire nodded as she packed up the last of their sleeping gear. “Yeah. The whole 'Jim Lake Disease’ thing was just a cover story. Couldn't exactly tell everyone the real reason, could we?” she chuckled.

“Wow…” Darci breathed. “Though, now that I know, it all kinda makes sense.”

Claire raised a questioning eyebrow at her friend. “Really?”

“Well, yeah. Jim’s scar, all those bruises, the PTSD symptoms… I had assumed it was just the aftermath of the 'rare disease’ he had, but knowing he was actually a prisoner of war…” Darci shuddered a little before continuing. “Honestly, I'm surprised how well he's doing for only being back one week.”

“Little Gynt is surprisingly tough,” Nomura smiled fondly, “for a human.”

“Yeah, I guess so,” Claire forced a smile in return.

*But they haven't heard Jim's screams of terror when he sleeps.*

“Claire-bear? Everything alright?”

“Oh. Yeah,” she blinked. “Just hoping Jim and TP come back soon. Dr. Lake will be here any minute, and we still have to take the tent down.”

“Well, I can help with that,” Darci winked. “And luckily everyone else should be hanging out around the campfires, so there won't be anyone around to see Miss Nomura and wonder why there's
a teacher hanging around.”

“Cool, thanks, Darci.”

But right as they got up to start moving out of the tent, the entryway of the tent burst open. Toby stormed inside, a mix of concern and rage painting his features.

“TP!” Darci exclaimed, rushing over to hug him. “What’s wrong?”

“Where's Jim?” Claire asked.

“Jim’s being an idiot,” he huffed. “He went into the woods alone to check something out, and I’ve got a really bad feeling about it.”

“Do you think it's a Gungan?” Darci wondered aloud.

“Gumm-Gumm, Miss Scott,” Nomura corrected. “And I'd say it's not impossible.”

Toby gave Claire a somewhat panicked and confused look. “Darci knows, TP,” she explained. “We ended up telling her everything.”

“TP, is it really true that you have a magic warhammer?” Darci asked excitedly.

“Yeah, I do,” Toby grinned. “Though I don't have it with me right now and I really wish I did. Then maybe Jim wouldn't have shooed me away…”

“Toby,” Claire placed a hand on his shoulder, “I'm sure Jim was just trying to protect you. You said it yourself earlier, it's how he is.”

“Yeah, well, he was pretty harsh about it this time. Said that without my weapon I'd just be in the way.”

“You and I both know that's not true,” Claire soothed. “He was probably just trying to make sure you wouldn't get hurt.”

“Well, he failed at that,” Toby grumbled.

“This... ‘thing’ Jim went to investigate,” Claire said in an attempt to switch topics, “any idea what it could be?”

“Not sure. But he seemed really concerned about it, whatever it is. And he made it pretty clear he didn't want me anywhere nearby,” he sighed and ran a hand through his hair. “Jim acted like he didn't know what it was, but I think he was lying. It's like… he knew somehow. Like the amulet told him, or…” he trailed off mid-sentence, his eyes widening as he looked up at Claire. His next sentence was barely audible, “Or he had some sort of connection with it.”

Claire gasped, “You don't think…?”

“Oh, I definitely think.”

“Shit.” Claire turned to Nomura, “So what, did you purposely lead him here?” she accused, hands on her hips.

“I would never,” Nomura spat. “Everything I told you was true. I was fleeing for fear of my life.”

“Uh, yeah, excuse me?” Darci interrupted. “Who is it we're freaking out over?”
“Gunmar,” Toby hissed.

“And he's the big baddie, right?”

The other three nodded.

Darci put her hands on her hips. “So then, what are we standing around waiting for? Sounds like Jim is in trouble, and he needs our help. Hammer or not.”

“For the doom of Gunmar, Eclipse is mine to command.”

Jim murmured the incantation, wary not to speak too loud lest he give away his location. Not that his approach would be any sort of surprise to his quarry. Twigs snapped softly beneath his feet as he weaved in between the trees and underbrush, plotting a somewhat twisted path deeper into the forest. He scored some of the tree trunks with his blade as he passed, hoping the cuts would be enough to leave a sort of trail so the others could find him. Assuming there was anything left to find.

Come closer, hunter.

Farther and farther he walked, away from the campgrounds and away from all signs of human life. This deep in the forest, there would be no one around to hear a verbal conversation. Or hear the sounds of a battle.

Or hear his screams.

He swallowed the lump in his throat and tried to regulate his breathing. But the adrenaline pumping through his veins made that difficult.

What if this is my chance to end this now?

Then no one else will get hurt.

The light from his armor illuminated his surroundings, its swirling red glow intermingling with the browns and greens of the pines. It revealed a trail of footprints in the soft dirt, prints that weren't made by man or any known animal. However, the tracks were much smaller than he expected. Too small to be Gunmar's...

Flat on his back, the unforgiving ground held him in place as Gunmar slowly added more pressure. The underlord’s foot was wider than Jim's chest, and as it pushed down on him it became harder and harder to breathe. Even despite his armor.

The worst part was that Gunmar wasn't even interrogating Jim anymore. No questions being asked, nothing being threatened... only grinning maliciously as his one eye watched Jim flail helplessly under the crushing weight.

Jim gasped, finding himself doubled over against a tree. Winded, he struggled to breathe. Sweat dripped down his face and into the collar of his armor.

Already tired, Trollhunter?

He grit his teeth and took a sharp breath. “Get out of my head!” he half yelled, half pleaded into the void.
Foolish whelp. You are the one who refuses to let me go.

“Lies!” he spat, scanning the darkness in front of him for any sign of his adversary. “I want nothing to do with you! You've ruined my life!”

“I've ruined your life?” the voice echoed through the trees. “You are mistaken, boy. You sealed your fate the moment you picked up Merlin's amulet.”

Jim held the Eclipse blade out in front of him, cautiously proceeding through the trees towards the sound of the voice. “It called to me. The amulet chose me.”

“A call from a magic trinket does not mean you must answer it.”

Something shifted in the shadows. Twigs and dried pine needles cracked under its footsteps.

“And now, young Trollhunter, it is time to face your fate.”

Two glowing, eerie blue eyes materialized in the darkness. Below them, the ghost of a cruel smile was barely visible, taunting Jim.

... wait, two eyes?

Oh no.

Draal.

Jim leapt out of the way as the troll came barrelling through the trees, kicking up dead foliage into the air. He turned, holding his sword up to block the next incoming flurry of attacks. Draal didn't hold back. Each strike sent a shock through Jim as it collided with his blade, rattling his bruised insides and forcing him to remember his cracked ribs.

He couldn't keep this up for long.

Physically, he felt like he was crumbling from the inside out. He simply didn't have the stamina yet to fight this intense of a battle, and each blow he parried from Draal sapped even more of his remaining strength. Mentally, he was utterly conflicted. He needed to defend himself. He needed to defeat Gunmar. But his opponent wasn't Gunmar, not really. It was his friend, practically his brother, being controlled by the Decimaar Blade. And he couldn't hurt his friend.

“Draal! Listen to me!” he called out, circling around behind a tree. “I don't want to fight you! Snap out of it!”

“Fool! Draal is no longer here. This husk is mine to command.” The voice came from Draal's mouth, but it very clearly belonged to Gunmar. Though there was something faint, nagging at the back of Jim's mind. Like a whisper, or -

Suddenly, Draal spun into the tree Jim was sheltering behind, cracking the trunk at the base and nearly felling it on top of Jim. He scrambled out of the way just in the nick of time and lifted the Eclipse blade. But he never swung out, only sticking to blocking and redirecting Draal's attacks. His side flared up in pain. Everything else felt like it was slowly going numb.

“Why won't you fight me, whelp?”

“I am not going to fight you! Draal, you can fight this! I know you can!”

Over the din of clashing metal and stone, Jim almost missed the quiet voice in the back of his head.
“NO! DRAAL!” Jim bellowed, only to have one of the troll’s punches collide with his midsection and send him flying against a tree. He crumpled at its base. “Please, Draal…” he wheezed, “I can't fight my friend…”

“Your friend is gone,” Gunmar's voice sneered. He grabbed Jim around the neck, hoisting him up against the tree until his toes dangled above the ground. “You fight everyone else. Even now, your Tribunal is against you.”

What?

“These aren't my only eyes, whelp.”

“I'm... gonna save him…” Jim choked, struggling against the troll’s vice grip. “And then... I'll stop you... Gunmar...”

“You can't even kill this broken husk that threatens your life!” Gunmar laughed. He dropped Jim, continued to chuckle darkly as Jim fumbled to regain his balance. “Kill this one-armed trash, or else it will be used against you again!”

“Leave Draal out of this!” Jim begged, his sword at his side. “If you want to fight someone, fight me! Not Draal!”

“In due time, Trollhunter. I'd rather kill you with my own hands.” Draal's body turned as if to walk away, then quickly pivoted back around. “But first, I want to see you suffer.”

Jim was too slow, too worn out to block the punch. Draal's fist collided with his unprotected chin. Lights popped in front of Jim's eyes.

Then everything went dark.

Chapter End Notes

Just your resident fandom wine aunt, back at it again with that sweet, sweet angst. Heh.

Oh man. Oh man am I getting excited about what I've got planned. You guys don't even know. Muahaha.

Though I do believe next chapter is when I finally take a slight detour to introduce the Creepslayerz, so there's that. ;)

Again, sorry my updates have been rather few and far between lately. Too many things going on. Because, you know, life.
Chapter 27

Chapter Summary

Enter: The Creepslayerz

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

“Oh no. Ohhhh no. Steve, I'm so -”

"Sorry?" Steve leered at Eli. “Oh, you'll be sorry alright. So sorry. You wanna know how sorry?”

Eli shook his head. “No, not re-”

“First, I'm gonna change my pants. And then, when I get back, I'm gonna give you a reason to change your pants.”

“Uh -”

Steve got to his feet and turned to storm away from the campfire. Immediately, a chorus of poorly suppressed snickering broke out among his classmates.

Because out of all the s’mores toppings that could have possibly 'accidentally' ended up on the log Steve had claimed as his chair for the evening, it just had to be chocolate. Not graham crackers. Not marshmallows. Chocolate. Brown, warm, slightly melted chocolate.

“Stupid… damn s’mores… hate camping…” he grumbled under his breath as he got closer to his tent, unable to clear his head of his classmates' laughter. His classmates knew it was chocolate. But that didn’t change the fact that the back of his jeans now sported a large stain that looked an awful lot like -

“Shit,” he cursed as he opened the flap of his tent. “First my pants, now raccoons .”

The inside of his tent looked like it had been ransacked by a - well, for lack of a better term - ravenous rogue trash panda. The few extra clothes he’d packed were scattered everywhere, and the collection of snacks he’d brought had been relocated from the bottom of his backpack to the floor of the tent. (Well, to be honest, it was mostly candy bars.) Some still had their wrappers intact, but most were peeled away to varying degrees to reveal noticeable bite marks. The Nougat Nummies seemed to have suffered the greatest number of casualties. Which was a shame. Nougat Nummies were his favorite.

Steve jumped when he heard a rustling from the back corner of the tent. “Eeeaaahh! Who… who goes there?” He grabbed a nearby flashlight, brandishing it like a stubby club while trying not to shake like a leaf in a hurricane, “I’m warning you, raccoon, or whatever you are, this isn’t going to end well. For you. Cuz I’m gonna get you.”

Yeah, that’s it, Steve. Verbally threaten the wild animal that doesn’t understand a lick of English.

Again, there was a rustling noise. He watched his beach towel shift slightly as the suspicious bulge
in the middle of it moved.

*Holy shit, there’s a raccoon in my tent. Or a small bear. Or a really large rat. Oh god, that’s worse. What if I get eaten by a small mammal? All because of Nougat Nummies! Shit shit shit shit -*

The bulge moved again. Slowly and methodically, an array of green, spindly fingers grasped the edge of the towel and started lifting the fabric.

*Wait…*

*Raccoons aren’t green.*

*I don’t think.*

*And neither are rats. Or bears.*

*… Shit, am I being invaded by a mutant frog?*

A pair of ominous, beady eyes peeked out from under the towel. Steve switched on his flashlight, focusing the beam on the intruder. When the light hit it, it immediately hissed, “*Wakaaa!*”

*Not a frog. Definitely NOT a frog!*

Startled, Steve dropped his flashlight. But before he had a chance to completely freak out, he reached for the volleyball net that was wadded up near his feet. As soon as he felt the material between his fingers, Steve flung the net across the tent. The not-frog tried to leap out of the way, but the net successfully hit its mark, thoroughly entangling the not-frog. It struggled, kicked, growled, and chattered at him, but it seemed like the creature was successfully stuck. For now.

Steve retrieved his flashlight from the ground and slowly approached the creature, his curiosity overtaking his terror now that the thing was trapped. It hissed again when he directed the beam of light at its face, allowing Steve to get a better look at the creature’s bloodshot yellow eyes and moss-like tufts of hair on its face. It sported a thin, curly mustache that looked like it had actually been drawn on with a marker. Not only was this thing *not* a frog, it was unlike any animal Steve had ever seen before.

“What *are* you?” he wondered aloud.

“*Waka chaka,*” it replied, grinning to reveal a row of jagged, sharp teeth. Teeth that looked like they would make quick work of one volleyball net.

*Shit.*

Reacting before he barely had time to think, Steve scooped up the creature, net and all, and shoved it into his wide-open backpack. The not-frog’s limbs, which were surprisingly bony compared to its squishy torso, flailed and tried to fight back as Steve stuffed it inside the bag, further entangling it in the volleyball net.

“Just… get… inside…” he panted, forcing fistfuls of net into the backpack on top of the creature, putting more material between himself and the freaky, pointy-toothed not-frog.

After one final shove, the creature and the entire volleyball net were completely inside. Steve quickly zipped the backpack closed. “There… that oughta hold you for a while,” he breathed, straightening up and crossing his arms as he regarded the makeshift containment system.
What the hell is that thing?

A memory conveniently pricked at the back of Steve’s mind, a memory of a squeaky voice trying to describe some sort of creepy monster that went bump in the night. Followed by shoving the owner of said squeaky voice head-first into a locker.

Eli.

If there’s anyone who knows what this thing is, it’s Eli.

Hoping the backpack prison would be enough until he returned, Steve rushed out of his tent and started sprinting back towards the campfires. Even at a distance, it didn’t take him long to pick out Eli’s pasty complexion amongst the nearest circle of students. He slowed down to a swift walk as he got closer, barreling towards Eli like a speeding locomotive. “Pepperjack!” he said gruffly. “You’re coming with me!”

Eli’s eyes went wide as Steve grabbed him by the shoulders, ‘encouraging’ the scrawny teen to stand up. “Oh, uh, okay…” Eli mumbed, stumbling a little as he got to his feet.

Most of their classmates were silent as they watched the exchange, as usual, though a few directly behind Steve snickered. Right. Pants. Changing out of his chocolate-stained pants hadn’t really been a priority anymore. Steve whirled on them and glared, and immediately the snickering came to a halt. “Yeah, that’s what I thought,” he sneered before whisking Eli away.

“Uh, S-Steve,” Eli started as Steve practically dragged him towards his tent, “if you’re going to beat me up, can I at least take off my glasses first? I don’t have an extra pair with me, and –”

“Huh?” Steve glanced at him from the corner of his eye, “I’m not gonna beat you up, Pepperjack.”

“Um, well… uh… you’ve said that before…”

“Not this time, I promise.”

“Oh, then… uh -”

“I need to show you something. Something weird.”

“If it’s a mole or some other abnormal growth, you should really have that sort of thing checked out by a -”

“Oh god , Pepperjack, not that! Ew!” he made a disgusted face as he opened the flap of his tent. Pushing Eli inside, he turned on his flashlight and used it to point to the backpack in the middle of the floor. “That’s what I need to show you.”

“Your backpack?” Eli’s eyebrow quirked up, his gaze darting around at the mini-disaster zone around them of wrappers and unfolded clothes.

“No, buttsnack. Inside the backpack.”

“What… what’s inside?”

“You, uh, said one time you saw monsters, right?”

“Steve,” Eli sighed, “if you’re pranking me, can we just skip ahead to the part where you’re laughing and I’m humiliated?”
“What? No. Shut up, Pepperjack. And tell me what this is.” Grabbing the pencil behind Eli’s ear, Steve used it to put a little distance between himself and the backpack as he slowly undid the zipper. He got about halfway before something started resisting him. Steve jumped back, and the main pocket of the backpack finished unzipping itself all on its own. Well, more accurately, the not-frog opened it from the inside. Which at least meant the thing hadn’t escaped when he went to get Eli, so that’s… a plus. Sort of.

Those familiar, green, spidery fingers wrapped around the top edge of the backpack, pushing the fabric down to reveal yellow eyes that reflected the light of Steve’s flashlight.

Eli gasped, “No way, you caught one?”

“Caught wha - aaaAAHH!” Steve’s question turned into a yelp as the not-frog leaped out of the backpack, completely free of the volleyball net. It made a beeline for Steve and he kicked at it, sending it skidding across the tent before it could reach him. The not-frog’s eyes rolled in its head, eventually focusing back on Steve and growling.

Before it could come crawling back, Eli got between Steve and the not-frog, holding out something in his hand to the creature. “Woah, there, little guy!” he said, surprisingly confident for someone with such a shaky voice. The not-frog abruptly stopped in its tracks so it could take the thing out of Eli’s hand and start munching on it - Steve quickly recognized the object as one of the candy bars that had miraculously survived the first assault of the evening. Looking back at Steve, Eli’s eyes were lit up with excitement, “Steve, do you know what this is?”

“No, I’m not super smart like you. That’s why I brought you here in the first place. But… this isn’t normal, right?” he asked nervously.

The not-frog finished the candy bar and started growling again. Eli knelt and handed it another one, smiling as it snatched up the treat, “Incredible. Absolutely incredible. I can’t believe you caught one!”

“Uh, yeah,” Steve muttered, daring to get closer and kneel beside Eli. “What is it, exactly?”

“It’s a Creeper,” Eli grinned.

“Creeper?”

“Things that creep in the dark. Monsters, stone creatures, shapeshifters…”

“But - but monsters aren’t real!”

Eli gave Steve a deadpan look as he fed the small, green monster a third candy bar.

“I’m just… freaking out, okay?” Steve continued. “Tell me what’s going on.”

“Are you sure you want to know? Once you do, there’s no going back.”

“Huh?”

“For years, I suspected,” Eli started dramatically without waiting for a proper answer, “and for years, I waited patiently. Then, on one fateful night, I saw them.” As Eli talked, the Creeper started sniffing curiously around the tent, seemingly in a much calmer mood now that more sugar was in its system.

“Saw what?” Steve asked, picking up a partially-wrapped candy bar and tossing a piece of it to the
“Arcadia is a hotbed for supernatural activity,” Eli stated, pulling a small field journal out of his back pocket. He flipped to one of the pages, revealing some blurry photos and sketches of monsters with stone for skin. At the top was a single word followed by a question mark: ‘Trolls?’

“Some I’ve confirmed,” he continued, turning more pages in his book, “some I’ve yet to scratch the surface of.” More words flashed by as Eli turned the pages: Wizards, Aliens...

Steve looked at Eli in shock, rendered temporarily speechless.

“Right now, I’ve got more questions than answers,” Eli sighed, “including why we found this Creeper so far outside of Arcadia. But now that we have proof, so many possibilities are open to us!”

“Wait, what?” Steve sputtered, still trying to absorb everything. “You’re… you’re kidding me, right? This is insane! Why haven’t you told anybody?!”

“I did,” Eli frowned, “You shoved me into a locker.”

“Oh. Right.”

“There’s a whole other world beneath our feet we know nothing about, Steve! Creatures living in shadow, monsters living among us…” he turned to the last page in the journal, revealing a photograph of one of those mystery-solving string board things; Steve was willing to bet the real version was currently hanging on the wall of Eli’s bedroom. Eli started pointing to some of the larger features on the photograph, circled in red. “But what do they want? Are they friends? Or not friends?” He looked at Steve with a serious expression, tapping the center of the photo, “Whatever they are, someone or something in Arcadia is at the center of this, covering it up. Why does no one know? Who’s hiding the creepers from the world?”

In the stunned silence that followed, Steve heard a commotion outside the tent. He quickly dimmed the flashlight and motioned for Eli to be quiet; the Creeper, meanwhile, sat on Steve’s sleeping bag and continued to happily munch on more pieces of candy it had found.

“Shhhh, keep your voice down, Tobes! Someone could hear you!”

“Right, because the empty tent of Steve Palchuck has ears.”

Eli and Steve exchanged a silent glance.

Lake and Domzalski? What are those two buttsnacks up to?

“I’m serious, Tobes,” Lake continued, apparently standing right outside Steve’s tent. “Let’s get moving -”

“Is it just me,” Steve whispered to Eli, “Or has Jim Lake been acting weird lately?”

“C’mon, Steve,” Eli replied in a hushed voice, “He was sick for a long time, cut him some slack!”

“Yeah, but -”

“Hey, I heard that!” they heard Jim scold.

Both boys froze.
“God, Tobes, could you knock it off?”

“What’s going on?” Eli whispered. “All I hear is Jim.”

“Same,” Steve agreed.

“For a good reason!” Jim blurted out.

“You’ve gotta admit, this is weird,” Steve frowned.

“Maybe...” Eli shrugged.

Steve glanced at the Creeper, noticing that it had stopped gorging itself on candy and was staring intently at the entrance of the tent. As if it were listening to Jim, too.

“And I have a headache from listening to everyone’s thoughts all day. So please, stop.” A brief pause, then Jim spoke again, “Tobes.”

“Okay, yeah,” Eli admitted quietly, “this is weird. Even for Jim.”

“I told you so!” Steve whispered triumphantly. “I’m telling you, he’s up to something.”

The Creeper crawled over to them, peering at Eli’s journal that still lay open on the floor. Giving them a knowing grin, it pointed to the circle on Eli’s photo that read: ‘Who?’

Then it pointed in the direction of Jim’s voice.

“Tobes, stop...” From the sound of it, it seemed like Jim and Toby had moved away from the tent.

Eli looked in shock at the Creeper, “Wait... are you suggesting Jim's behind this?”

The Creeper nodded and gave a low reply, “Yuh-huh.”

“But that doesn’t make any sense!”

“It makes perfect sense,” Steve immediately insisted. “My nemesis wants to destroy the world!”

“But Jim’s the nicest guy in school!”

“It’s all an act. I bet he wasn’t even sick all those months, he was just doing super-secret creeper stuff instead!” Steve gasped as he made another realization, “Claire and Domzalski were covering for him, so they must be in on it, too!”

“No, there’s no way...”

“You heard Mustache,” Steve gripped Eli’s shoulder, “Jim’s behind everything. Which means he’s a danger to Arcadia. Hell, he’s a danger to the whole world! And it’s up to us to stop him.”

“Steve, I think you’re jumping to conclusions...”

“No, I’m being decisive, Eli. Ever hear of an indecisive hero? That’s right, you haven’t, because heroes are the type of people who get shit done.”

“But Steve, we only just -”

“Eli. Pepperbuddy. Do you wanna be a hero, or not?”
“Well, yeah, but… I still don’t think Jim’s the bad guy. It doesn’t seem right.”

“C’mon, Eli, who are you gonna trust,” Steve clapped Eli on the back, “your gut, or me and Mustache, here?”

“That doesn’t exactly ease my mind.”

“How about this, then: obviously Mustache can understand English, so we take him to the authorities or the government or whatever and they can question him. They start an investigation, then bada-bing, bada-boom, Jim Fake and all his cronies get served the justice they deserve.”

“If they find Jim guilty.”

“Yeah, sure. Whatever”

The Creeper’s eyes narrowed as it started backing away from the two of them.

“Hey, what’s up with Mustache?” Steve wondered aloud.

Before Eli could even attempt to answer, the Creeper got a running start and bounded over them, kicking the tops of their heads in the process. They tried to turn and grab it before it could escape, but the little monster had already reached the front of the tent and slid out through a gap in the entryway. It blew them a raspberry before vanishing completely.

“Why, Mustache? I thought we were friends!” Steve called after the Creeper, shaking his fist in the air.

“You kicked it across the tent earlier,” Eli commented, readjusting his glasses.

“Whatever. But you gotta admit, the fact that it recognized Jim? Still pretty suspicious. And it means he’s involved somehow, baddie or not.”

“Well… I guess that makes sense.”

“See? I can make sense sometimes!”

“Heh, but not dollars,” Eli chuckled to himself.

“Huh? What’s that supposed to mean?” Steve scowled.

“Nothing. Just an attempt at humor.”

“Well, it was lame. You’d better keep that stuff to a minimum if we’re gonna partner up and save the world and shit.”

Eli gave him a confused look, “Wait, partners? Like in all those cool crime-fighting movies?”

“Duh,” Steve smirked, “Jim Fake or not, Creepers like Mustache are still a threat. With our combined smarts and my muscles, I think we’ve got a chance at getting to the bottom of all this.”

“Yeah… yeah, you’re right!” Eli grinned. “So, what’s our first move?”

“We figure out how Lake factors in to all this.” Standing up, Steve cracked his knuckles before helping Eli to his feet. “Find out what he and his little friends are hiding.”

“We’re going to spy on Jim? What about the Creeper that just got away?”
“If we follow Jim long enough, I’m sure we’ll find more.”

“But what if we don’t? What if -?”

“Eli. You’re a fan of sciencey stuff, right?”

“Yeah…”

“Did any famous scientist people become famous because they just sat around and questioned things all day?”

“Well, actually, Einstein -”

“It was supposed to be a rhetorical question!” Steve cut him off. Taking a breath, he continued, “Do you want to get to the bottom of the Creeper mystery, or not?”

Eli nodded.

“Then trust me, we’re gonna spy on Jim. Starting now.” Steve surveyed his mess of a tent, picking up his backpack and filling it with a few useful supplies he had lying around: some rope, what was left of the volleyball net (the Creeper had eaten most of it, apparently), an extra flashlight, and his handy-dandy swiss army knife. He wished he had more, but he’d packed for an overnight camping trip, not an impromptu stakeout mission.

“I think I have some stuff in my tent we could use,” Eli piped up.

“Good idea. And your tent is right next to Lake’s, so we can use it to easily eavesdrop on him. Let’s go.” Steve slung the backpack over his shoulders and opened the entrance of the tent, peering outside to see if the coast was clear. He nodded to Eli, motioning for them to leave the tent. Then they started walking briskly in the direction of Eli’s campsite.

And were quickly stopped when they saw a couple figures in the distance, one obnoxiously tall and the other comically stout, having some sort of verbal disagreement. Keeping low to the ground, Steve and Eli tried to get as close as they could without being detected, but they were still too far away to hear what the other two were saying.

“Jim and Toby fighting?” Eli whispered, “Now that’s the weirdest thing I’ve seen yet.”

They watched as Jim turned away from Toby to face the forest, with Toby gesturing angrily in return. Then Toby turned and started storming off, at one point flipping Jim off as he walked away. Eli shifted as if to follow him, but Steve held his scrawny partner back by grabbing the back of his t-shirt. Steve pointed to Jim, who was steadily trudging towards the edge of the forest, “Look. He’s going into the woods.”

Eli’s eyes went wide, “You’re not seriously thinking of following him in there, are you?”

“He could be meeting up with Mustache. Or some other Creeper.”

“We don’t know that.”

“And we won’t know if we don’t follow him. Now come on, Eli! Before we lose him!”

Sighing, Eli let Steve grab his wrist and drag him across the field towards the treeline. They made sure to keep a healthy distance between themselves and Jim as they followed him, using the increasing number of trees as cover. Not that he ever bothered to look over his shoulder; apparently
the dude was super focused on wherever he was going. The scent of pine surrounded them as they walked deeper into the forest, bringing with it a sense of exhilaration laced with anxiety. But as they continued, it got harder and harder to maintain eyes on their target, what with all the trees and shrubberies and whatnot. Eventually they lost track of Jim altogether.

“Steve,” Eli whispered, “I can’t see Jim anymore.”

“He couldn’t have gone far,” Steve replied, squinting into the darkness ahead of them, “he wasn’t exactly moving quickly.”

“But he could have changed directions or -” Eli paused when a flash of red light shone through the trees, maybe only thirty yards in front of them. (Or maybe it was twenty. Guessing distances is hard.) The light briefly illuminated everything in the surrounding area, and when it subsided Steve could just make out a figure standing where the source of the light should have been. Though, once his eyes readjusted, it wasn’t actually that hard to see the figure.

Because it was Jim, who apparently was now sporting a *flipping glowing suit of armor*. Complete with a *flipping glowing sword*.

“Whoah,” Eli’s jaw dropped.

“Okay, so you see the glowy armor, too?”

“Uh-huh.”

“Is that normal for Creeper stuff?”

“Umm, No? I’ve never seen that before…” Eli squinted and rubbed his eyes behind his glasses. “Wait, maybe I have! That looks like Jim's costume he wore back in the Spring play! Except now it looks a lot more ominous.”

Steve gave Eli a sideways glance. “How the hell do you remember stuff like that?”

“It's one of my many talents,” Eli replied proudly.

“Cool. Great. Now shut up, he's getting away!”

They restarted their pursuit, following the haze of red light moving deeper into the forest. It was a lot easier now that Jim was his own light source, and occasionally they’d spot small slash marks he’d left on the tree trunks as they passed. As if he wanted to be found. Weird.

Suddenly Jim stopped in his tracks, staggering up against a tree for support. Steve threw his arm out to the side to stop Eli, catching him square in the chest.

“Oof, hey!”

“Shhh! Something’s up with Jim,” Steve pointed at the moaning teenager up ahead. In the dim light, it almost looked as if Jim were wincing in pain.

“Maybe he’s still sick.”

“Or maybe he’s being possessed. Is that something Creepers can do?”

“I don’t -”

“Get out of my head!” Jim abruptly cried out, struggling to regain his balance. Hidden from view,

“I’ve ruined your life?” a voice echoed through the trees in response. The sound sent a shiver racing down Steve’s spine. Probably because the voice somehow sounded like the unholy offspring of death and fear itself. “You are mistaken, boy. You sealed your fate the moment you picked up Merlin’s amulet.”

Jim started walking again, holding his glowing red sword in front of him, “It called to me. The amulet chose me.”

Merlin? Chosen one? Is this some sort of modern-day Camelot shit or something?

Steve tried to follow, but Eli firmly grasped his backpack to hold him back.

“Steve,” he whispered, “I think we need to stay here. I’ve got a bad feeling about this.”

As much as he didn’t want to admit it, the pit in Steve’s stomach agreed. He nodded, peering around the tree they were hiding behind to see if he could still spot Jim. Steve could see the red glow of Jim’s armor, but he was just far enough away that it was hard to figure out the conversation he was having with whatever lurked in the shadows.

Then, dried pine needles and branches crackled and flew in the air as a dark figure lunged at Jim. Jim leapt out of the way in the nick of time, lifting up his sword to block the onslaught coming for him before disappearing from sight behind a grove of trees. The sound of metal clanging against stone resounded through the forest, spooking a flock of birds from a nearby bush. And the din made it impossible for Steve and Eli to make out what Jim was saying, now only able to hear Jim’s wordless shouts and the gravelly roars of whatever Creeper he was facing.

Steve felt a tug on his sleeve, coming face-to-face with a very concerned Eli. “I don’t think Jim’s the bad guy,” Eli said, barely loud enough to hear. “And I think he might be in trouble.”

As if on cue, a tree close to the battle let out an ear splitting crack before toppling over. “NO! DRAAL!” they heard Jim scream before the Creeper sent him flying through the air, only to collide with another tree a little closer to Steve and Eli. Steve got a better look at the Creeper as it approached Jim - a large hulking brute made of blue stone, with odd antlers or horns or whatever on its head, a metal arm, and a devilish grin painted on its face. And freaky, glowing blue eyes.

“At least Jim has armor,” Steve muttered. “We’ll get pulverized in seconds by that Creeper if it sees us.” He hid behind the tree again just as the Creeper wrapped a hand around Jim’s neck and lifted him into the air.

“Your friend is gone,” they heard the Creeper sneer. “You fight everyone else. Even now, your Tribunal is against you. These aren’t my only eyes, whelp.”

“I’m… gonna save him…” Jim choked. “And then… I’ll stop you… Gunmar …”

Gunmar? What’s a Gunmar?

“You can’t even kill this broken husk that threatens your life!” the Creeper laughed. There was a thud, and Steve carefully peered around the tree to see Jim struggling to get back to his feet. “Kill this one-armed trash, or else it will be used against you again!”

That’s a weird way to taunt your opponent.
“Leave Draal out of this!” Jim shouted. “If you want to fight someone, fight *me*! Not Draal!”

Despite talking about fighting, Jim was holding his sword at his side. *And what the hell is a ‘Draal’?*

“In due time, Trollhunter. I’d rather kill you with my own hands.”

Steve dared to look further around the tree as the Creeper started walking away back into the shadows. But then it quickly turned back to Jim, and Steve scrambled to hide behind the tree again. Out of the corner of his eye, he saw Eli shaking like a leaf beside him.

Then the Creeper spoke again, “But first, I want to see you suffer .”

Steve’s stomach sank as he heard a sickening thud. He involuntarily gripped Eli’s shoulder, who in return held onto Steve’s wrist for dear life. A booming laugh surrounded them, followed by slow, steady footsteps. Footsteps that grew more distant with each step. Breathing a small sigh of relief, Steve dared to peer around the tree to find the Creeper disappearing deeper into the forest. A flash of red light came from nearby, drawing Steve’s attention to a figure lying unconscious on the ground.

*Lake.*

Doing a double-take to make sure the Creeper was gone, Steve rushed out from behind the tree with Eli close at his heels. They stopped at his side, looking down at the beaten teen. Jim’s armor had vanished, leaving a dimly glowing metal disk lying on his chest on top of his regular clothes they’d seen him wearing earlier. His face was scratched up and a little bloody, with a particularly nasty bruise already blooming across his jawline.

“Is he…?” Steve started, unable to finish his question.

Eli knelt down and put his ear to Jim’s chest. “I... don’t think so. Quick, hand me your pocket knife.”

Steve dug the swiss army knife out of his bag and delivered it into Eli’s outstretched hand. Selecting one of the larger blades, Eli held it - sharp side away - near Jim’s nose. A small amount of condensation formed against the cold metal.

“He’s still breathing,” Eli announced with relief, standing up and handing the knife back to Steve. “But he needs medical care ASAP.”

“Well, don’t just stand there, then! Help me carry him back to -” Steve’s words got cut off by a chorus of voices crying out in the distance.

“*Jim?*”

“*Jim! Where are you?*”

“Quick, Eli, hide!” Steve hissed.

“Why?”

“Us standing over an unconscious Jim doesn’t exactly paint a pretty picture.”

“But we could just expla-”

Steve ducked behind a tree a few yards away, dragging a reluctant Eli behind him. As soon as they’d hidden themselves, they heard the shuffle of nearby footsteps and a familiar voice.

“Guys,” Darci Scott shouted, “over here!”

More footsteps. There had to at least be two or three other people here, maybe more. Steve had to keep himself from looking at the new arrivals, not wanting to risk getting implicated in Jim’s current condition.

“Oh, Jim,” Claire gasped. The worry in her voice was clear.

“Dr. L, he’s barely breathing!” Domzalski cried out urgently.

“We need to get him back to the car. I have some supplies that should help until we get to the hospital. Darci, Claire, you help me with Jim,” Dr. Lake ordered. “Toby, I need you to run back and help Ms. Nomura finish packing. Pull out the first aid kit from the trunk of the car before you stuff everything else inside.”

“Aye-aye, Dr. L!” There was the sound of hurried running as Toby left the scene.

“Okay, girls, I need you to help me lift Jim. Be careful with his ribs, I’ll bet he made his injury worse again… Alright, on the count of three… one… two… three!”

There was a little bit of groaning, but it seemed like they successfully lifted Jim off the ground. Steve heard their footsteps steadily move away from the boys’ location. As they faded into the distance, he sank down along the tree trunk to join Eli on the ground.

What seemed like an eternity of silence passed between them. Then, Eli finally spoke, “Jim’s going to be okay… right?” His voice seemed smaller than usual.

“Yeah. Totally. Probably. I mean, his mom’s got him. And she’s a doctor.”

“I guess…” Eli trailed off, letting silence settle between them again.

“Well…” Steve started, nervously cracking his knuckles, “I guess Jim really is a... good guy.” He choked a little on those last couple of words.

“Told you so.”

“And I think it’s pretty clear we’re in way over our heads, here.”

“Agreed.”

“So… what now?”

Eli thoughtfully tapped a finger against his chin, “I think we need to get more facts. Figure out what’s going on before we try to get involved. I, for one, don’t want to end up as Creeper kibble.”

“Same. Though that big Creeper tonight, the one Jim was fighting? If there’s more where that came from, Arcadia may be in serious trouble. Especially after the ass-whooping it put Jim through.”

“Then we need to stay on the down-low and find out more, so that we’re ready to help when Arcadia needs us. Like secret superheroes!” Eli exclaimed, his eyes lighting up.

“Secret superheroes… I can dig that,” Steve smirked.
Eli got to his feet, placing his hands dramatically on his hips. “Look out, all you things that creep in the night! Because the Midnight Boys are coming!”

“Oh no, no way. We are not calling ourselves that,” Steve insisted, standing up next to Eli.

“What do you suggest, then?”

Steve thought for a second, “We’re the Creepslayerz. With a ‘Z’.”

“Oooh, that sounds cool!”

“A cool name, for a couple of cool dudes,” Steve grinned, placing his hand on Eli’s shoulder. “Now come on, we should get back to camp.”

“Hey, uh… Steve?”

“Yeah, Pepperbuddy?”

“You still have chocolate on your pants.”

“Shit.”

Chapter End Notes

This was supposed to be a short-ish, entirely lighthearted chapter. Whoops.

Well, at least it was mostly lighthearted!

I wasn't sure how writing a chapter entirely from Steve's point of view was going to go, but I ended up liking it more than I thought I would. Writing Jim's POV is still my favorite, though ^.^
Chapter 28

Chapter Summary

Oh, I know I'm worse for weather
But, my love, I won't give up.

Chapter Notes

We're officially over 100k words now, y'all

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“Guys, over here!”

“Dr. L, he's barely breathing!”

“Hang in there, kiddo. You're going to be okay.”

“Hold on, Jim…”

“Jim…”

Jim lay on his back, wheezing after getting tossed roughly into his cell mere moments ago. Everything hurt. Even breathing hurt. It was as if the outer shell of his armor was the only thing holding his crumbling insides together. But even that wouldn't last much longer - with each day, each hour, each second that passed, the light from the amulet kept growing fainter.

It was only a matter of time.

“Little Gynt.”

He tried to respond. But when he inhaled, the right half of his ribcage reminded him of its recent torture at the hands of the Gumm-Gumms. Letting out a low moan, he curled in on himself, embracing the array of flaring pains that seemed to be a permanent part of his existence now.

“Little Gynt, talk to me.”
“Leave me alone, Nomura,” he muttered.

“See, I could do that, but then I’d be bored.”

“Do I look like I care?”

“You look like you’re in pain,” the changeling stated.

Jim lay silent, obstinately keeping his back to the wall between their cells.

“Come now, Trollhunter,” Nomura started, her voice turning soft, “remember that candy bar from the other day? I’m sure your friends will be here soon.”

“Fat chance,” he snidely remarked, pressing the side of his face against the cold, stone floor. “No one can open the bridge without me, remember?”

“Your friends are nothing if not persistent. They will find a way.”

“No, they won’t.” Then, grimly, he added, “Not soon enough.”

“I liked you better when you were obnoxiously optimistic,” she sighed. “Little Gynt, please tell me Gunmar hasn’t broken you.”

“Well, I’m pretty sure he broke my ribs today.”

“Not that. I meant your spirit.”

The ache that had been growing inside his chest - the one he kept trying to bury and hide and ignore as much as possible - lurched again, leaving him with an empty, numb sensation in his very core. A couple of tears escaped from his eyes and ran across his face.

“I just want it to be over already,” he whispered.

Nomura was silent on the other side of the wall. For a while, the only sound Jim heard was his own ragged breathing. Then, eventually, she slowly started reciting in a low voice, “Though wise men at their end know dark is right… Do not go gentle into that good night.

“Rage, rage against the dying of the light.”

...

Jim woke with a start to the soft, persistent beeping of medical equipment. “Draal!” he gasped, bolting up in bed, eyes flying open to the concerned faces of his mother and Claire hovering over him. The tempo of the ambient beeping quickened as his awareness of reality came crashing back.

Gunmar’s out.

Everyone’s in danger.

And Draal…

His right hand flew to his face as his scar flared up in sympathy, a split second of searing pain that settled into a dull ache. His vision swam before him as he tried to refocus on his mother’s face.

“Kiddo, I need you to lie back down,” Barbara insisted, gently pushing on his shoulders. “You’re not -”
“I need to get to Trollmarket,” he attempted to shrug her off. “Gotta talk to Blinky. And Vendel. Now.”

“Jim, we already told them,” Claire assured, helping his mother pin him to the bed. “They know about Gunmar. And Draal.”

“But -”

“Jim, you need to rest,” Barbara frowned, thwarting his next (pathetic) attempt to get up. “Your side is swelling again, you fractured your jaw, and,” she paused to shine a light in his eyes, sighing with relief, “miraculously, at least you don’t have a concussion. But you’re not going anywhere anytime soon, mister.”

“But I need to -!”

“No.”

“But -”

“No, Jim. You’re no good to anyone if you can barely stand on your own two feet,” Barbara insisted.

Again, Jim tried to sit up. And again he was firmly pushed down against the bed. “But Trollmarket -”

“Will be fine without you for a little longer,” Claire soothed as she held one of his arms in place. “We can hold down the fort until you’re better.”

Jim struggled to get up again, making it a little farther this time before the women restrained him. “You don’t understand, I need to get to Trollmarket!” he said through clenched teeth, the throbbing pain in his jaw finally becoming more prominent than his aching scar. “Gunmar -”

“So help me, Jim, if you don’t calm down I’ll put a sedative in your IV drip,” his mom scolded.

He slumped backwards into the hospital bed. IV? ...oh. Guess that explains the weird feeling in my left arm. And the bandage-y thing. With the tube. Huh. How long has that been there?

Wait…

“How… how long have I been out?” he asked aloud.

Barbara glanced at her watch. “Almost sixteen hours. Assuming we found you shortly after you got knocked out.”

Shit.

He tried to take a deep breath, wincing when he felt a sharp pain in his side. Then moaning when the act of wincing caused his face to twinge, “Oww… Why does everything hurt?”

“Because you’re an idiot who went into the woods without us,” Claire frowned.

“And your pain medication is running out,” his mom commented. “I’ll have to go get more. Claire, make sure he stays put, will you?”

“Sure thing, Dr. L.”
As soon as his mom disappeared behind the fabric divider, Jim briefly thought about getting out of bed - even injured, he was pretty sure he could take Claire. Maybe. Actually, probably not. But it was a moot point, anyway; before he could move a muscle, she shot him a piercing look that froze him to the bed.

Don’t you dare.

“I’m not going anywhere, promise!” he said, lifting his hands in defeat.

“Good, because you’re never leaving our sight again,” she scowled.

“Not even to go to the bathroom?”

“Not funny, Jim.”

“It was a serious question.”

Claire sat down in one of the chairs next to his bedside, biting her lower lip. “Well, then I have a serious question for you: do you have a death wish or something?”

“Claire -”

She held out her hand to silence him. “You knew what was waiting for you in the forest.”

“I didn’t -”

“And cut the bullshit about trying to protect us, Jim!” she lectured, tears building in the corners of her eyes. “You’re no good to anyone dead! Trollmarket needs you. We need you. Your mom needs you. And I…” Claire paused to wipe a tear from her cheek before whispering, “When I saw you on the ground, not moving… I was so scared, Jim. It was one thing to have you disappear for six months, but this…”

Jim could feel his heart in his throat. “Claire, I’m sorry. But I -”

“What? Couldn’t bear it if any of us got hurt? God, Jim, for once can’t you stop to think that maybe, just maybe, we feel the same way towards you?”

He let her words settle for a moment before uttering a phrase he immediately regretted, “But the amulet chose me.”

“That doesn't mean you have to become a martyr!” Claire's voice rose. “That magic hunk of metal may have chosen you, but we chose you, too, Jim. We've chosen to stand by your side, to fight by your side. How many times do we have to have this conversation? We're all involved, whether you like it or not, so you need to stop pushing us out of the way!”

“But I can't let you get hurt. Not because of me.”

Try telling that to Toby.

“Wait, is Tobes still -?”

“Pissed? Yeah,” Claire crossed her arms. “And I take it you're still reading minds?”

“Apparently.”

A brief silence fell between them. After stewing for a moment, Claire got up and took Jim's hand in
hers. Her tone was softer, but there was still a recognizable tightness in her voice, “Jim. *Please* promise me you'll stop running off on your own. You may have the amulet, but we're stronger together as a team. Got it?”

“Fine. I'll try.”

She shook her head, “Trying isn't good enough, Jim. *Promise.*”

A single look into her warm, brown eyes crumbled what was left of his resolve. At least, for now. “I promise,” he sighed, “no more running off.”

*Unless I have to,* he silently added to himself.

Claire visibly relaxed and gave him a small smile, “Good.” She gently reached out to trace the edges of his scar, and Jim instinctively winced at the contact. She immediately withdrew her hand. “So… what happened, exactly? In the woods?”

“I'd like to know the answer to that, too,” Barbara announced as she re-entered the room holding a small vial. She injected some of its contents into his IV, and within a matter of seconds Jim imagined he could already feel the edges of his pain starting to dull. The ache in his scar, however, refused to be sated by the medicine.

He took a slow breath and began, “I… found Draal. Except it wasn't Draal, not completely. Gunmar was controlling him, just as Nomura said, but…” he paused, looking back and forth between his mother and girlfriend, “Draal’s still in there. I *heard* him. Well, his thoughts, at least.”

“You… heard Draal's thoughts?” his mom asked, a puzzled expression breaking through her calm, cool, and collected “doctor face”.

“It's an amulet thing, just go with it,” Claire assured her. Then she turned her attention back to Jim, “So if he's still there, there's got to be a way to free him. Right?”

“I hope so. But… I'm not sure. I want to talk to Vendel about it. And…”

“And what?” Barbara asked.

“Gunmar… he warned me about something else. Well, really it was more of a taunt,” Jim slowly let his breath out before continuing. “He said something about the Tribunal being against me.”

“Are you sure?” Claire furrowed her brow. “Vendel's on the Tribunal. If there was something going on, he would have noticed it by now.”

“Not if it's just starting now.” Jim looked up at his mom, “Please, Mom, I *need* to get to Trollmarket. Isn't there something you can do?”

“I'm sorry, kiddo, but I can't release you. Not today.”

“But Mom -”

“I said, *no.*”

“Mom, *please,*” Jim begged, “Trollmarket needs me. Every minute I'm here could be a minute too late.”

“Trollmarket needs you in fighting shape. Not like *this,*” she gestured vaguely at him. “You will not be leaving this hospital until your condition has stabilized.”
“But -”

“Doctor's orders, Mr. Lake,” she frowned before abruptly turning away from him, busying herself with the papers on her clipboard so he couldn’t see her face. “Now, if you will excuse me, I have other patients that need attending to.” With that, his mother briskly left the room.

A heavy silence weighed down the room. Jim found his eyes were glued to the spot where his mother had exited, a pit of guilt sinking into his stomach. Here he was, all too eager to jump into the path of danger again after his mom had watched over his unconscious body for hours on end, undoubtedly worried out of her mind. He could have at least tried to be a better patient. And a better son.

_Someday, when all this is over, I’ll make it up to her. I swear._

_Assuming I’m around when that day comes._

Out of the corner of his eye, he noticed Claire appeared to be deep in thought. Or, more accurately, silently arguing with herself, based on her continually shifting expressions. Finally, after some time, she sighed with resignation and looked at Jim. “Your mother's right, you know,” she said softly.

He tore his eyes away from the curtains to meet her gaze. “Claire -”

“You need to heal before you can go anywhere.” She interrupted, giving him a cryptic look.

“But -”

_Clam.

“Huh?”

_Jim, quit talking._

“But why -?”

Claire squeezed his hand, in both reassurance and as a warning, before letting go to dig something out of her backpack.

_Vendel snuck me a jar of Quagawump mud when I was in Trollmarket earlier, just in case. And if your mom finds out she's probably gonna kill us both._

“Oh.”

Unscrewing the lid of the jar, Claire started scooping out small handfuls of mud and applying them to Jim's injuries, beginning with his jaw. Her demeanor was calm, but Jim could spy the shadows of worry lurking underneath her expression.

_You said something might be up with the Tribunal?_

He nodded.

Claire bit her lip. _Blinky mentioned that they're having some sort of emergency meeting this afternoon. He didn't say what it was about, though. If there really is something fishy going on, you need to get to Trollmarket ASAP._

“So, let me get this straight,” he whispered, “you're going to help me break out of a hospital?”
Help? Please. I'm the one doing all the heavy lifting, you're pretty much just along for the ride. She winked, and Jim could feel the heat rise in his cheeks. Now, let's see if this can help your side at all before I toss you through a portal.

“You… you're not actually going to throw me through a portal, are you?”

“Maybe, maybe not,” she quietly teased, “you'll just have to wait and find out.”

The sound of metal hammering away at stone filled the Hero’s Forge as Toby went to town on the training grounds’ targets. But Toby could barely hear the racket over the sound of his pulse thundering in his ears and the fuming thoughts swirling in his head.

Why?

Why did he have to say I get in the way?

Sure, maybe I’m just a sidekick. But I’m one hell of a sidekick.

He pulverized another dummy, and AAARRRGGHH!! scrambled to get more set up.

I’ve saved Jim’s butt before.

Lots of times.

Even before he was the Trollhunter.

And for some reason he thought it would be just peachy for him to go off into the woods all by himself, and now he’s… he’s….

“EeeaaaaAAAGGGHHH!!” Toby cried out, smashing his warhammer into the last target AAARRRGGHH!! had just set up. The target crumbled to the ground, and the large troll gave him a concerned look.


“I’ve just got a lot of steam to let off, alright?” Toby panted, setting his hammer down and leaning on the handle.

“Steam? Only see sweat.”

“It’s an expression, big guy,” Darci chimed in, standing up from the rock she’d been sitting on off to the side of the arena. She strolled over to join them in the middle of the training grounds.

“Expression?”

“An expression that means he’s trying to manage his anger,” Darci further explained, frowning slightly at Toby.

“So wingman is angry.”

“I’m not angry,” Toby insisted, crossing his arms. “Just… frustrated.”

“TP,” Darci sighed, placing a hand on his shoulder, “it’s been hours now. Maybe it’s time to take a break.”
“I don’t want to take a break. I want to smash stuff. AAARRRGGHH!!, can you go find more targets?”

“AAARRRGGHH!!, don’t,” Darci countered before the troll could wander off. “I think Toby and I need to talk.”

AAARRRGGHH!! looked back and forth between the two humans, eventually settling his gaze back on Toby. “Darci right,” he said. “Time to take a break.”

“But -”

“You heard him, TP,” Darci scowled at him. Then she stepped up to AAARRRGGHH!! and stood on her tiptoes to kiss the troll’s stony cheek. “Thanks, big guy,” she beamed.

The large troll grinned at Toby, “I like her.”

“Yeah, me too, wingman,” Toby smirked, watching as the troll already started picking up after Toby’s ‘training session.’ He had to admit, it was nice to finally introduce Darci to AAARRRGGHH!! - the two already got along famously, which was incredible considering Darci had only learned about the existence of trolls a few hours ago. At least, he figured it was a few hours. To be honest, he’d sort of lost track of time. And with as upset as he was, his usually reliable stomach clock was already out-of-whack.

He stowed his hammer and let Darci drag him off to the side of the arena, where she sat down on an outcropping of rock and motioned for him to sit next to her.

“TP,” she rested a soothing hand on his knee once he sat down, “you can’t seriously still be mad at Jim.”

He chose not to respond.

“I know what he said was shitty, but he’s your best friend. He was only trying to keep you safe.”

Toby sighed and focused on the floor in front of him, “Darci, you weren’t there. It wasn’t just what he said, but the way he said it…” he exhaled slowly, “it just… it really sucked, okay?”

“But it kept you out of harm’s way, didn’t it?” she tilted her head.

“Darci, that’s not -”

“Toby,” she cut him off, a serious look on her face, “it’s been well over twelve hours now since we found Jim. And Claire hasn’t texted to tell us he’s awake, yet.”

“I don’t see why that’s -”

“Jim had whatever magical knight powers you guys say he has to help protect him. And he took a serious beating. If you had been there, too…”

“I could have helped,” Toby gritted his teeth. “And maybe Jim wouldn’t be in the hospital right now.”

“And maybe you’d be there, too,” Darci retorted. “Or worse.”

“Darci -”

“TP,” she gently turned his chin so she could look him in the eye, “I know you’re upset. But I, for
one, am grateful for what Jim did. You may not see it that way right now, but you never will if you
don’t start trying to forgive him.”

“I know. It’s just…” he took a deep breath before continuing. “To have your best friend in the
entire world tell you that all you do is get in the way, even if he didn’t really mean it… that sort of
thing cuts deep. Real deep. I’ve become quite the expert at shrugging off comments from other
people over the years. I’ve had to in order to keep my sanity. And a shred of self esteem. But... I
wasn’t expecting that sort of comment from Jim. Ever.”

“I get it. Believe me, I do. But you know Jim better than anyone else. He would never really mean
that.”

“I thought I knew him,” he traced a line on the floor with his heel. “But ever since he got back
from the Darklands… like, he’s still Jim. But not the same Jim.”

“Jim’s been through a traumatic experience, TP. He’s going to be a little different, now. It doesn’t
excuse his behavior, but he’s going to need you now more than ever as he recovers.”

“I don’t know, I think Claire’s got that part already covered,” he scoffed.

“Maybe for now, but eventually he’ll need both of you. After all, you’re the one who’s known him
since you were five.”

“Sure. But the first person he called when he started having nightmares was Claire. Not me.”

“If it had been me, I would have called Claire, too.”

“Not helping.”

Darci playfully nudged him with her elbow. “TP, you snore like a family of hibernating grizzly
bears.”

“Wait, seriously?”

From across the arena, AAARRRGHH!! chimed in to their conversation, “Wingman snore loud!”

“Aw, man! Why didn’t anyone tell me?” Toby dramatically flung his hands into the air.

“We’re telling you now, silly,” Darci teased. “But seriously. Just give Jim some time. And for the
love of god, please talk to him after he wakes up - knowing Jim, I’m sure it hurt him just as much
to even think about what he said to you.”

“I… ugh, alright,” Toby sighed. “Damn, why do you have to make so much sense?”

“It’s one of my many strengths,” she smiled, giggling slightly when he brought her hand up to his
lips to kiss it. “Speaking of strengths… now that I’m part of the team, or whatever, when do I get a
cool weapon?”

“Well, I guess there’s no time like the present,” he grinned, feeling significantly less irritated than
he had been a few minutes ago. Not quite ready to forgive Jim just yet; no, they’d need to have a
one-on-one conversation before that happened. But he felt cool-headed enough that now Toby was
really starting to worry about his best friend’s current state of health. And therefore he was in need
of a new distraction. Standing up, he led Darci over to the area of the Forge where the weapons
were, littered on the floor and haphazardly hanging on the wall as they eagerly awaited to be used.
“Take your pick,” he stated.
Darci squinted and tapped her chin with her fingers. “Hmm… there’s so many to choose from,” she scanned the wide array of weapons. “I don’t think I could even lift most of these.”

“What about that one?”

“A mace?” she raised an eyebrow at him. “I dunno, TP. I don’t think that’s quite my style.”

At this point, AAARRRGGHH!! had finished cleaning up the last of Toby’s carnage and sauntered up next to the duo. “Mace too pointy?”

“I wouldn’t say *that*,” Darci considered. “But with its short handle, it would make for some really close combat.”

“Too close for comfort, eh?” Toby mused, resuming his scan of the weapons. “How about a spear? You could throw it at the bad guys.”

“I don’t think so. Last year I was literally banned from participating in the javelin toss in track and field.”

“Seriously?”

“It’s a long story,” Daric grinned sheepishly. “Okay, not really *that* long: I nearly skewered Coach Lawrence. Twice.”

“Sounds like you’ve got killer aim, then!”

“Not exactly,” she laughed, “the target I was *supposed* to hit was over twenty feet away off to the side.”

“Killer instincts, then?”

“Something like that, I guess,” she smirked. “Actually, now that I’m thinking about it, maybe my aim’s alright and I just suck at throwing stuff. Because I’ve been to shooting ranges with my mom before and done alright. And I wasn’t half-bad at archery during summer camp.”

“Archery, you say?” Toby said, surveying the collection of weapons again. They were mostly large, bludgeoning weapons fit for trolls. Or large swords fit for trolls. In general, there were plenty of options fit for a troll; not so much for a teenage (albeit, athletic) girl. But, hiding behind a pile of stone clubs, he finally spied something promising: the tip of a bow. He walked up to it and pulled it out from behind the other weapons, revealing an ornately carved bow made out of hardwood. Eventually he spied the matching quiver, fallen on its side on the ground and covered in a substantial layer of dust - evidently, the bow and arrow wasn’t generally a troll’s first weapon of choice. Or their second choice. Or their last choice.

When Darci laid eyes on the bow, she nearly squealed, “Oh, TP! That’s perfect!”

He blew off some of the dust and handed the set over. “Go ahead, try it out!”

Darci pulled out an arrow from the quiver and knocked it. Automatically adjusting her stance, she drew it back and quickly honed in on a target up on a ledge that Toby hadn’t been able to reach earlier. She took a breath, then let the arrow fly. It soared across the arena and embedded itself in the outer edge of the target.

“Huh, guess I’m a little rusty,” she commented.
Meanwhile, Toby’s jaw had made a valiant attempt to drop to the floor. “Rusty? You call that rusty?”

“What’s ‘rusty’?” AAARRRGGHH!! asked, similarly staring in awe at the arrow.

“Usually, it’s when metal gets covered in a layer of reddish-brown gunk,” Toby explained. “But in this case, it’s pure bullshit,” he shot Darci a sideways glance, a balloon of pride swelling in his chest.

“Bullshit!” AAARRRGGHH!! happily repeated.

“Uh, maybe don’t repeat that one around Blinky, wingman.”

The three of them burst into laughter.

“God, that beeping is so annoying!”

“Only because the machines think you’re dead!” Claire hissed at Jim, slapping a piece of gauze over the spot where she’d pulled out his IV. “Now hurry up, we gotta get out of here before your mom and who knows who else comes charging in!” Slinging her backpack over her shoulder, she waved the Shadow Staff and made a portal appear next to the hospital bed. Just as the edge of the room divider started fluttering with movement behind it, she pulled Jim forward by the arm and propelled him through the portal.

“Aaahh!!” Jim stumbled through and found himself in Blinky’s library. Claire followed close on his heels and caught him before he could fall face-first into a pile of books. A few feet away, an extremely startled Blinky jumped up from pouring over a stack of papers, scattering them across the table in his surprise.

“Egads!!” the six-eyed troll exclaimed.

Master Jim should not be here!

“It’s fine, Blinky,” Jim said as he righted himself, double-checking that the amulet was still in his back pocket. “Claire used the Quagawump mud on me that Vendel gave her.”

“Quagawump mud?” Blinky frowned. Peering around Jim, he narrowed his eyes at Claire, “I thought we had agreed that Master Jim requires rest.”

“But I’m all healed, Blink!” Jim interjected before Claire had a chance to respond.

“Physically, perhaps. Though you still appear a little ‘worse for wear’, as you say,” the troll tutted. “But mental exhaustion is also a serious threat, one that both your mother and I fear you are extremely susceptible to at the moment.”

“How can I possibly rest when everyone is in danger?”

“We have, unbeknownst to us, been in danger for well over a week already. Another day or two would not matter in the grand scheme of things, despite,” he held up a hand to stop Jim from interrupting, “the absolutely tragic events that have befallen Draal.”

“Blinky, it’s not just Draal,” Claire started, stepping up beside Jim and placing her hands in the crook of his elbow. If Jim wasn’t so on-edge right now he would have really enjoyed the touch. “Jim, tell him.”
He took a steadying breath before starting, “In the woods, Gunmar gave me a warning. About the Tribunal.”

“...What sort of warning?” Blinky slowly asked, his eyebrows scrunching together.

“They're working against me. Or, something like that.”

Blinky thoughtfully sat back down on his stool, his lips in a tight line as he silently watched Jim.

Do I tell the boy? Though if he remains here much longer, he shall find out on his own.

“Tell me what, Blink?”

Momentarily confused, Blinky’s face lit up with realization before he slapped his forehead with one of his hands. “Ah, I nearly forgot, the Cernentia stone!” He started shuffling through the scattered papers on his desk, “Master Jim, I was doing some research and came across -”

“Not now, Blink,” Jim interrupted, “we've got bigger problems. What's going on? And why don't you want to tell me?”

“I… do not want to further add to your stress levels,” Blinky worried as he reorganized the stack of papers. “Perhaps this is a conversation to be had in the comfort of your own home. Away from Trollmarket. Claire, if you will?”

Beside him, Jim felt Claire reach for her Shadow Staff. He moved to block her before she could hold it out to make a portal, “No, wait. Whatever it is, I want to hear it. Now.”

Blinky nervously looked at him and let out a long sigh. “Very well. But I shall be brief, for we must depart soon after.” He motioned for the two humans to come closer so he could tell them, in a low voice, “The Tribunal knows about Draal. And everything that entails.”

“Of course they do, we told Vendel!” Claire whispered.

Blinky shook his head, “You misunderstand. Vendel's intent was to keep the information quiet until we had allowable time to formulate a plan. But Usurna has discovered it and called a meeting of the Tribunal, and surely they are picking apart the inconsistencies in our narrative even as we speak.”

“Then we tell them the truth,” Jim announced. “About everything. It's what I should have done right after I got back. And after the Blood Goblins. And -”

“Master Jim, I beg you to listen. The Tribunal means to - oh, craglesnacks,” Blinky muttered, glancing at the entrance of the library. “I fear we are out of time.”

Jim whirled around to follow Blinky's line of sight. On the wall of the cave, a group of shadows grew larger until they quickly materialized into Usurna and a few of her guards, followed by a very crestfallen Vendel. The guards positioned themselves around Jim, effortlessly pushing Claire and Blinky out of the way before restraining him. He hadn’t even had time to reach for the amulet.

“James Lake Junior,” Usurna declared as she stared him down, a satisfied sneer gracing her lips. “Under the authority of Trollmarket, you are hereby under arrest for the release of Gunmar and treason against troll-kind.”
*Obligatory apology for taking so long to update.* And, unfortunately, this time of year I get even busier (what with holidays and everything that goes with that), so we'll see when the next chapter gets finished. Hopefully sometime in December, since that seems to be my current update pace. lol. Who knows, maybe the first season of Below will motivate me to write faster? But we'll see what happens.

For those of you following along at home, I'm sure you've noticed we're about to hit the "unbecoming" portion of the storyline. And, I kid you not, all my outline says right now is "Unbecoming. But somehow angstier." So... you're welcome in advance. :)
Chapter 29

Chapter Summary

Spend my days cursing my soul,
Wishing I could paint my scars and make me whole...

One of these days I'll stop using song lyrics as my chapter summaries. But today is not that day.

Chapter Notes

Thanks to all of you who keep reading this fic (and commenting!) - whether you've been here since I started this mess or you've just recently discovered it, I appreciate every single one of you. Seriously. Especially comments of all shapes and sizes, those really make my day! ^.^

See the end of the chapter for more notes

A cell.

After everything he'd been through, after being free from the Darklands for barely more than a week, Jim was back in a cell.

Albeit, this was a very different cell - rather than rotting away in a cold, stone tomb, this time he got to be suspended over a giant chasm in one of Trollmarket's cold, metal cages.

And honestly, it wasn't much of a change in scenery.

The sound of shuffling stones echoed through the air as the doorway to the chamber rolled aside to allow a small group to enter. Usurna led the pack, of course, followed by Vendel and a couple other Tribunal members he didn't recognize. None of his friends were anywhere to be seen.

“Lower the prisoner,” she told the guards.

Jim grabbed onto the wall of his cage as it suddenly jerked forward. The chains holding up the cage clanged and rattled as they shifted, lowering him and steadily bringing him closer to the edge of the chasm. Eventually the motion stopped, leaving him precariously swinging just out of range of the only solid ground in sight. And just low enough so that he was eye-to-eye with Usurna.

“James Lake Junior,” she started, “you stand accused of unleashing Gunmar upon the world and betraying the very trolls you are sworn to protect.”

“Betray?” he glowered, any attempt to keep his cool already evaporated. He grasped the bars in front of him as he glared at the Kruberan queen. “Everything I've done, I've done for the good of Trollmarket. And Arcadia.”

“Oh, have you? So, conspiring with changelings and allowing Draal to be forced into Gunmar's
service was for the good of Trollmarket?”

“What? No! That was -”

“And let us not forget opening Killahead Bridge, crossing into the Darklands, and abandoning your duties for half a year!”

“I never meant to -!”

“Enough of this, Usurna” Vendel interrupted. He narrowed his eyes at her. “You know very well that those particular charges were dropped earlier this week. Stop antagonizing him and finish reading the statement. This time, without improvisation.”

There was some murmuring amongst the other Tribunal members as Usurna composed herself, side-eyeing Vendel while she smoothed an invisible wrinkle from her cloak.

Damn goat. It will be such a relief to finally have him out of the picture.

Jim's stomach lurched. Was Usurna plotting to kick Vendel out of the Tribunal or something?

But first, the Trollhunter.

“James Lake Junior,” Usurna began again, clearing her throat, “you shall stand trial for your crimes. If found guilty, the consequence could be death.”

“I'm not guilty,” he spat.

“That is yet to be decided, boy,” Usurna frowned at him. “But you should know there is an offer of mercy on the table. Surrender Merlin's amulet to be destroyed, and you shall walk away unharmed, never to return to Trollmarket again.”

“Well, that's a stupid-ass idea,” Jim rolled his eyes, catching a faint smirk flash across Vendel's expression while the rest of the Tribunal stared at him with wide eyes. “Gunmar's on the loose and you want to get rid of your best shot at defeating him? You know, I've never been too great at math, but even I know that doesn't add up right.”

“We have relied on Merlin's antiquated spells and trinkets to protect us for far too long.” Usurna crossed her arms, speaking up over the murmurings of the other Tribunal members. “It should be up to our own race to decide how to face tomorrow's evils, not some human child.”

“But this doesn't just affect trolls! Gunmar's going to try to take over the surface world the first chance he gets, which, in case you've forgotten, is where me and the other humans live!”

“Perhaps you should have considered that before you released Gunmar.”

“But I didn't -!” Jim paused to forcefully exhale, “Isn't there something else I could do? Like, community service or something?”

“No. Forfeit the amulet, or prepare to stand trial for your crimes.”

Vendel took a step forward, holding up a hand to silence Usurna as he spoke to Jim, “I know this is a terrible choice, young one, but it is solely yours to make.”

“Seriously? Vendel, can't you do something about this?”

“This matter is beyond even my power, Jim,” he stated solemnly. “I… am sorry.”
“Your trial begins at dawn,” Usurna announced. “You have until then to decide.” Without another word, she turned on her heels and ushered the other Tribunal members away. Vendel lingered a moment longer than the others, studying Jim with a somber expression before leaving the prison chamber.

After the door slid closed, Jim slumped back against the wall of his cage.

This can't be happening.

He pulled the amulet from his pocket and clutched it so hard his knuckles started turning white. “Is this what you wanted?” he whispered angrily. Tears threatened at the corners of his vision. “I've screwed everything up! And now, either I hand you over and poof, no more Trollhunters, or… or…”

Jim shuddered and let out a sob, acutely feeling the aches in his body that the Quagawump mud hadn't been able heal.

“You should never have picked me,” he sniffed, turning the amulet over in his hands. “This is all my fault! The Darklands, Draal, Gunmar… everyone is in danger now because of me,” he choked back another sob. “Maybe I should give you up! You've been nothing but trouble since the day I picked you up! And I've been nothing but a failure!” With a cry, he hurled the amulet through a gap in the bars. It flew through the air and wedged itself into a crack in the ground, close to where Usurna had been standing.

Feeling unsatisfied, hopeless, and alone, Jim curled his knees up to his chest and wept into his hands.

“You should have chosen someone else… I wish I never picked you up.”

A blue light pulsed in front of him, finding its way through the spaces between his fingers. Jim peered around his hands, noticing the amulet glowing brightly from where it lay on the ground. He sneered at it, “Oh, have something to say, do you? Sorry, but I don't speak 'cryptic glowy shit.’”

“Young Trollhunter,” a soothing voice rang out in response, startling Jim. “You are not the first to struggle under the weight of the amulet's call.”

Jim shifted onto his knees, nervously searching for the source of the voice. But all he saw was the amulet. “Who… who are you?”

“Another who knows the difficulties of carrying the weight of the world on your shoulders.” A ball of light squeezed itself out of the amulet, floating through the air until it reached Jim’s cage. It hovered a couple feet from his face, pulsing gently as the voice continued to talk, “But I admit, I am disappointed that you've managed to completely unravel my efforts to keep Gunmar locked away.”


“Good, you're not as dull as you look.”

He brushed the comment aside. “But what are you doing here? Er, in spirit, I guess.”

“I, too, struggled to accept my role as Trollhunter in my younger years,” the ball of light bobbed. “Though my struggles did not result in nearly as much disaster as yours have caused.”

“I get it, I'm a failure, we already established that. Is this pep talk going anywhere?”
“This is not a ‘pep talk’, James Lake Junior. This is a second chance. For you, and for both our worlds…”

“What do you mean -?” But before Jim could finish his question, his vision was filled with a blinding light.

And then everything went pitch black.

…

**BEEP! BEEP! BEEP!**

“Gooooood morning, Arcadia Oaks! If you’re still in bed, you are missing the most *beautiful* sunrise!”

Jim gasped as he opened his eyes and sat straight up in bed.

“What the - where’s my cage? I should be in a cage!” he muttered aloud, untangling himself from the sheets. “Why am I in my bed? What kind of freaky hallucination is - ?” He stumbled out of bed and stopped cold when he caught his reflection in the mirror.


His scar was gone.

In disbelief, he started prodding his nose and cheek where his scar should have been, feeling only skin. “What the hell is going on?” he whispered.

He cautiously crept out into the hallway. On the door to his mother's room, he spotted a note: *Late night at work. Sleeping in. Mom.*

Taking the note, he slowly opened the door. His mom was fast asleep on her bed, glasses still on. It wasn't the first time she'd fallen asleep before taking off her glasses, but somehow something about it seemed… familiar. Kinda deja vu-ish.

He softly closed the door and turned towards the stairs, scratching his head. “What the *hell* is going on?” he whispered to himself. “Why am I at home, and what happened to my scar?”

Jim wandered downstairs, somehow feeling completely out of place in his own home.

*This… this is my home, right?*

*Something seems off.*

*Were the walls that color this morning? Er, last morning? Crap, wait, how long have I been away from home this time?*

He scowled at his reflection in the window at the bottom of the stairs.

*And what the hell happened to my scar??*

Jim made a beeline for the kitchen, heading straight for the cabinet with all of their cookware. He set to work pulling out all the pans, trying half-heartedly to keep the amount of clanging to a minimum. Thank goodness his mom was a light sleeper. Eventually he finally found their large frying pan, the one that was best balanced for flipping omelets. And bludgeoning goblins.
He pulled it out and peered at it, finding no dents, scrapes, or any other evidence of the blood goblin battle left on the piece of cookware.

“How is this possible?” he groaned. “Mom really did a number on this pan the other night! And my scar… there’s no way it’s all just gone!” Finding a spot on the floor to sit amidst the pots and pans, Jim sighed and pinched the bridge of his nose. “This doesn’t make any sense!”

Just then, his phone buzzed in his pocket. Taking it out, a text message from Toby flashed across the screen:

[finishing breakfast now. see ya soon!]

And then Jim gasped when he saw the date displayed at the top of his screen.

Holy shit.

He’d gone back in time.

Over six months in time.

The goblin battle hadn’t happened yet.

He hadn’t gone into the Darklands yet.

Which meant maybe, just maybe, he could keep from screwing everything up this time.

Still a bit disoriented, he hastily put all the pots and pans back in their places and made his way to the garage. The hole where his Vespa used to be - er, would be? Would that still happen now? - seemed particularly empty. But it’s not as if he’d ridden it much in the past six months, anyway. Sighing, he grabbed his bicycle and pushed the button to open the garage door.

Stepping outside, he instantly felt the sun's warmth on his face. And instantly spotted the overturned trash can in his driveway, its contents scattered all over the pavement.

“Ugh, not racoons,” he cursed.

Setting his bike aside and picking up the trash can, he bent over and started tossing the spilled garbage back in the waste receptacle. As he worked, he heard the whir of a set of bike wheels approaching. They came to a stop at the end of his driveway.

“We're late for school, Jimbo,” Toby commented, readjusting his bike helmet as Jim put the lid back on the trash can. He gave Jim a once-over. “No lunch?”

“Huh?”

“You said you were making something special for me this morning.”

“Oh, uh -”

“Ah, well, maybe it’s for the best. I am on a diet.”

“You’ve been on a diet for fourteen years, Tobes,” Jim responded, the feeling of deja vu practically smacking him in the face this time. And he could pretty much predict what his best friend was about to say next.

“Long term goals,” Toby shrugged. “My body’s still changing. Now come on, Jimbo, we’re gonna
be late for school!” He straddled his bike and sighed, “Guess we should take the canals.”

“The canals…” Jim patted down his pockets as Toby started wheeling away, finding only the rectangular lump of his phone. No amulet. And then it finally clicked:

He really had been given a second chance. At everything.

His pulse quickening slightly, he hopped on his bike so he could catch up to Toby, “Hey, wait up, Tobes!” He pedaled up next to his best friend, “You sure you wanna take the canals? I know you hate it.”

Toby did his best attempt to shrug while pedaling, “Well, yeah. But it is faster. And we’re already going to be so late our kids are going to have detention. Might as well try to spare our grandkids.”

Jim chuckled, “You have a point. Alright, then, to the canals!” He sped off, turning away from the sidewalk and onto the unpaved path that led to the canals. He went as fast as he dared on the uneven terrain, a thrill of exhilaration coursing through him as the wind battered his face. This was the most active he’d been since… the goblin battle? That hadn’t actually happened yet? He really needed to sort out this whole “the future hasn’t happened yet” stuff. But in the meantime, he was definitely enjoying the fact that his ribcage didn’t feel like it was on the verge of breaking to pieces anymore. He didn’t feel strong, per se - his lean muscle mass he’d built up during Trollhunting had vanished in the time warp as well. But he felt healthy. And damn, did it feel good.

He lifted up the front end of his bike a little, just in time so he could catch some air as he traveled over the edge of the canal. He came down for a smooth landing, coming to a stop at the bottom so he could look back and search for Toby. “Come on, Tobes, hurry up!” he called.

Gasping and panting, Toby appeared at the top of the canal. “Ugh, I hate this part.”

“Do it for the grandchildren!”

Steeling himself, he positioned his bike over the edge and rolled down until he was at the bottom with Jim. Letting out a little sigh of relief, he turned to Jim, “You know what? That grandchildren stuff sounds weird.”

“Agreed,” Jim smiled. Then his heart sank when he spied a pile of rubble below the bridge running above the canal.

So Kanjigar still fell in battle. That much hadn’t changed.

Toby followed Jim’s line of sight, “Woah, look at all those rocks! Think there’s anything interesting in there?”

“Tobes, we’re gonna be late.” Butterflies had started up in Jim’s stomach. He knew what would come next.

“I will gladly risk a lifetime of detention if it means scoring something sweet for my rock collection. Now come on!” Toby started walking his bike over to the rubble. Jim begrudgingly followed. “Oooh, I think it might be K-spar!” Toby cooed.

‘James Lake,’ came a call from the pile of rocks. Right on cue.

Jim bit his lip, but remained silent.

‘James Lake.’ It was more insistent this time. Jim thought he could spy a faint blue glow buried
under the heap.

“Hey, uh, Tobes? Do you hear anything?”

“Mmm, nope.” Toby shuffled closer to the pile, picking up a couple of the smaller pieces. Jim swore he could see the glow of the amulet, but, if it was there, Toby seemed to be completely ignoring it. If he could even see its light in the first place. “Score!” Toby held up one of the rocks, “This one’s got some sweet markings on it! Definitely worth being late to class.”

The piece Toby held up looked like it was once the tip of one of Kanjigar’s horns. “Wait, Tobes, that’s -” Jim stopped mid sentence, unsure of what he could say next that wouldn’t make him sound completely insane.

“It’s what, Jimbo?”

“Uh… dirty?”

“Duh, it’s a mineral. That was on the ground. You okay, Jimbo? You seem kinda spacey today.”

“Yeah, I’m fine,” Jim rubbed the back of his neck. “You sure you wanna carry that around in your backpack all day?”

“Yes. That’s why I grabbed one of the small ones.”

“And… you’re sure you don’t hear anything weird?” Jim asked, the call of the amulet still ringing in the back of his mind.

“I’m sure. Dude, seriously, are you okay? Did you skip breakfast or something or -?” Toby was cut off by the sound of a school bell ringing. “Oh no, that’s the final bell! We gotta move!” Unknowingly shoving the tip of a troll’s horn into his backpack, Toby got back on his bike and began pedaling again.

Meanwhile, Jim lingered to stare at Kanjigar’s remains. The blue pulse of the amulet beckoned to him underneath the rubble.

“Jimbo, did you hear me?” Toby called back. “Time to go!”

Jim positioned his foot onto the pedal of his bike, his heart pounding in his throat.

‘James Lake.’


‘James Lake,’ the amulet called.

Jim inhaled slowly.

And then he rode away.

Chapter End Notes
Happy I got done with this chapter sooner than expected! What with the holidays and stuff coming up and below!!!, I'm not sure when Chapter 30 is gonna come into existence. So we shall see.

and it'll depend on how much angst I actually decide to pack in the next chapter.

muahahaha
Chapter 30

Chapter Summary

*Open up again, I believe in second chances.*

*Also: the one where the plot of unbecoming takes a definitive turn for the worse*

Chapter Notes

Warning: mentions of depression ahead. and sort of an allusion to suicide.
We're getting kind of dark here, folks.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“Tobes?”

“Nnggg… yeah?” Toby panted as he struggled to force his locker shut.

Jim leaned against the row of lockers, his hands buried in the pockets of his jacket. His very empty pockets. “Do you believe in destiny?”

“I believe we're gonna be late to history class,” Tobes groaned, wiping a bead of sweat from his brow before giving his locker one final shove. After the door latched into place he straightened up and looked at Jim, “Can't this philosophical stuff wait?”

Jim waited until they had shouldered their backpacks and started walking down the hall before continuing, “But, like, do you think our lives are meant for a specific purpose?”

“I don't know,” Toby shrugged, “I'd like to think there's a lot of things that could happen, and it just depends on what choices we make.” He gave Jim a sideways glance, “Is this why you've been acting weird all morning? Are you having another existential crisis?”

“Something like that,” he muttered.

“Jim, you're only fifteen. Try to hold off on having your quarter-life crisis until we're in college, alright?”

*Only fifteen. Right.*

Jim automatically went to rub the bridge of his nose, still in disbelief at how smooth his skin felt without the scar.

*It can't all just be… gone, can it?*

*What if I'm only dreaming I went back in time? Surely Merlin's magic can't actually mess with the time-space-continuum-whatsit...*
Testing his newest theory, he pinched the back of his hand. He breathed in sharply - if this was a dream, it was a painfully realistic one.

“Hey, Jimbo? You in there, buddy?”

“Oh, uh, yeah,” Jim replied. “Sorry, guess I didn't get enough sleep last night.”

“Obviously,” Toby gave him a friendly jab with his elbow. Jim instinctively flinched at the contact, causing Toby to raise an eyebrow at him, “Just… try not to fall asleep in class again, okay? I don't think Mr. Strickler would be too cool with that.”

Jim stopped cold in his tracks, right outside the entrance of the history classroom. “Hold up, Strickler?”

“Um, yeah? Who else would teach history class? Unless you know something I don't.”

“Uh .”

“Mr. Domzalski, Mr. Lake, would you care to join us? Or are you planning on observing today's class from the doorway?” There, standing with his arms crossed at the front of the classroom, cooler than a cucumber at an ice rink, was Walter Strickler. Jim tightened his grip on his backpack, and the secret changeling shot him a genuinely concerned look. “Jim? You're looking quite pale. Do you need to see the nurse?”

“He'll be fine,” Toby assured, gently pushing Jim towards their usual seats near the window. “Just questioning our place in the universe today, Mr. S.”

“Ah, so simply another Tuesday, then?” Strickler smiled, and a few of their fellow classmates snickered at the quip. “In that case, let us get started with today's lesson: the Peloponnesian War.” Strickler pointed at the map he was projecting onto the screen at the front of the room and started his lecture. Jim slipped into his chair, mind racing as he tried to dig his notebook out of his backpack.

Strickler's here.

That means...

Shit.

The bridge.

Bular and the changelings are still planning to assemble Killahead Bridge.

... Hell, I know everything they're going to do!

And they won't know that I know. That's a huge advantage!

...

Except that I didn't pick up the amulet.

God, I'm an idiot.

I need to get back to the canal, ASAP.

“Jim, are you sure you're alright?” Jim blinked and looked up, finding Strickler hovering worriedly
next to his desk.

“Oh, uh…”

“You're five shades paler than usual. Please, go see the nurse. You can learn all about the peace of Nicias once you are feeling better.”

A perfect excuse - thank you, Strickler.

Making a show of reluctantly packing up his backpack, he accepted the quickly scrawled note from Strickler, avoiding eye contact as he shuffled towards the door. In his act, he accidentally bumped into a few desks on his way out. One of which was Claire’s. Her pen rolled off her desk and clattered to the floor, so Jim immediately stooped to pick it up. Holding it out to her, she regarded him with a guarded, almost impatient look, her eyes flicking back and forth between him and the screen of her laptop. His heart caught a little in his chest.

Right. She’s not my girlfriend yet.

“Here,” he mumbled, placing the pen on her desk when she didn’t take it from him, “uh, sorry.”

“It’s fine,” Claire bit her lip, fingers hovering over her keyboard as she watched him expectantly. He smiled at her, and in return she raised an eyebrow at him. “Don’t you need to go to the nurse?”

“Right! Uh…” he glanced around the room, feeling the heat rise to his cheeks as he noticed everyone watching him with amusement - even Strickler. “Sorry,” he adjusted his backpack and made a beeline for the door to the tune of more snickering.

“Looks like someone’s caught the love bug ;,” he heard Darci tease as he left the room, catching her nudging Claire with her elbow out of the corner of his eye.

“Not now, Darci,” Claire hissed, still hyper focused on her laptop. Jim’s heart sank as he closed the door behind him, now actually feeling a tad nauseous.

He let his feet guide him to the nurse’s office, where the attending nurse - a kindly, middle-aged woman - took one look at him and declared he needed to go home and rest. She insisted on calling his mother, despite Jim’s protests that he could still ride his bike home, only to reach Dr. Lake’s voicemail. Assuring the nurse that his mom was on shift at the hospital and wouldn’t be able to pick him up anyway, the nurse reluctantly ushered him out the door with some sort of official note and a bottle of water, cautioning him to be careful and stay hydrated.

And, just like that, he was free from school the rest of the day.

Dizzy from his still racing thoughts, Jim took a few gulps of water before shoving the bottle inside his backpack and straddling his bicycle. No Claire, no amulet… but he was going to fix that, starting now. Pushing off, he left the school property and rode down the street, setting course for the all-too-familiar location of Kanjigar’s last battle.

Upon reaching the canal, Jim did a quick scan of his surroundings before guiding his bike down the angled wall. Kanjigar’s remains were still crumbled in a heap below the bridge, the shadow of the structure steadily creeping closer to the pile of stone as the sun made its trek across the sky. Closer, but not touching yet. Which meant he still had a chance to grab the amulet before Bular or anyone from Trollmarket could reach it.

But as he approached the rubble this time, not once did it call his name.
A pit formed in Jim's stomach.

Ditching his bike near the rubble and shrugging off his backpack, he got down on his hands and knees and started frantically sifting through the rocks. “It's gotta be here,” he muttered, stone scraping against his knuckles and fingertips as he searched. “I left it here. It should still be here…” His skin was raw and on the verge of breaking before he finally laid eyes on a familiar piece of Kanjigar's breastplate. Triumphantly, he turned it over.

Only to see an empty, circular indent in the once-living stone that had housed the amulet.

In a panic, Jim tossed the piece aside and flung himself back at the pile, heedless of the intense stinging his hands felt as skin scraped against stone. “Where is it? It has to be here!” he cried in desperation. He clawed at the rubble, scattering the pile and overturning every piece he could get his hands on. But each time he lifted a stone, he found nothing. No cryptic glowing, no ominous disembodied voice… no amulet.

He worked his way through the entire pile, fighting back tears that threatened to spill on the ground and join the streaks of dark red that had started appearing on everything he touched. Eventually he was left with only the cement of the canal underneath, with Kanjigar's remains scattered in a five-foot radius around him. All rock, no metal. And definitely no magic amulet.

Jim slumped forward and angrily swatted away a nearby piece that might have been one of Kanjigar's shoulder guards. Red painted the edge of the rock as it tumbled away, leaving an inconsistent dark streak across the concrete. He clasped his hands in front of him, dimly making the connection between the red smears around him and the matching hue on his fingers and knuckles, accompanied by a stinging so intense his nerves were practically numb. In fact, everything felt numb.

“Where is it?” he half growled, half choked, “Where’d it go?”

Just as he was about to hang his head in defeat, a glowing blue light bobbed in front of his face. Deya’s calm voice rang out to him, “Why, the amulet is with the Trollhunter, of course.”

“But I’m the Trollhunter!”

“Not anymore,” Daya tsked. “You did not answer the call. So another was chosen instead.”

“But I was going to make things right this time!”

“Intentions do not matter. You have already chosen your path. So this is your second chance: a chance to simply be James Lake Junior, average American high schooler. The weight of the world is officially off your shoulders. Congratulations.”

“But -!”

“This is what you wanted, is it not?” the floating blue light scrutinized him. “Did you not wish to have never picked up the amulet?”

Jim gulped as his words were thrown back in his face. “But I didn’t... the amulet -”

“Is no longer your concern. Now go, enjoy your second chance,” Deya ordered. “And by the might of Maddrux, tend to your hands. You’re bleeding everywhere.”

Jim choked back a sob as the blue light disappeared, leaving him utterly alone at the bottom of the canal. He sat back and drew his knees to his chest.
I don’t want to be an average high school student.

I’m supposed to be the Trollhunter…

He was startled when his phone started buzzing from the depths of his sweater pocket. He gingerly reached for the device, trying to limit the amount of bloodstains he added to his clothes. At this point, though, it would probably be best to just drown his entire outfit in high-grade stain remover. Jim sniffed and tapped the green call button on his screen. “Hey, Mom.”

“Jim? Jim, are you okay? I just got the call from school. Do you have a fever? Do you need me to come home?”

“Mom…” he was about to assure her he was fine. But then, glancing around, he stammered, “I, uh… I actually… just fell off my bike.” His voice cracked as he continued, “Could… could you come pick me up?”

“Jim!” his mom gasped on the other end of the call, “Oh no, you didn’t fall because you were answering your phone, did you?”

“No, Mom, not at all,” he assured her, “This was a few minutes ago. I, uh, lost focus, is all. I took a spill over the side of the canal. I’m fine, just… bleeding a little.”

His mom sighed and he could hear her voice tense, “Really? Only a little?”

“I swear. It looks worse than it is.”

He could practically hear her shake her head. “Alright. Hang tight, kiddo, I’ll be there soon.”

“Thanks, Mom.” Ending the call, he carefully put his phone away and laid on his back, looking up at the sky.

Wondering what the hell he was supposed to do next.

Being average, having a normal life - turns out, it wasn’t all that bad.

Jim got to cook meals for his mom more. He and Toby hung out all the time, playing Go Go Sushi and other video games in his room rather than constantly running in fear for their lives from Bular and the changelings. That was nice.

Spanish class was going well, now that he actually had time to study and do his homework. Algebra was… going. But at least he wasn’t teetering on the edge of failure anymore. And some of it was almost starting to make sense. Almost.

He still auditioned for the school play; Blinky’s speech from another lifetime served him well in landing the role of Romeo again. And, of course, Claire was his Juliet. And, since he no longer had Trollhunter duties, he was able to make it to every rehearsal on time. Hell, he even started getting to rehearsal early, just so he could have extra time to spend with Claire. That was nice, too - getting to know her as a person without the underlying pretext of having to save the world together. It was slow going, but she was still the same Claire.

His sixteenth birthday came and went without any threats to his life. Well, except for his mother’s attempts at cooking. But his mom also bought him a Vespa, so that was… nice. Not the same as building it with Blinky. But nice.
After a while, Claire started getting sick more often and had to miss some of the play rehearsals. Or she would have to babysit her little brother and have to miss rehearsals. Mary Wang became her understudy, just in case (and so Jim would still have someone to rehearse with), but Miss Janeth had no doubts that Claire would come through for the actual performance. Jim didn’t have any doubts, either.

He wished they’d had the same amount of confidence in him, back when he had been the one missing rehearsals. Not that he’d warranted any amount of confidence whatsoever.

But that was another lifetime.

And, as much as he tried, it was a lifetime he couldn’t seem to forget.

He still jumped at shadows. Flinched at unexpected contact. Found himself constantly looking over his shoulder. Woke up in a cold sweat in the middle of the night with visions of Gunmar’s blazing eye boring a hole through his very soul.

And he couldn’t talk to anyone about it. No one would understand. No one else had lived through it.

Not that anyone else had lived through what he experienced in the Darklands. But at least, at one point in time, his friends and family knew that it had happened, even if they could never fully understand it.

Being “average, having a “normal” life... despite going through the motions of day-to-day life, it was something he could never truly have, not with what he’d been through.

And as nice as passing all of his classes was, he found he still itched for something more. Some sort of purpose. And maybe a little adventure.

He’d had that, once.

But then, in a stupid split-second decision, he’d lost it all.

He seemed to excel at making stupid split-second decisions.

At least with the Darklands he eventually came back.

This?

He didn’t know that there was any coming back from this.

He was at a loss for what to do.

So, over time, he gradually withdrew into himself.

He slipped back into putting the minimum amount of effort into his schoolwork. It was easier that way, having lower expectations.

He didn’t hang out with Toby as much anymore, either. He regretted it, but lately every time he saw Toby all he could think of were their Trollhunting adventures together. And how Toby had been through his side for all of it from the very start. You know, except for the whole Darklands thing.

Jim didn’t want to think of those things anymore.
Though his nightmares made that difficult.

They weren’t the same as his post-Darklands nightmares, not exactly. They lacked the terrifying sense of impending doom that seemed to always accompany them. But these nightmares were based on bad memories. Scarring experiences. Regrets.

A lot of regrets.

Jim didn’t get a lot of sleep anymore.

But he still dragged his ass to rehearsals for the play. Seeing Claire, even though their relationship wasn’t the same as it once was, still had a way of grounding him. Though her appearance at rehearsals dwindled as her mother’s reelection campaign picked up. That was annoying. Claire would complain about it to him every now and then. It was nice to listen to her talk. And she had started smiling at him a lot more - that was nice, too.

God, he missed her.

He still cooked, too. Once in a while… Well, once a week. Sort of. Kind of. Actually, he’d lost most of his appetite - he seemed to be nauseous a lot, lately. Or just straight up not hungry. And cooking delicious meals loses its appeal when you can’t stomach the results. But he would cook for his mom every now and then when he got the chance. And he would make a show of picking at his food whenever she watched him eat. He didn’t want her to worry.

Days continued to pass.

He grew more tired. Both physically and mentally.

Most days he didn’t want to get out of bed.

He hated this life. This “average”, “normal” life.

He wanted it to end.

“Jim?” his mom asked from across the table. “You haven’t touched your steak. And you’ve been pushing peas for the past ten minutes. Is everything alright, kiddo?”

_No, nothing’s alright._

“I’m fine, Mom,” he replied. He tried to flash her a convincing smile before taking a sip of water.

She frowned, then turned her attention back to her own half-eaten plate of food. After taking a bite, she set her utensils back down on the plate and dabbed the corner of her mouth with her napkin.

“So,” she swallowed and cleared her throat, “Mr. Strickler called today.”

Jim instantly bristled like a cornered racoon. “Huh?”

“Jim, he’s concerned. He says you’ve been falling behind in your schoolwork. Not just in history class, but all your subjects.”

“... So?”

“So? This isn’t like you, Jim.”

“Then maybe you don’t know me,” he mumbled.
But his mom heard him anyway. “I would if you would talk to me. Please, Jim, just tell me what’s going on.”

You wouldn’t understand.

“Nothing’s going on, Mom. Just… teenage angst, or… something.”

His mom reached across the table and placed one of her hands over his. He wanted to pull away. But as he looked into her eyes, he saw her face so filled with concern that he almost broke down and started weeping on the spot. But he was tired. So tired. So he just sat there like an unfeeling potato as she spoke.

“Jim,” she started, “I know you’re not sleeping well. I can hear you moving around in the middle of the night. What’s bothering you?”

Everything.

“Nothing,” he shrugged.

By the look of it, his mom didn’t believe him for one second. In a calm voice, she asked, “Are you having trouble falling asleep? Or staying asleep?”

Yep.

“Um… both, kind of.”

She continued, “Have you been feeling too tired lately? Like you don’t have enough energy?”

Yep.

“Well… yeah.”

“Jim,” she lightly squeezed his hand, “in the past two weeks, how often have you been bothered by having little interest in doing things?”

Hold up. These sound like ‘doctor’ questions.

She thinks there’s something wrong with me.

“I don’t know what you’re talking about,” he responded, sliding his hand free and crossing his arms in front of his chest. “I’m fine.”

She watched him patiently from across the table. “It was just a question, honey. I’m not accusing you of anything.” Pushing her plate to the side, she folded her hands in front of her on the table. “But I am concerned, Jim. You’re exhibiting the symptoms of major depression, and I think it’s about time I took you to a specialist. Maybe some medication would -”

Medication? I need my fucking memory erased, that’s what I need!

Jim abruptly stood up, causing his silverware to clatter on his plate. “I’m not sick, Mom!” he spat. “I’m just… going through some stuff, okay? Stuff that medicine can’t fix!” In the back of his mind, though, he knew his words weren’t entirely true. But that didn’t matter at the moment - right now, he felt the intense need to go. Somewhere. Anywhere.

As he stormed towards the door, he heard his mom swear under her breath, “Shit.” Then she called out to him, “Jim, please, come back.”
But he was already slamming the door shut behind him and making his way towards his bike. He sat astride it and immediately started pedaling, willing the simple machine to take him someplace where he could feel something again, something besides irritation and hopelessness.

*Shit, she’s right, I probably do have depression.*

Angry at the thought, he pedaled faster and faster, letting the cool night air whip against his face as he raced down the street towards town. It wasn’t exactly the feeling he was looking for, but at least it was *something*. Suburban houses whizzed by as he carried on, gradually morphing into storefronts and lighted neon signs as he got closer to downtown Arcadia. As he approached the center of town, Jim could feel himself running out of steam and finally eased up on the pedals, allowing himself to coast to a stop just beside the large statue in the park.

Right across from the museum.

Jim gazed at it forlornly for a few minutes, reminiscing on all the harrowing close-calls that had occurred inside those walls. But now were never meant to be.

At that moment, a dark sedan pulled up in front of the museum. A figure stepped out of the car - Strickler. Jim hid himself behind the statue and waited for the history teacher to go inside, all the while trying to keep his breathing in check.

*Strickler.*

*The museum.*

*Killahead Bridge.*

Making sure his bike was out of sight, Jim darted across the street and quickly found an open window off to the side. He shimmied inside, careful to tread quietly and cautiously. If this was anything like last time, this place would be infested with hostile, fear-smelling goblins.

And, unlike last time, he would be completely defenseless if he got caught snooping around.

He poked his head around a corner, spotting the familiar doorway draped in construction plastic. *Bingo.* He crept up to the entrance and slid past the drapes, quickly ducking behind a nearby pile of wicker baskets. For he was most definitely *not* alone.

Bular stood, seemingly satisfied, at the center of the room, the completed structure of the Killahead Bridge looming over him. Nomura and Strickler stood on either side of the Gumm-Gumm, both still in their human forms. But Bular’s satisfaction quickly turned to ire, “It is finished! Why does the bridge not open?”

“We need Merlin’s amulet to activate it, you brute,” Strickler scolded. “And for that, we need the Trollhunter. Alive. ”

“This one is particularly cunning,” Nomura added. “We will need a suitable trap.”

“And then, I assure you, Bular,” Strickler finished, “your father will be free.”

*Gunmar.*

*Oh no.*

*This isn’t good.*
"I need to warn someone. I have to -"

Then, in one horrible, terrible instant, Jim’s blood ran cold as his phone vibrated in his pocket.

There was a snarl and flash of purple, followed by the sound of rapid, cloven footsteps heading straight for his hiding spot. In a fluid, sweeping motion, the collection of woven baskets was shoved out of the way, leaving Jim cowering on the floor in the shadow of an extremely unfriendly Nomura. He tried to kick out at her, aiming for her kneecaps. If he could just slow her down long enough so he could scramble outside...

But she quickly got past his meager defenses, pinning his legs with one arm as the other reached out to grab his neck. Jim immediately found himself lifted up into the air, feet dangling above the floor, desperately grasping at the clawed hand threatening to suffocate him. His phone continued buzzing in his pocket - if he had to bet, it was probably his mom calling to see if he was alright. How ironic.

“What have we here?” Nomura hissed, green eyes glinting brightly in the dim light. Keeping her grip on Jim's neck, she stroked his cheek with a long fingernail. “A midnight snack?”

Strickler’s voice called out from behind her, “Put the boy down, Nomura.”

But Nomura did not heed Strickler's command. “This is one of your students, right? You really should have taught him better than to wander alone at night.”

“I teach history, not life skills,” he spat. He then turned to Bular, who was practically radiating impatience, “Besides, this one can be of some use to us - the human Trollhunter has a certain... fondness for the boy.” Strickler paused, sighing a little as he met Jim’s alarmed look, “Though it’s a pity, Jim has always been one of my favorite students.”

Wait... human Trollhunter?

Before he had a chance to fully process that thought, he felt Nomura’s grip on him shift ever so slightly.

Then, the next second, he was knocked out cold.

Chapter End Notes

*reclines in chair, chuckling darkly while stroking a plushie penguin*
sorry not sorry

My original plan was to only spend one full chapter on the flashback/time-travel/whatever-crap-merlin-pulled, but I spawned so much angst that it's turning into two chapters. Whoops.

and next chapter is gonna be good. and by good i mean gut-wrenching.

Muahaha

Anyway... who all has watched 3Below and absolutely LOVED it? I'm already scheming up ways to incorporate our Akiridian friends into the "season 3" portion of this fic. ;)
Chapter 31

Chapter Summary

Leave behind your heartache, cast away...
Rather be the hunter than the prey.

Chapter Notes

Warning: this chapter contains mentions of blood and a major character death
(I've tried my best to keep it on the less-graphic side in order to keep the rating T, but parts of this chapter are toeing the line between T and M. You have been warned.)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Jim mentally took inventory of his current status as he slowly regained consciousness. Cool metal pressed against the side of his face, slightly easing his throbbing headache. Coarse rope bound his hands tightly behind his back and put an uncomfortable strain on his shoulders. His feet seemed to be free, though - he might be able to work with that.

He groggily opened his eyes and let his sight adjust to the dim lighting. Metal bars flecked with rust obscured most of his vision, but beyond them he could make out the familiar features of the large, central room of the museum. It seemed as if his cage was somehow suspended high in the air, high enough that his line of sight was level with the top of Killahead Bridge. Jim craned his neck to get a better look around. Below him, Nomura lounged lazily against one side of the bridge, disinterestedly running a fingernail along the edge of one of her blades. Bular seemed to be absent, as did Strickler. If he was going to try to make a break for it, now would be the time.

If I can find a way out of this cage, I might be able to outrun Nomura long enough to get outside the museum. Assuming I don't break a leg getting down from here.

Shifting a little, he spotted the door of the cage - padlocked shut, of course.

Maybe if I kick it at the right angle -

“Ah, so the little bird is finally awake,” Nomura called out. He rolled over to try and look down at the changeling, who was now eagerly watching him like a ravenous alley cat.

Shit, the cage must have swung when I moved. So much for the element of surprise.

“And to think,” she continued, “I was worried you were going to miss out on all the fun.”

“What, the part where you release Gunmar into the world and find out he still won't give changelings the respect you deserve?” he retorted. “Not really my idea of entertainment.”

He watched with some satisfaction as Nomura's face twisted in confusion, accompanied by a brief flash of doubt. “How... how do you know of such things, boy?” Then her eyes narrowed at the
distant sound of a closing door. The corners of her mouth turned upward in a sly grin, “It doesn’t matter, our main event is about to begin.”

There was some sort of commotion outside, followed immediately by construction drapes being shoved aside as Strickler entered the room, pushing a slight figure with a burlap sack over its head in front of him. “Almost there, Trollhunter,” the words dripped from Strickler’s mouth with a mix of annoyance and contempt.

“Good,” the human responded, “because I have a play I’m supposed to be at in less than three hours.”

*That sounds like…*

*No. No, it can’t be…*

“How bold of you to assume the play will still go on,” Strickler smirked, pulling away the bag with a flourish.

And in that moment, Jim’s stomach was as heavy as if he’d swallowed a block of lead.

For on the other side of the room, standing confidently and slightly disheveled, was Claire.

“The museum?” Claire mused, looking around the room. “Killahead’s been here this whole time?”

Suddenly it made sense. All the missed rehearsals. Claire getting “sick” more often. It had been staring him in the face the whole time and he’d been too wrapped up in his own misery to see it.

His heart skipped a beat when she spotted the cage and locked eyes with him across the room.

“Let him go, Strickler,” Claire calmly stated. But Jim could sense the fury simmering just below her cool demeanor. “I’m here now. Jim’s got nothing to do with this.”

But their history teacher merely shook his head. “That is where you are mistaken, Miss Nuñez. You see, Mr. Lake is our insurance policy. To ensure you do exactly what we ask of you.”

Claire’s fist clenched as she glanced between Jim and the bridge, her brow furrowing as she weighed her options.

Jim clumsily twisted so that he was sitting upright, then frantically cried out, “Don’t do it, Claire! Don’t open the bridge! I’m not worth it! Don’t do it!”

“Pipe down, Tweety Bird!” Nomura hissed.

Strickler’s eyes narrowed at Jim before shooting a glare at Nomura, “Don’t tell me you’ve told the boy of our plans, Nomura.”

“But don’t look at *me,*” she snapped, “I told him *nothing.* He must have been spying on us for longer than we thought.”

Strickler let out a frustrated sigh and turned back to Claire. “So, what will it be, Miss Nuñez? Open Killahead, or watch us crush your crush?”

“He’s not…” Claire started, immediately stopping herself to bite down on her lower lip. Jim noticed that the amulet had appeared in her hand, glinting softly as she anxiously kept turning it over. “What about *you,* Strickler?” she countered. “You’d really be willing to break Dr. Lake’s heart just so you can try to free your cranky boss?”
Clearly taken aback by her statement, Strickler sputtered, “I beg your pardon?”

“I know you have feelings for her,” Claire continued. “Just think about what would happen the second she found out you were the one responsible for her son’s death.”

The changeling scowled, “It would put a damper on our relationship, I presume. A necessary sacrifice in order to release Gunmar.”

“But you see, Jim only dies if I don’t open Killahead. So not only would you have ruined things with Dr. Lake, you still wouldn’t have achieved your goal.” Claire smugly crossed her arms, “Either way, you lose.”

Jim felt a small trickle of hope bubble up in his chest as he watched Strickler state. Maybe Claire can talk us out of this whole mess…

“Let us test that theory,” boomed a low voice from the doorway. Claire and the changelings turned towards the sound, and Jim followed their gaze. The plastic shroud over the door was shoved aside as Bular lumbered into the room, as imposing as ever, and glared daggers at Strickler and Nomura. “The longer you stand here with your idle chatter, the longer her allies have to discover our location.” The troll turned his attention to Claire, his next words low and deliberate, “Open the bridge, Trollhunter.”

“No,” she stated.

“Do not make me ask again.”

But Claire stood defiantly in front of Bular, clutching the amulet tightly in one hand as she dared her adversaries to make the next move.

The corner of Bular’s mouth twitched in amusement, “So be it. Nomura, the prisoner.”

A pink blur moved at the edge of Jim’s field of view as he felt his prison sway. He turned his head to find Nomura hanging on the side of the cage, green eyes glowing while she grinned maliciously at him. “Time to come out and play, little fleshbag,” she crooned.

“Uh, I’m good here, thanks,” Jim replied, automatically inching towards the opposite side of the cage. Every fiber of his being was on high alert, filled with the sense that something dreadfully awful was about to happen. And the little whisper in the back of his mind had pushed its way through his headache, chanting to him: you’re not going to make it back home tonight...

Nomura casually drew one of her scimitars and lopped off the padlock. The piece of metal clattered to the floor below, allowing the door to the cage to swing wide open. Jim immediately twisted his torso to the side, freeing up one of his legs so he could kick at the changeling as she entered the cage. His balance was horrible, his aim even more so, and it took very little effort on Nomura’s part to push his leg out of the way and render him defenseless. He felt a sharp pain as a clawed hand wrapped around his ankles. In one fluid motion, he was dragged out of the cage and left to dangle upside down high above the hard, polished floor of the museum. Heart pounding in his throat, he wordlessly cried out in alarm, “Aaaahh!”

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rest of his bodyweight, while his ankle felt the full force of Nomura’s crushing grip. But he’d endure that force a thousand-times over if it kept him from falling head-first towards the ground.

“No!” Claire shouted. She started towards him, but Strickler held her back. “Leave him alone!” she struggled against his grip, the amulet still in her hand. Despite being upside down, Jim could see the horror in her expression as she looked his way. Her eyes flicking between Jim and the bridge, eventually that horror morphed into determination. Mouth set in a thin line, she looked over her shoulder at Bular, “Fine. You win.”

Jim’s insides lurched as an awful smile spread on Bular’s face. What is she doing?

“I’ll do it. I’ll open the bridge,” Claire continued. “But only once Jim is safe.”

“That can be arranged,” Bular grinned. The Gumm-Gumm nodded at Nomura, and, just as quick as he had been threatened with falling to his death, Jim was yanked back into the relative safety of the cage. He choked down a cry of pain when the action caused something in his ankle to pop and snap.

Nomura cut the ropes binding his hands, then unceremoniously tossed him into a corner. “We’ll see if you can fly another time, little bird,” she sneered lowly before gracefully jumping from the cage.

Jim scrambled to his hands and knees, crawling so that he could peer over the side of the cage. His ankle felt like it was on fire, but the terror rising in his chest burned hotter. “Claire, no!” he shouted. “If Killahed is open, no one will be safe!”

But Claire continued walking towards the bridge, her shoulders squared as Strickler followed behind her. Bular kept his post near the door in case his quarry tried to make a run for it, but there wasn’t really a need - not once did Claire hesitate or deviate from her path. It wasn’t until she reached the base of the bridge, where Nomura was waiting, that she looked up at Jim. There was kindness in her eyes, and something about the look she gave him sent a wave of assurance through him. “Stay safe, Jim,” she said with a slight smile, barely loud enough for him to hear.

Nomura groaned and rolled her eyes as she grabbed for Claire’s wrist, intending to usher the girl to the top of Killahed.

And that’s when Claire slipped from the changeling’s grasp and raised the amulet high above her head.

“For the glory of Merlin, Daylight is mine to command!”

Jim blinked as a blinding blue light filled the room, clearing just as the last pieces of armor attached themselves to Claire. She immediately whirled and kicked low, catching Nomura off-guard and sweeping her legs out from under her. She leapt past the fallen changeling, turning just in time for a flash of green to light up her features. Strickler, now in troll form, pulled a handful of razor-sharp daggers from his feather-like collar and started throwing them at Claire. She neatly dodged them, redirecting a couple with her vambraces; one such dagger embedded itself into the floor next to Nomura’s face, spurring the changeling to push herself up from the floor and join Strickler’s side.

Claire grinned as she adjusted her stance, the sword of Daylight materializing in her hands as she got set in a ready position. “Two against one? Hardly seems fair.”

“Most things in life are not fair, Miss Nuñez,” Strickler replied.
“Actually, I was referring to your odds, not mine.”

Time seemed to slow down as Jim watched Claire fend off her attackers, light gleaming off the intricate details of her armor as she shifted to meet them move for move. She was good. Really good. Strong, quick, graceful… Jim was in awe as he watched her swing Daylight through the air, always one step ahead of the changelings in their dangerous dance, smoothly blocking their attacks and nearly landing her own in return.

The armor suited her well.

But even though his heart filled with pride and wonder at the sight, a part of him was twisted with guilt.

*She’s in danger right now because of me. Because I was stupid enough to get caught. Because I was stupid enough to refuse the amulet in the first place.*

Overcome with a sudden urge to help, he glanced around. There was nothing in his cage he could use, no loose bars he could pry loose or anything he could possibly throw. And although the door was wide open, the only escape route would be for him to drop down to the floor below. If he’d had two good ankles he might have been able to manage it, but now… he felt like a sitting duck. A useless, sitting duck.

Jim turned his attention back to the scene below. Claire was slowly backing up the side of Killalhead bridge, keeping the two changelings at bay in front of her. She still seemed to be managing them well, only panting a little bit when she parried Nomura’s scimitars and dodged Strickler’s knives. Jim quickly scanned the room, curious if the sound of clashing metal had drawn any goblins or other unsavory creatures to the site. But when he skimmed over the entrance to the room, he did a double-take. The entrance to the room was notably empty.

*Shit. Where did Bular go?*

His fear back in full force, Jim stretched as best as he could to see around the bars of the cage, trying to see if the troll was lurking behind or underneath him. He couldn’t become Bular kibble, not right now. It would distract Claire. He couldn’t let that happen. But as he kept looking, he saw no sign of the Gumm-Gumm, further compounding his terror.

*Where the hell -?*

Claire cried out, a sound that pierced the air and Jim’s heart. His attention snapped to the bridge. At the top, Bular had snuck up behind Claire while she was distracted with the changelings and was attempting to restrain her. Still wielding Daylight, Claire tried to twist and kick out, trying to find some sort of opening to escape. But between Bular and the changelings, she was trapped. They were slowly closing in on her, leaving her less and less room to maneuver.

And there was nothing Jim could do.

… On second thought, maybe there was *one* thing he could do.

“Hey, Strickler!” he called out. “Is that what you wore to picture day? It sure would explain why you looked uglier than usual this year!”

Strickler tore his attention away from Claire to throw a glare in Jim’s direction. “I have half a mind to give you detention, boy!”

Claire, too, glanced over at Jim as she blocked a wide swing from Nomura. Seeing the window of
opportunity afforded to her by Strickler’s distraction, she wound back her sword arm -

- and hurled Daylight through the air, straight at the chain that suspended Jim’s cage from the ceiling. It sliced through the metal with ease, and suddenly Jim’s stomach was in his throat as the cage plummeted towards the ground. He scrambled to cling to one of the sides, hoping and praying that Claire’s crazy stunt wasn’t about to crush him into a Jim-pancake.

The cage crashed to the ground with an ear-splitting clang. Despite his attempts to anchor himself, Jim ended up slamming into the floor of the cage when it fell, knocking the wind right out of him. There was a ringing in his ears, and everything hurt like hell, but at least it seemed like the only thing broken was his ankle. Wheezing, he slowly got his bearings and tried to pull himself from the cage.

“Run, Jim!” Claire’s voice echoed. “Get out of here!”

Blinking away the last bit of his disorientation as he gasped for air, Jim used the bars of the cage as leverage and pulled himself to his feet (well, foot). He turned towards the bridge, looking up to see that Bular had taken advantage of Claire’s temporary lack of sword to successfully restrain her. Nomura was at her side, muscling Claire’s right hand closer and closer to where the amulet sat on her chest.

“Jim, go!” Claire shouted desperately as she struggled against her captors. “Find Darci, she’ll know what to do!”

But Jim found himself frozen in place, unable to move. He couldn’t leave Claire, not like this. But what could he do? He had no weapons, nothing to defend himself with. Not to mention he only had one good leg. He didn’t stand a chance against any one of them in his current state, nevertheless all three.

Claire cried out again as Nomura forced her to remove the amulet, light flashing as her armor vanished into thin air. The changeling began guiding her hand to the top edge of the bridge, to the spot where the amulet would open the portal between worlds. Claire strained to fight back, but ultimately she was no match for Nomura’s strength, not while Bular limited her range of motion.

Lead coursed through Jim’s veins as the amulet affixed itself to the bridge. Eerie blue light spread along the carvings in the stone, racing along the surface of the bridge until the entire structure lit up like an ominous beacon. Beneath the arch, a dark, whirling portal grew until it was as large as a respectably-sized kiddie pool. Blue flames danced along the edges of the portal, growing higher as a massive, horned shadow made itself visible through the flames. A fiery blue eye pierced through the darkness, boring into Jim’s very soul.

Gunmar.

Bular quickly released Claire and dropped over the side of Killahead, kneeling as the leader of the Gumm-Gumms passed through the portal out of the Darklands. “Father,” he started, “at last, you are free.”

Gunmar took a few steps away from the bridge and breathed a long, rumbling sigh, “After centuries of imprisonment, I shall finally crush this pathetic world beneath my heel. The Eternal Night is at hand.” Glancing to the side, the Skullcrusher spotted Jim leaning against the outside of the cage; Jim’s blood froze over, a knotted ball of panic forming in his chest. “Is this the fleshbag Trollhunter you told me about?” Gunmar asked his son as he gestured at Jim. “Even for his species, he looks to be quite unimpressive.”
“No, father,” Bular answered. He pointed to the top of Killachead, where Claire was still grappling with Nomura in an attempt to grab the amulet. “That is the Trollhunter. The other fleshbag merely served as bait to lure her here and open the bridge. His usefulness is at an end.”

Gunmar considered him for a moment. “Perhaps. But he may have one more purpose. He is far too skinny for even a snack, but a human spy could have potential...” The Decimaar Blade materialized in Gunmar’s hand. “I have never attempted to turn a human before,” he mused. “If this works, I shall turn the Trollhunter to my side as well.”


Jim’s instincts were screaming at him to run, hide, do something, anything to try and escape what was heading his way. But fear kept him frozen in place as Gunmar drew nearer, one footstep at a time. When the dark underlord reached him, Jim’s awareness of his surroundings faded away, leaving only Gunmar and the accursed Decimaar Blade. Blue light glistened off the edge of the blade, and one of Jim’s hands flew to his face as he felt a phantom pain from a past lifetime flare up beneath his skin.

Gunmar lifted the blade, holding its point level with Jim’s forehead. “Let us see what you are truly made of, fleshbag.”

Jim’s vision became engulfed in flames. It felt as if his entire being was being pulled from the inside out, like a giant hand was reaching into his core to scoop out whatever made him “Jim” to make room for Gunmar’s designs. He couldn’t move. He could barely breathe. There were distant cries of terror ringing in his ears - most likely his own cries, but his voice sounded so foreign to him that it was hard to tell. The pain stretched on for an eternity, never easing up, but never really intensifying. Just a constant, excruciating pain.

Until suddenly, it stopped.

“Why won’t it work?!” Gunmar snarled. In frustration, he swung the Decimaar Blade at the floor, cracking the floor open as the weapon sunk into the tile. “None can resist my blade!”

Jim gasped for air, dumbfounded as he clung to the cage for support. Thankful for whatever kept Gunmar’s magic from working on him, but terrified for the implications that had for his short-term future.

“I have no time for this,” Gunmar continued, wresting his sword free from the floor, “I have a world to conquer. Son,” he barked, “retrieve my armies! I shall clean up this mess.” Gunmar looked down at Jim, his face twisted with contempt, “If you will not be turned by my blade, then you shall die by it.”

This is it, Jim thought as Gunmar pulled his weapon back.

“No!” someone shouted. He couldn’t recognize the voice.

Gunmar started to thrust forward.

Something hurtled into Jim’s side, pushing him to the ground.

He heard the Decimaar Blade sink cleanly into its mark.
Jim blinked and looked up. And immediately felt like he was going to be sick.

For Claire was standing over him, wearing a look of surprise as Gunmar’s blade pierced her back.

Gunmar pulled his blade out, watching the fresh blood drip off its edge while Claire crumpled to the floor at Jim’s feet. “Pity,” he remarked. “We won’t be needing this trinket anymore, then.” He swiftly strode to the top of Killahead and slammed the hilt of his sword into the amulet, shattering it and causing it to fall to the ground underneath the feet of the Gumm-Gumm horde still filing in from the Darklands. “Come, my armies!” he announced. “Enough time has been wasted here - the surface world is ours for the taking, and the night is not yet everlasting!”

Leaping down from the bridge, Gunmar marched with his armies outside of the room, motioning for the changelings to follow. But both were reluctant to fall in line as they watched the fallen teenagers with a hint of remorse; it wasn’t until Bular snarled at them that they, too, left the room, leaving Jim alone with Claire in the unsettling quiet that blanketed the area.

His shock finally easing enough to allow him to move, Jim hastily crawled over to Claire. He knelt beside her, one hand tenderly cradling her head while the other wrapped around her back, vainly trying to stem the flow of blood seeping from her wound. “Claire?” he whispered, his words catching in the back of his throat as tears blurred his vision, “Claire, can you hear me?”

The slightest of smiles danced on her lips. “Jim…”

“Hang in there, Claire,” he urged. “The hospital isn’t far. If I can find my phone…”

Her eyes fluttered open, and she weakly lifted a hand and placed a finger on his lips. “Shhh… It’s okay, Jim…”

“No, it’s not okay!” His tears were flowing freely, now. “You shouldn’t have tried to rescue me! I’m not worth it!”

“You are worth it… to me…” She coughed before continuing, “I couldn’t let you die, Jim… But I was… overconfident. Prideful. I thought… I could take them… on my own…”

“You were amazing, Claire,” he soothed, brushing aside a stray lock of hair with his thumb. When she didn’t respond, his heart caught in his throat. “Claire? Stay with me, Claire…”

She coughed again, placing a hand on his chest. Her voice was barely loud enough to hear, “I will stay with thee… and never from this palace of dim night depart again…”

“That’s… that’s my line,” he sniffed.

She smiled a little, her voice continuing to grow softer, “Think’st thou… we shall ever meet again?”

“I doubt it not,” he murmured as he carefully brought his forehead to hers, trying to keep his voice steady, “and all these woes shall serve for sweet discourses in our time to come.”

“Stay safe… Jim…” Claire’s eyes grew distant. Her head suddenly grew heavier in his arms, and the hand she’d been holding up to Jim fell limply to her side.

“Claire? Claire!” He clutched her head to his chest. His shoulders shook with the force of his sobs. “Don’t go, Claire! Don’t… don’t leave me…”

But the light in her eyes was gone.
Claire was gone.

Numbness spread through his entire body, chased by a deep, aching pain. Slowly, he closed her eyelids and pressed a light kiss to her still lips. “Thy lips are warm…” he half-whispered, half-croaked, tasting the salt of his own tears on her skin. Jim gently laid her down on the floor, slightly removed from the puddle of red that now stained the tiles around them. He wiped his face with the back of his sleeve and shakily stood up, barely registering the pain in his ankle. He stood there for a moment, his face wet with tears and his jeans soaked with blood, as he tried to reorient himself.

Claire is dead.

Killahead is open.

Gunmar is out.

As if to emphasize his point, an explosion somewhere outside the museum rattled the walls, shaking dust loose from the rafters. Sirens blared. People screamed.

He couldn’t let more people die.

The world needed a Trollhunter.

With a temporarily renewed sense of purpose, Jim hobbled over to the amulet. It lay in multiple pieces on the ground, its central stone shattered and cracked and no longer glowing with magic. He fell to his knees and tried to gather the pieces together in his hands, attempting to hold them in their approximate positions.

“For the glory of Merlin, Daylight is mine to command!”

His voice echoed off the surfaces in the room, coming back to his ears as a desperate plea.

“For the glory of Merlin, Daylight is mine to command!”

Still no response from the amulet.

He shook the pieces in his hand, “Come on, work! Please work! For the glory of Merlin, please! For the glory of Merlin, Daylight is mine to command!”

Nothing.

The only blue glow Jim saw came from the magic flames that circled the still-open portal to the Darklands.

“Please,” he sobbed, bringing his hands to his forehead, feeling as if the weight of the world were crashing down around him. “Please… please. This is all my fault… I was supposed to be the Trollhunter! This shouldn’t have happened! I -” he gasped and shuddered, cold and alone on the floor of the museum. He let the pieces of the amulet fall to the ground. Angrily, he wiped away his newest wave of tears on the back of his sleeve. “This is my fault,” he repeated, “I was the Trollhunter…”

Another explosion came from outside, followed by more screaming.

Jim struggled to control his breathing. Gradually, his ragged sobs turned into steady, determined breaths. Leaving the pieces of the amulet on the ground, he pushed himself to his feet, favoring his broken ankle as he stood up.
He took a deep breath, “I’m the Trollhunter...” Swallowing the lump in his throat, he found his balance and turned towards the door. “I’m the Trollhunter,” he repeated. “Amulet or not.”

Out of the corner of his eye, a glowing blue orb floated into view. “This is no longer a burden you have to bear, James Lake Junior,” Deya’s voice called out. It had been so long since he’d heard from the past Trollhunter that he’d nearly forgotten about her. “Run away. Find your mother. Save yourself.”

Jim limped forward and picked up a spear dropped by one of Gunmar’s soldiers. “I can’t do that,” he shook his head. Looking back at the ball of light, he pointed to the door. “Out there, they need a Trollhunter! And a Trollhunter…” he paused, turning back towards the doorway and squaring his shoulders, all too aware of Claire’s body lying off to the side. “A Trollhunter fights to the end.”

He took an unsteady step forward, and suddenly there was a flash of green light behind him.

“Ah, now you’re getting it,” a man’s voice said. “My amulet does not make mistakes.”


The green ball of light bobbed in response, “Gunmar is free, Trollmarket is in peril, and of all creatures in our worlds, I chose you. Now, show them why.”

Steeling himself, Jim made his best attempt to confidently march towards the door, a renewed burst of determination coursing through his veins. When he got past the plastic covering the doorway of the room, he found that the front doors of the museum were swung wide open. There, at the foot of the museum steps, ringed by driverless police cars, was Gunmar. The Decimaar Blade hung casually at his side while his single eye narrowed at Jim.

Broken ankle be damned, Jim half-limped, half-ran towards the Gumm-Gumm, brandishing the spear in front of him as he charged. He was mere feet away from the troll, close enough that he could see the Decimaar Blade start its trajectory that would surely separate his head from his body.

He’d only have one shot.

Aiming for Gunmar’s eye, Jim thrust his spear forward -

- and tumbled head over heels out of a cage, landing in a heap onto a rough, rocky surface. Breathing heavily, he blinked and looked around to find Blinky, AAARRRGGHH!!, Toby, Darci, and Claire watching him with concern.

Claire.

Hastily pushing himself to his feet, he raced to embrace her, nearly causing them both to fall over.

“Claire,” he murmured, hand wandering to the spot where he’d seen her get stabbed. With not even the slightest sign of injury, he sighed with relief and held her close, nestling her head protectively under his chin, “Oh thank god you’re okay.”

“Master Jim, is everything alright?” Blinky asked.

“Yeah,” Jim replied, squeezing his eyes shut against the tears that were building there, still holding Claire tight. “It is now.”
Claire shifted against him, pulling away slightly so she could reach up and caress the side of his face. His breath hitched when her thumb caught on the edge of his scar. “Are you sure?” she asked, her brow slightly furrowed with concern. “Did they rough you up?”

“No, Claire, I’m… I’m okay,” he smiled down at her.

He was in Trollmarket. His friends were okay. Claire was here, warm, safe, and alive. The second chance had never really happened.

To say he was ‘okay’ was a bit of an understatement.

But at the same time, he couldn’t quite shake the image of everything he’d just seen. Or all the emotions still swirling in his chest from those last few weeks - although in reality it had only been a few hours. He felt drained. And exhausted. But a fire burned low in his chest, renewing his resolve. Whatever came his way, he wasn’t about to go down without a fight. He had friends to protect. Worlds to protect. And he couldn’t let them down.

Taking a small step back, his heel kicked something at his feet. Looking down, he spotted the amulet, pulsing faintly as it lay nestled in a shallow crack in the floor. Beside it lay a small, light purple stone that reflected the dim torchlight. Jim released Claire so he could stoop and pick both of them up.

“The Cernentia stone!” Blinky exclaimed. “It must have fallen out of the amulet when you dropped it, Master Jim!”

Jim thought he caught the amulet briefly glowing an electric shade of green. But when he blinked, all he could see was blue. Holding the mind-reading stone in his other hand, he had half a mind to put the pesky thing back in the amulet - despite how crazy it drove him, there had been moments where it had come in handy. Especially something… something about Usurna. He couldn’t quite remember. But with as messed up as his mind was, particularly right now, perhaps it was for the best that the stone was no longer a part of the amulet.

He placed the stone into one of Blinky’s outstretched hands. “Excellent,” the troll remarked as he pocketed it. “We should be on our way. The Tribunal is waiting.”

The Tribunal. Right.

My trial.

He caught Toby’s eye where he hovered just behind the Blinky’s shoulder. Toby gave him a wary look, worry hardening the edges of his features, “Jim… they say if you’re found guilty, you could die. Is… is that true?”

At that moment, Usurna shouldered her way through the guards. “He would walk free if he were to surrender the amulet,” she reminded him. “What is your choice, Trollhunter?”

“Um, how about the one where he doesn’t die?” Darci piped up, squeezing Toby’s shoulder.

But as Jim looked around at his friends, he shook his head. “No. I’m keeping my amulet.” Bringing the amulet to his chest, it immediately responded with a flash of red light and enveloped him in the Eclipse armor. The feel of the obsidian metal against his skin further steeled his will. “I’m ready to face whatever comes my way.”

“You sure, Jim?” Claire looked up at him, eyes filled with concern.
“Never been more sure,” he smiled softly. Head held high, he let the guards usher him towards the entrance of the prison dwell, throwing Usurna a cold, sideways glance as he passed.

“So be it, Trollhunter,” Usurna remarked. “Your trial awaits.”

Chapter End Notes

*takes a deep breath*
Well.
*That happened.*

The next chapter won't be nearly as dark, I swear.
*double-checks notes*
Er... probably.

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