Future Rust, Future Dust

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Summary

She'd heard the phrase on and off throughout her youth. "Time heals everything".

During these travels, however, she'd witnessed the opposite more than once. Steel grew brittle. Flowers wilted. Bitterness and suspicion lurked in the back of the mind. She could feel it spreading under her own skin; a newfound fear, awareness of the evil and darkness in a world she thought she knew. Time doesn't always heal. Sometimes... it rots.

Maybe that's why, as he allowed his carefully constructed walls to lower, she decided time wouldn't have the chance. Not as long as she was around.
still dead summer

Chapter Notes

liam and laura discussing tattoos during talks machina basically handed me permission to write this, and it was also heavily inspired by "spanish sahara" by foals and the whole "GRIS" soundtrack. just the whole thing.

i'm weak for tattoos-over-scars kinda stories, catch me lying facedown in the void above the arby's.

thanks for clicking in, and i hope you enjoy! ᕕ( ᐛ )ᕗ

It wasn’t the first time he’d flinched at the sight of himself. It was just... different... this time.

Jester had begun to notice, more and more, the ways Caleb would react to seeing his own reflection. She prided herself in certain forms of observation. Part of being an artist, after all, is learning to create the illusion of life on paper--while adding your own personal touch, of course. You started picking up on things after that. Little things, minute behaviors, gestures, details--things that were distinct to that specific subject.

Caleb rarely made eye contact with himself. He wouldn’t stand in front of a mirror if he could help it, often finding a place in a room so he’d be out of its grasp. She’d found the behavior entertaining… sometimes side-stepping just so, so that he’d have a more difficult time escaping a reflective surface. He never outright told her to stop, nor did he try to push past her. He merely stood or sat in silence, looking anywhere but at himself. It’d become another ‘game’ of sorts. And that’s all it was. A game.

Until... he’d removed the bandages. The scars, the history, lay bare for them to see and know.

The chill she’d felt wash over her skin had been akin to frozen water. It shook her from flesh to spine, tightening her chest to the point it ached. When Caleb quietly discarded the wrappings that night as they kept watch while the others slept, she hadn’t quite known what to feel. Relief? Sorrow? Anger? These people who had done this to him. How? How could they?

...It was great that Caleb was comfortable enough to share this with them, though! He didn’t have to hide them anymore. Not from them. Not from anyone.

They knelt by a stream, now. Bloodied and smeared with mud from battle.

Jester barely caught the sound of his sharp breath over the bubbling water. From the corners of her eyes, she saw his hands flinch as he’d begun to roll up the sleeves of his coat and how he hesitated, as though uncertain of whether or not to continue the movement. After a few seconds, his sleeves slid back to his wrists. It was while she watched him go about washing his hands, no concern given to the splashing water or absorbent fabric, that she realized she’d misunderstood.

He hadn’t just been hiding those scars from them and the rest of the world. He’d been hiding them from himself, too.

Jester made herself look busy. She scrubbed at her wrists, between her fingers, making sure to take as long as she could so she could leave the stream with him rather than before. Her efforts paid off
(the cost being small patches of raw skin; nothing she couldn’t heal later), and she stood as he did.

“That was super gross,” she said, smiling. They turned away from the stream, heading in the direction of the cart. Beau passed them, and Jester’s smile twitched into a small wince when she noticed the clay and mud caked around her friend’s ear. That'd been one hell of a faceplant... Beau would totally be feeling it tomorrow.

She returned her attention to Caleb. “I mean, we’ve fought some pretty gross things before, but, like. That was. Pffffbbbbbt.” She blew air through her lips, rolling her eyes back and around before letting her gaze slide down to his arms. She straightened, pointing. “...--your sleeves are wet!”

“... ah.” Caleb kept his eyes forward, shrugging. “Ja. I guess I just, ah. ...didn’t think about rolling them up. It’s no big deal. They’ve been in worse condition.”

“I mean, yeah, okay, maybe, but what about your arms?” Jester asked, waving her hand at his hands. He pocketed them, and she pouted. “The water was so cold, and now it’s going take, like, hours to dry.”

Caleb frowned, and he glanced at her from the corners of his eyes. “If... you’re worried I am going to get sick, I don’t think that’s how it works, Jester.”

Shit. He’s got her, there.

“Yeeeeeaaahhh.” She squinted her eyes a bit. “I guess I just... --I don’t, ahm.” A pause. “I wish you would, like. Not make yourself uncomfortable. ...you know? ...you said there was nothing to hide now.”

She echoed his words, tilting her head just enough to attempt a glance at his expression. He remained silent, eyes fixed, again, on the cart ahead. A beat passes before he quickens his pace, head bowed as he puts distance between them.

“It’s fine, Mr. Clay, thank you,” Caleb muttered, lifting his hand only long enough to offer a dismissive wave. “I’ll take care of it.”

Jester’s ear twitched, and she turned her head at the sound of scuttling feet. Nott scampered past her and up to Caleb, snatching the ends of his coat in her hands and tugging at them until he stopped walking and looked down at her. “--Caleb, let Caduceus heal it--please? We’ve been out here so long--there’s dirt and grime over all our supplies--it could get infected!”

“Seriously, Caleb,” Beau spoke up. Jester could feel the scowl in her voice. “You might need that arm later. Don’t be a dumbass.”

Caleb stared at Nott for a long moment. He looked up, his gaze scanning almost absently across their surroundings until it found Jester’s. Rather than look away, he held it. Jester bit her lower lip, nodding her head only enough so her silent plea would be understood. His expression dimmed, and his eyes drifted downward. Finally, he shifted his jaw and nodded.
“Okay.”

He didn’t take his coat off, opting instead to shrug it over his shoulders and upper arms, so the sleeves remained.

They’d reach the next city within two days. Maybe three, if they decided to camp a while longer and rest their spirits. Even though there was always the option to hop out of the cart and walk behind or alongside it to stretch their legs, that was never quite the same as having a small field or forest to explore. The open road could be pretty dull when all you had to look at was the same grass and horizon.

Jester skipped as she returned from a raspberry bush, humming and popping one of the bright red berries into her mouth. It was sweet and tart--maybe a bit more tart. Had they arrived a little later in the week, the berries would have been a little sweeter. This would do fine for now.

She slowed her steps to a walk as she entered the campgrounds. Beau and Fjord were sparring a few yards out, and it looked like Beau was winning. Yasha sat on a large log not far from the forest line. Her journal rested open on her lap, and Jester could see a small pile of freshly picked flowers stacked beside her. Caduceus looked like he was having a conversation with one of their horses; she could hear his soft, low voice in the wind, and the horse’s ear flicked, swiveling as he walked around the cart, so it always faced him. Jester smiled at the sight, and her smile widened when she noticed Nott lying across the neck and withers of the other horse. She’d removed her hood and her wrappings, content under the warm sun. It must be nice to feel safe enough to have it on her skin, again.

It took her a moment to find Caleb. He sat against the trunk of a large tree, partially hidden beneath its shadow with one of his books in his lap. Though he was looking down at it, he didn’t seem to be actually reading it. He still wore his coat, but he’d shrugged the top off his shoulders again.

Jester bee-lined to him.

“Hey, Caleb!”

He jumped, lifting his head from his palm. The startled sharpness in his eyes faded when he saw her, and his posture relaxed.

“Oh. Jester.” His eyes flicked to her cupped hands and back up. “What, ah. What have you got, there?”

“Raspberries!”

Jester spun on her toes, letting herself drop into the grass to sit beside him. Some of the berries almost bounced out of her fingers, but she managed to catch them. Crossing her legs beneath her, she leaned and offered him the berries, her grin softened to a gentler smile. “Have some! They’re a little sour, but they’re still pretty good.”

Caleb blinked at her. She was confident she saw the corners of his mouth twitch upward beneath his beard, and he plucked a single berry from the pile in her hands. “Thank you.”

“Uh huh!”

They snacked in silence for a few minutes, taking turns picking the berries from the grass between them. Jester slowed after a while, only reaching for the berries to feign taking one when she knew most of his focus had returned to his book. He soon finished off the berries, and she clasped her hands, resting them in the fabric of her dress.
“I think Nott’s sunbathing,” she said. “It’s pretty warm today. She seems really happy.”


“Isn’t it hard to read in the shade like this? We could go sit in the cart.”

“Nah. This is fine.”

Jester pouted, shoulders slumping.

She knew she shouldn’t. She should leave it be. But she’d never been one to follow the rules.

One of her fangs dug into the pad of her lip. She leaned forward enough to see his face. “...hey, Caleb? ...if… you’re not ready to have the bandages off, that’s okay.”

She actually felt the air between them thicken. Caleb continued to stare at the book in his lap, but his eyes had stopped moving. For a moment, she thought he might even be holding his breath. She could have kicked herself, stammering on,

“--I just… --you’ve been acting so, ahm. --We won’t think badly or be disappointed or anything if you want to put them back on, Caleb. It was super brave of you to show us and--”

“--Jester.”

She clamped her jaw shut. His interruption had barely been above a whisper, but it somehow managed to be louder than her scrambling thoughts.

Caleb opened his mouth. It took a few seconds for the words to find a voice. “I … I, ah. I don’t. Want. To put them back on, it’s… Mmn. …” His hands came together, then slowly slid up to grasp and hold his forearms. He kept his eyes locked on the pages of his book. Jester frowned. She could feel her heart sinking.

“... it’s what, Caleb?” She asked. He was trying to communicate his thoughts to her; she could tell. Caleb licked his lips, fingers pressing into the worn fabric of his coat.

“It’s… ah. … it’s been so long. Since I’ve… --I haven’t seen them… I didn’t expect it to be, ah, this…” He trailed off. A beat passed. “They… remind me.”

She could tell by the way he seemed to curl into himself, the vacant look in his eyes, that this was all he was going to be able to say. Whether he wanted to say more or not.

She wanted to hug him. To wrap her arms around one of his or both of his shoulders, give the sort of comfort and encouragement that words couldn’t offer. But that was what she needed. Caleb preferred his personal bubble un-popped. She had to try something else, something better suited for his needs.

Her gaze drifted from his face down to his arms, which he’d drawn close to his stomach.

If only there were a way to heal scars of the past… she’d make them go away, banish them from creeping their nightmares back into his memory, so they wouldn’t be able to hurt him anymore.

It came to her, then. A connection--a silly, maybe stupid one, but. An idea, nonetheless.

Her eyes flicked up to look at his face.

“You know, Caleb,” she started, keeping her voice low and gentle. “When I was really little, I spent
a lot of time in my room and stuff. And I would get super bored.” His eyes remained downcast, and she continued. “One time. I decided it would be fun to stack a bunch of things on my bed and pretend it was a mountain and climb to the very top and get to the clouds—which were the rafters up in my ceiling? Because I had never heard of anyone ever getting to the clouds before and I thought it would be pretty cool to be the first! Even if they weren’t technically clouds. So, I pulled all my drawers out of my dresser, and I threw everything on the ground, and I dragged a chair up onto my bed and bunched up my sheets and started stacking all the things I could get my hands on.” She couldn’t help but smile a little to herself. “But I realized that, like… to make the mountain taller? I had to climb everything I had already stacked, you know? And stack more things on those things. So I got on top of the chair and the first drawer aaaaaaand I fell down. So did the drawer. And, ahm, it kinda slammed into my wall and chipped a big piece off.”

He turned his head enough to look at her, now. She took this as a sign to go on.

“I was super worried at first because, like, I knew Mama wouldn’t be super mad at me, but I also didn’t want her to be upset or disappointed either--because that’d suck, you know? She works really hard, and I never liked making her upset or sad. I thought about trying to push my dresser across the room so it would hide the stupid thing, but I realized that if someone noticed I’d done that they’d be like, ‘oh my gosh Jester why did you move your dresser across the room right next to your bed?! That's totally weird!’ and then I’d have to lie and keep lying, and that’s hard!! So, I got a pretty smart idea. I went, and I got my paints out of my desk, and I started painting on the wall around where the piece fell off. I made the crack look like a boat! And I painted the Traveler and I SAILING the seas and fighting the giant squiiiiids.” She gripped imaginary swords, swinging her arms around as though fighting for emphasis. Then she grinned, turning to face him and shrugging, hands open on either side of her shoulders. “And no one even noticed!”

Caleb stared at her. Some of the light had returned to his eyes, but his brows were wrinkled. Slowly, he rolled his lips together. “... but… the wall was still broken.”

“It wasn't broken!” She said quickly, dropping her hands into the grass. “It was still a working wall, doing the things walls… y’know, do. Separating rooms and stuff, letting you hang things on them, juuust thin enough to drum your hands against until someone starts to ask if the room is actually haunted or something because it's supposed to be empty. It was a very good wall! ...just... a little more scratched up than it had been before.”

He held her gaze for a long moment before turning away. She let the silence linger until he spoke again. “You… mean to paint on my arms…?”

“Mmm,” she hummed, bringing her hands together and fidgeting with her left pinky a bit. “Not… paint. I was wondering, actually, if you’d maybe… want tattoos? So that way when you look down, and you see your arms, you don’t see just the scars anymore. You… could see something you like, instead. And you wouldn’t have to wear the bandages anymore.”

He stayed quiet. Jester waited another long moment, resting her hands in her lap. “It’s up to you, Caleb. Whatever would make you… you know. --What would make it easier to not have to wear the bandages. Since you don’t want to wear them.”

There came another long stretch of silence. She held her breath. Finally, he exhaled through his nose, turning to face her. “... what would you give me, then?”

The jolt of joy and hope that shot through her was enough to straighten her spine. Jester sat up and gasped, eyes wide and beaming. It took every ounce of her self-awareness to keep her voice from rising to a shrill, elated squeak. “--Anything!! Whatever you want! --Whatever would make you
super happy. Caleb--I’ll learn to draw it super good and stuff before I give you the tattoo! I promise I’ll do my best to make it REALLY cool and REALLY pretty. --If that’s what you want. --Do you have any ideas of what you want?”

She may have gotten too excited. Caleb looked overwhelmed for a second or two, and she quickly reeled herself back in to give him both literal and metaphorical space. Again, he pressed his lips together. Then, slowly, he looked out toward the field, the treeline, and the cart.

“...them,” he said, nodding once. Jester blinked, her brow wrinkling. Honestly? That was unexpected.

“You want… like, portraits of all of them?”

“--No,” he said quickly, as though she would have reached out and gotten started right then and there. He cleared his throat, scratching at his jaw. “No, ah... I suppose… I mean that I would like, ah... something they would all like. Like, aaahhh... --Nott. She prefers small things--trinkets and such? Buttons? ...oh, that’s, ah. That’s probably… mm.”

As he fumbled through his words, Jester’s smile grew. She understood what he wanted. It couldn’t have been more perfect. “You want tattoos of things they like so you’ll think of them! And a piece of them will always be with you. ...That’s so nice, Caleb.”

Maybe it was the rays of sunlight speckling their way through the tree leaves, but she could have sworn she saw a blush bloom over his nose and cheeks. Caleb shrugged, drumming his fingers on the pages of his book.

“Uh, ja.” He paused. “That, ah. Wouldn’t be too… ‘busy,’ you think?”

“Pffff, nahhh,” she said, flicking her wrist at him. “I could do most of it in, like, one color, but then have liiiiiittle, little accents of other colors to give it just the smallest bit of a pop! We will have to do it a bit at a time, though, because that shit needs to heal and stuff, you know?”

Caleb nodded. Jester clapped her hands together, grinning.

“Great!! --Okay! I can get some more inks and stuff once we get into the city--and we can do the first one then, is that okay?”

“Ja. Sure.”

“Eee! Okay!” She shoved her hands into the grass and pushed to her feet, bouncing twice and wiggling in place for but a second. “Okay--I’ll start sketching some things and pick out, like, the base color, and maybe try to figure out a pattern or design or something, and I can show it to you, and--oh my gosh, Caleb--your arms are going to look so good!!! Everyone is going to be so jealous.”

She twirled on her toes, starting to skip back to the cart where her bag, sketchbook, and paints were.

“--Jester?”

Her boots dug into the ground, the sudden stop just about tripping her. Jester turned around, blinking at Caleb. He stared back at her from the tree’s cool shadow. His blue eyes had softened to a cautious, but genuine, affection, and he gave her a small nod. “... thank you.”

Jester flashed him a toothy grin, giggling with a wink. Maybe it was just the sunlight, but she felt a little warmer as she made her way to the cart.
in your hands

holy... cow, you guys. i’m not accustomed to so much feedback and i just gotta let you know how much i utterly and sincerely appreciate every single comment, kudos, and bookmark. it legit made my week last week and was a wave of positivity much needed. from the bottom of my heart, thank you so, so much for such a kind reception. this is my first time writing for this fandom, so the 'art-fear' was real. y'all are amazing. thank you, once more, for all your generosity. c:

Her quick glances failed to be as discreet as she may have liked. Caleb would catch Jester peeking over the top of her sketchbook or pretending to look at the scenery behind him at any given time. He didn’t mind much, and he knew she was more trying not to draw attention to the two of them rather than veil her motives from him outright. He just couldn’t ignore the way his stomach tightened, or how his face and ears warmed whenever he felt the sparrow-light weight of her gaze.

She pulled him aside at their next stop. They huddled in the corner of the cart while the others went about stretching their legs or exploring. Jester took his hands after he’d shrugged out of his coat, resting them palm up on her knees. He kept his eyes on other things. Some birds flew from one set of trees to the next, chattering amongst themselves. A breeze knocked a leaf or two from the branches. Somewhere, in the distance, he could hear the bleating of sheep.

Every few minutes, he’d dare to peer through the corners of his eyes down to the pages of her sketchbook. She’d wedged it into the space between his hands and her stomach. Her bright eyes bounced their attention from his bare arms to her pages, where her ever-shrinking pencil copied his likeness onto the paper. She’d soon run out of room to grip it, and he hadn’t seen a spare lying around.

The others eventually found their way back to the cart and became curious. Despite Jester’s best efforts to keep her plans lowkey (for his sake), he’d already accepted that this ordeal wouldn’t remain, in any way, a secret. And that was fine. He just hoped this wouldn’t lead to a lot of questions…

“Eyyyy, that’s a cool idea, Jess!” Beau said with a grin. She perched herself on the side of the cart, one knee against her chest, the other foot on the floor. Caleb watched as she tossed a pear between her hands. “I like it, I like it. --and you’re just gonna let her go buck-wild, Caleb? Sounds like a risk.”

“Ahh, a calculated risk, maybe,” he mutters. “But I’ve never been good with math.”

Beau’s grin curves into a small, crooked smirk, and Jester giggles. The sound stirs a jittery feeling in his stomach, but he’s quick to snuff it out. Caleb clears his throat, turning back in the direction of the sheep as Jester sits up.

“You guys are going to be. So. Jealous. Of Caleb’s arms,” she said (and he barely resisted the urge to glance at her and catch her signature eyebrow waggle), “I’m making: the BEST. Tattoo.”

“Iiiiiii, ah, don’t… think anyone is going to be jealous of my arms,” Caleb said. “But, ah, the tattoos, yes.”
“You do kinda have chicken leg arms, yeah,” Beau said. Caleb gave her a dull glance.

“Thank you, Beauregard.”

“Fjord and Yasha are, like. Beefcakes. You’re more like… string beans. Or an old, limp carrot.”

“... Thank yooooou.”

Jester laughed and, again, Caleb had to smother the feeling in his stomach and chest. He pressed his lips together, dropping his eyes to the cart’s floor between his feet and Beau’s. The temptation to just let himself topple off the side of the cart and into the dirt was getting stronger by the second. Didn’t matter that it was parked.

Beau took a large bite out of the pear, smearing the back of her wrist across her lips to wipe away the juice. “So, for real. You gonna give him googly eyes? Tusk-tooth? ...a dick?”

Maybe if he got lucky, the earth would just part and swallow him. Or the horses would spook and manage to trample him. Aahhh, he could only hope.

“How on Earth do you think the earth would swallow you? I mean, it’s a cart. It’s not a spaceship. Or a super-advanced robot. It’s just a cart.”

“Caleb wants something each of you guys like!” Jester said. “Soooo, hey, Beau! You should totally think of something that makes you super, super happy so I can start to learn to draw it!”

“What if I said Captain Dick-Tooth-Googly-Eyes made me super, super happy?”

“Beau.”

The change of tone in Jester’s voice was enough to make Caleb look up. Her demeanor had shifted; the playfulness had almost disappeared, and she now stared at Beau with an arched brow and gentle frown. She shook her head. “I would really, really appreciate it if you picked something that you really, really like and makes you very happy.”

Caleb glanced at Beau. Her smirk gradually became neutral, mockery giving way to something quieter. She huffed, rolled her eyes, and swung her legs over the side of the cart. “Yeah, yeah, sure.” She dropped off the cart. “I’ll think about it.”

She continued to toss the pear between her hands as she walked away, tipping her chin upward as she passed Caduceus. Caleb watched her a moment longer before he turned to Jester. He didn’t realize until he started speaking that he was smiling.

“If that would really make her happy, it would be fine.”

Jester puffed out her cheeks in a tiny pout. “Yeah, but, it should make you happy, too, Caleb. I mean, it’s gonna be on your arm and stuff. I don’t want anyone to, you know, tease you about it or anything.”

He stared at her before bowing his head, clearing his throat. That light, warm feeling fluttered in his stomach, and Caleb leaned back, pulling his arms with him. He forced a chuckle and rubbed his forearm. “Ah. Well. ...thank you, Jester. I look forward to seeing your designs.” He nodded, tugging his sleeves back into place. “I am sure they’ll be wonderful.”

“They’re not just going to be wonderful,” Jester said. She grinned, clapping her sketchbook closed. “They’re going to be: the best.”

Those two days to the town dragged on, but Jester kept herself busy. Sketching in the cart could be
difficult with the uneven roads jostling her pencil as she scribbled. Jester kept at it despite the small mistakes and annoyances; on one side of the page, she started a list of their party and on the other, loose sketches of Caleb’s arms. Even as only a ‘half sleeve’ on both of his forearms, it would take a while. The areas of skin she worked on first would have to heal before she could add more. She might be able to cast cure wounds and speed the process up, but that seemed a little excessive. Plus, re-damaging the skin after speeding its natural healing process could be more harmful in the long run than good. She didn’t really know, but it’d be best to let things run their course. She also didn’t want to bounce between his arms, working on one while the other healed. If they got into another fight, it’d be safer for him to not be sore in two places.

They arrived in the town early in the evening. Jester was tired, and her body felt stiff and sore from bumping around in the cart, but she wasn’t about to let this stop her.

Once they’d separated into their rooms and started settling in for the night, Jester dumped her bag across her bed, digging through the contents. It took a minute, but she located the jar of black ink and her tattooing kit.

“I’m gonna go to Caleb and Nott’s room and get started!” She said, throwing Beau and Yasha a grin over her shoulder. She held up the ink jar, shaking it for a bit of emphasis. Beau huffed, raising a brow.

“Yeah, yeah. If the lights are out before you get back, just don’t make a lotta noise comin’ in.”

"Our beauty sleep is very important,” Yasha said. Her deadpan expression didn't so much as twitch.

Jester stuck out her tongue at them and dashed through the door.

Caleb and Nott’s room was three down on the opposite end of the hallway, and she rapped a silly little rhythm against the door. A beat passed before the door cracked open, then steadily swung the remaining way. Caleb’s tired face came into view, expression neutral but his eyes bright and alert. “Jester. Ah. … --I see you have your, uh, supplies with you.”

“Yeah!” Jester said, smiling. She opened her mouth to invite herself in but paused. Another glance or two over his face, and she frowned a little. “If you’re super tired, though, tonight, Caleb, we can totally do it tomorrow or something!”

He shook his head, pulling the door fully open and stepping into the room. “No, no. That’s quite alright. I, ah, was going to be up and reading, anyway. …the, ah. Sooner the better, ja?”

Jester nodded, sliding into the room and kicking the door shut with the back of her heel. “Where’s Nott?”

“She went to ask Mr. Clay if he had, ah, some tea that is… --calming? I think,” Caleb said, scratching the crook of his arm through his coat sleeve. “She should be back shortly.”

“Oh! Is she having trouble sleeping?”

“No.”

“…are you having trouble sleeping, Caleb?”

“Where do you need us to sit?”

The abrupt change in subject startled her for a moment. Jester blinked, and she breathed a faint sigh. “Ahm. Anywhere is good! We just need space to rest your arm. —And if you still want to read, we
can make sure there’s room for your book, too!”

“Mm. The, ah… floor might become uncomfortable if we were to sit for an hour or so, maybe—”

“We can sit on the bed!” Jester said. She bounded to one of the two beds, springing into the air and crossing her legs before she even hit the sheets. The old mattress squeaked as she landed, and she got to setting up the tattooing kit. Caleb hesitated for several seconds before he stepped forward and sank onto the edge of the bed. He retrieved a book from a carefully organized stack by his feet and placed it on his lap.

“Do… I need to sit on this side? I, ah, am not sure what you had in mind.”

“Oh! I was going to begin with your left arm. Is that okay?”

“Ja.”

“Scoot over here, and I can move to that side.”

Jester slid off the bed and rounded him as he slipped to the center of the bed. She bent a knee and dropped her weight onto the mattress, leaving one foot touching the floor as she gently took his left arm. She looked up at him, and he nodded, so she began to roll up his sleeve. He opened the book in his lap. “... so. Have, ah. You decided on a design?”

“Mayyyyyyybe,” she said, glancing at him with a quick smile. She finished rolling his sleeve, tucking it behind his elbow. He must have been waiting for a more detailed answer because, after a couple seconds had passed, he cleared his throat.

“What… is it?”

“A surprise.”

“… Jester.”

“Caleb.”

He exhaled through his mouth, and Jester didn’t need to look up to know he was either smiling or smirking. Just a little. “You really aren’t going to tell me?”

“You can see it as I draw it. It’s more exciting that way!”

Caleb chuckled, though it sounded a bit forced. If he had more to say, the sound of the opening door interrupted him. Nott pushed into the room, a teacup in each hand, and stopped mid-step as she saw them.

“--Oh!! Hi, Jester! --Are you giving Caleb his new tattoos??”

“Uh huh!” Jester said, grinning.

“Wow! I can’t wait to--oh! Did you want some tea, too, Jester?”

“That’s okay, Nott, you--” but the goblin had already set the teacups on the floorboards and ducked back through the door. Jester blinked. She turned to Caleb, giggling. “She’s so silly.”

Caleb snorted, turning the pages in his book.

Jester cleaned off the needle one last time. She adjusted Caleb’s arm in her lap, stealing small glances
at him as she did to ensure he was still comfortable with this whole ordeal, and grabbed for a razor. What hair grew on his arm came in thin and unevenly. The scarred tissue had a different texture to it, she noticed; it almost didn’t feel like skin. It was wrinkly on the edges and smooth in the center, a pale whitish-pink in color. Some were vaguely diamond in shape. Others made her think of honeycombs. All of them looked like they’d been re-opened more than once. She bit down on her lip as she set the razor aside, gingerly wiping his arm clean with a soft towel. He kept his eyes fixed on his book.

Nott returned with a third teacup by the time she had finished. Jester watched as she tugged a nightstand closer to their side of the bed and set the teacups on it. Caleb muttered a soft ‘thank you,’ and he reached for a cup.

“Whatcha gonna get?” Nott asked, pulling herself up to sit on the bed beside Caleb. He shrugged, and her ears twitched upward. “--What? You don’t know?!”

“Nope.”

“It’s a secret,” Jester whispered, winking at Nott. Nott’s eyes twinkled, and she grinned.

Jester blew a quick breath through her lips, adjusting the needle in her hand as she scooted back a bit to better lean over Caleb’s arm. “Okay. I’m about to get started. ...still okay?”

Caleb nodded once, his eyes staying glued to the pages. “Ja.”

Jester returned the nod. She leaned over his arm, using one hand to hold the skin in place as the other got to work. His fingers twitched sharply a time or two. She expected this much. To lighten any lingering tension or nerves, she began to hum an old lullaby that Mama would sing to her at night when she was small. It’s a soothing, comforting piece, and while it would hold no familiarity with him, she hoped the gesture would provide a little incentive to relax.

The unfortunate part of her designs—for both arms—was that she wouldn’t be able to put down each symbol one by one and create a slow reveal of what she’d chosen to represent each of their friends. Instead, she’d woven them together. It just felt right. A bunch of odd, unrelated things, brought together into one unique composition. She smiled to herself, letting her tongue poke out of the corner of her mouth as she gently pushed the ink into a specific pattern. It’s always easy to lose track of time, especially when she gets really into a new drawing. How much passed before she realized something was wrong, she didn’t know. But, at some point or another, she realized it wasn’t her hands that were shivering and making it hard to get the accents right. It was Caleb’s.

Jester looked up. Caleb’s breathing had slowed and deepened. His eyes stared, blank, down at his book, and he’d begun to press his lips together so tightly that the skin started to whiten.

Her heart sank. Shit. Had this been a bad idea, after all?

She opened her mouth to ask just as his eyes shifted to look at her. They held each other’s gaze before Caleb slowly nodded. He tried to smile, and the gesture made her want to throw her arms around him and hug him tight and praise him for being so brave.

Jester rolled her lips together. Then, she turned her head.

“Hey, Nott?”

The goblin had moved herself to one of the corners of the room, several vials set up around her and a small pot. Nott looked up, blinking widely, and tilted her head. “Yeah?”
“Would you wash your hands real good and come here?” Jester asked. “I need a little help holding the skin still while I work.”

“Uh. --Yeah! Sure! Sure, sure!”

Nott scrambled to her feet, dashing to the wash basin. Jester turned back to Caleb. He squinted at her, brows wrinkled and expression difficult to decipher. She smiled, and her hand that had been lightly pressed against his arm slid down to his palm. She rotated her hand enough to thread her fingers into his, giving his hand a gentle squeeze. The color gradually came back to his face. A lot of it. He looked back to his book, exhaling through his nose. He said nothing, but he nodded his head.

Within a minute, Nott returned and sprang onto the bed. Jester showed her how to press her thumbs against Caleb’s inner forearm so the skin wouldn’t bunch up or pinch while she worked, and she kept her left hand in her lap, never loosening her hold on Caleb’s palm. As she set the ink into place, she let her thumb brush absently along the curve of his wrist.

Caleb slipped between being conscious of the passing time and having no idea what the concept of time even meant.

The words in his book melded into unintelligible symbols. Sometimes Nott and Jester’s playful conversation was clear, sometimes it sounded as though he were listening to them from the other side of a thick wall. By the time Jester leaned back, gently wrapped his arm with loose bandages and a large piece of gauze and gave him instructions to wait an hour before removing it, he’d been on the brink of exhaustion.

Caleb hated himself for it… but the sharpest thing he could remember was the sudden emptiness in his hand after she’d announced she was finished for the night, and she’d pulled away to reach for the gauze.

His arm ached the following morning. Caleb washed it as she’d instructed, careful not to scratch the patchy red spots and wincing when he accidentally applied too much pressure. He could make out what looked like the shapes of very thin… cups? And some sort of creature among them. It took him a couple seconds to recognize it: a seahorse, anchored to the beginnings of some kind of plant.

Caleb lifted his arm, touching his fingers to the meticulous line-work. Though it was upside down from his point of view, the detail and texture put into the tiny creature’s scales and fins were visible. It may only be a drawing, but he could almost feel how fragile it was, and the hummingbird-like energy from its tiny fin propeller. His thumb grazed an unusually smooth patch of skin, and he sucked in a breath, quick to lower his arms back out of sight.

By the time he got downstairs to the dining area of the inn, it seemed most of the patrons were up and indulging in the available breakfast food and drinks. Caleb tugged at the flaps of his coat, sticking close to the walls as he scanned the room for a familiar face. He spotted one in Fjord, who had just exited out the front entrance. With some careful crowd-weaving, head bowed and all efforts made to draw no attention to himself, Caleb slipped out the doors.

He found Fjord and Beau around back with the cart. Fjord stood in front of a large crate, hands propped on his hips and a look of mild irritation on his features. The apparent source of this irritation came in the form of Beau, who had perched herself on the crate in a crouch, chin propped in one hand. She wore a crooked little smile, the one that usually came with a bit of light (or not so light) taunting.

“When I asked for a hand, I meant a hand lifting this thing,” Fjord said, his tone dry. "Not making it...
more of a pain in the ass."

Beau chuckled. “C’moooon. Push yourself, Fjord. Ninety-nine isn’t a hundred, and a hundred isn’t a hundred and ten. Chop, chop, we ain’t got all day.”

“For fuck’s sake, Beau.”

“I can help,” Caleb said, stopping a yard or so from them. The two glanced at him. Beau’s amused and eager expression was not lost on him.

Fjord’s brows knitted together before he raised one. “Uuuh. Thanks, Caleb, but. --No offense, this might be outta your range. Your arms are kinda... stringy.”


“A stringy set of arms is better than none at all, ja?” Caleb asked. He bounced his shoulders in a small shrug, then nodded to the crate. “What is it?”

“Food and water, mostly,” Fjord said. He gestured at the crate, letting his arm drop back to his side after. “I was kinda hoping the innkeepers would, y’know, put it in smaller sacks or something so it’d be easier to move. But beggars can’t be choosers.”

Beau hopped off the crate, landing with the ease of a cat. She straightened into a long stretch, arms held in an arc high over her head, before grunting and dropping them to her sides. “Should be enough to hold us over ‘til the next town.”

Caleb nodded.

The three formed a triangle around the crate and knelt by its sides. Caleb waited as Fjord worked his hands and fingers beneath it on his side before shoving his own hands between the wood and grass. He could already feel a splinter or two burrowing into his skin. “Where is Yasha?”

“She went into the market with Jester and Caduceus,” Fjord said, grunting as he shifted his weight. “Think she was lookin’ for a sharpening stone. Caduceus said something about a crack in his teapot. Dunno about Jess.”

“Pencils, maybe,” Caleb said. “The one she was using this week is no more than a nub.”

“Are we gonna lift this or what?” Beau interrupted. “I kinda like my hands not flat and usable.”


Caleb pulled upward. His shoulders jerked, and the weight of the box dragged his body back downward with enough force to choke a gag out of him. But the crate lifted. It suddenly fell into him, as Beau and Fjord’s sides were no longer in balance with his, and he stumbled.

“--Your knees!” Fjord said quickly. “Caleb--lift with your KNEES!”

“I am!” Caleb grunted, fumbling his hands under the crate in an attempt to find purchase. His forearm burned.

“Fucking--GET YOUR ARMS UNDER IT, CALEY,” Beau barked.

“I AM!!!”

“--Shit, shit, SHIT--”
They careened away from the cart. Fjord and Beau side-stepped as quick as they could in an attempt to redirect the crate’s fall and Caleb struggled to regain balance of his side. But with the weight so unevenly distributed, and the telling sound that most of the crate’s contents had toppled to his side, he doubted there was any saving it.

“--Don’t drop it on him!” Fjord ordered. Beau snarled back,

“The FUCK do you THINK I’m doing?!”, and she shoved her chest up enough to force more of the crate over her arms. “--Go right GO RIGHT--”

“nhhgh--Ja, oka--”

“--THE OTHER RIGHT--”

“That--direction has--a NAME--you know!”

“FUCK YOU.”

“OKAY, OKAY, just STRAIGHTEN OUT!!” Fjord said, his voice cutting off with a strained grunt. He suddenly thrust forward against the crate, and Caleb barely had a chance to gasp as he blundered to the side. He shot a glance over his shoulder, spotted the nearing cart, and rotated his body to ‘throw’ the crate at it with all his might. The crate was airborne for a split second before it landed on the end of the cart with a crash. Beau tore her hands away from it just in time to avoid getting her fingers crushed.

Fjord let out a full breath, pulling his hands out from under his end of the crate, which was still free off the edge of the cart, and patting them against its side. He shoved the crate all the way in before turning to them. “Well. ...coulda gone worse.”

Beau flicked her arms and wrists out as Caleb bent over, propping his hands on his knees. He huffed out a few deep breaths before tilting his head enough to look up and through his hair. “I… think it went very well.”

Beau stared at him, her expression bemused and maybe a little cross. She let out a snort, shaking her head as she walked past him. “We really gotta bulk you up.”

Caleb waited around a few more minutes to make sure Fjord and Beau didn’t need help with anything else before he made his way to the market. It took maybe a half hour to locate the rest of his party members. Caduceus always stood out like a sore thumb; his bright pink hair and height turned him into a beacon. Jester and Yasha were close by, the latter examining some sort of decorative box between her hands. Jester chattered enthusiastically beside her. The tiefling’s hands and arms were empty.

He made his way through the slow-growing crowd, pocketing his hands as he neared the others. Under his coat sleeve, his forearm throbbed. It had started to itch a little. He decided conversation would be worth the distraction. “What are you looking at?”

Yasha and Jester turned around. Jester grinned, bouncing on her toes a few times.

“I told Yasha she should get a box to keep some of her flowers and stuff in!” She said, clapping her hands. “Like, some of the bigger ones? They need to be pressed and stuff a bit longer, and the box will help keep them from getting crushed by other stuff in the cart! Pretty good, right?”

“I like this one,” Yasha muttered. “But it comes with a key. I don’t want to lose it and have to break it open.”
“You don’t have to lock it!” Jester said, turning to face her again. Yasha frowned softly.

“But there’s no other way to secure it.”

“Hmmmmm.” Jester scratched at her chin, puffing her cheeks out. “Maaaayyyyybeee I can mess with it! So, like. It WILL latch, but you won’t need a key to do it! It can’t be that hard. We just need to find a new buckle-thing.”

“No, no, you don’t need to do that,” Yasha protested, lowering the box in her hands. “It’s alright. I’ll find something else.”

“But you like that one!”

“--you know, ah, Nott. Is good at tinkering with things.” Caleb blinked, a little surprised that he’d spoken up. The two women turned to look at him, and he felt his back stiffen. He cleared his throat. “Perhaps she could help you take a look at it, Jester.”

Jester beamed. She turned to Yasha again. “See? We can totally fix that box up. So it’s not just super useful, but it’s pretty, and you like it and stuff!”

“… okay,” Yasha said. She smiled, albeit cautiously, and nodded her head.

As Yasha spoke with the merchant, Jester moved to Caleb’s side. She folded her hands behind her back, rocking forward and backward on the balls of her feet as she smiled. “Soooooo, do you like your special tattoo so far?”

“Ah. Yes.” Caleb started to reach for his coat sleeve but paused, pocketing his hands again. He pushed the irritating sensation in his arm out of his mind, focusing on her in its place. “It, ah. … it’s a seahorse, yeah?”

“Not just a seahorse,” Jester said, her smile widening to a toothy grin. The ornament hanging on her ear and horn jingled as she shook her head. “Some fungus, too! --like. Ahm. Wow, that kinda sounded gross actually saying it but--like the kind that’s on Caduceus’s staff! It’s a little hard to see right now because I did the seahorse first. But it’s gonna look super good when it’s done.”

“I know it will.” Caleb said. He smiled at her, and her eyes brightened. Warmth tickled his face; he looked away again. “--ah. Beauregard and Fjord are packing the last of our supplies into the cart. Have the rest of you found what you were looking for?”

“Yep! Caduceus found this really cute little tea set that’s totally his style, aaaand now Yasha has a box to protect her flowers! We should be heading back to the inn soon!”

Caleb blinked. He looked back to her, his smile faltering. “Was… --did you not need anything?”

“Aaaaah, I think I’m good,” Jester said, shrugging. “Fjord said we should get an early start, anyway, and it took a pretty long time to find the tea set and box. I don’t want to make him cranky.” She glanced around a moment--as though to make sure no one was listening--before leaning a little closer to him and whispering, “Caduceus said he spat up salt water this morning. I think he might be a little tense, you know?”

Caleb frowned, nodding. “Ah... Understandable.”

“Anyway,” Jester said, sighing as she leaned away from him again. “I guess we’ll get back to the inn, now. --Did you need to get anything, Caleb? --There was a tiny bookstore, like, a few turns from here! Maybe you could find something useful! --and you walk pretty fast when you want to so
“This is true,” he agreed. He rolled his jaw, glancing in the direction Jester indicated. A small town like this probably didn’t have anything he hadn’t read yet. There was, of course, always the chance they could have a rarity tucked away… but that chance was slim. “Mmm. I might have to check it out, then. …if… I’m gone too long would you, ah. Mind recruiting Nott to keep Fjord distracted, maybe?” He looked at her. “You shouldn’t have to. But… just in case.”

Jester smiled, and she winked. “I’m a really good distraction.”

She turned on her heel, skipping the distance between herself and Yasha. Caleb looked after her. He swallowed, nodding to himself as he turned and moved further into the market.

...Jester... you have no idea.

Before long, the little town was no bigger than a speck on the bright blue horizon. A few stray clouds stretched across the sky, spread far enough, so their shadows visibly drifted across the grasslands like giant, slow-moving cattle. She loved clouds like these. It was another one of those marvelous things others found pretty mundane. Finding the edge of the cloud’s shadow and darting in and out of it for no other reason than that she could? It was cool. Usually, things were just overcast or just sunny. It was neat finding something so simple, but unique, like that.

Jester swung her legs from the back of the cart. She’d just plopped down to continue work in her sketchbook; the plan was to finish up the design for Caleb’s left arm and give the Traveler an update on things. Fjord and Yasha were discussing weaponry, and she could hear Nott prodding at the box Yasha had purchased by Caleb’s side. He was reading, like always, but Jester had noticed he hadn’t returned to the group with any new books. The little shop must not have had anything that caught his interest. Maybe he’d have better luck at their next stop.

She tugged her bag open, fishing around for her sketch case. Her fingers touched something unfamiliar, and she blinked, leaning down to peer inside. She gasped.

“--Oh my GOSH!!!” Jester pulled a bundle of five, bright pink and white pencils out of her bag. They were held together with a thin leather band, the woodwork smooth and unchipped. “What?! --Where--wait--” she twisted around to face the rest of the cart, holding the bundle up “--did anyone buy some pencils and put them in my bag??”

Fjord, Yasha, and Beau shook their heads. Caduceus glanced over his shoulder from steering the horses and commented that they were lovely, but no, he did not. Nott shrugged.

“I guess they’re yours, now, Jessie! Wow. They’re beautiful!”

“They’re SUPER pretty!” Jester echoed, grinning and looking down as she cradled the bundle in her hands. “Oh my gosh--I can’t wait to use them!! --They’re even different kinds of lead?! AAaaaAaaAAAa!!!”

She bounced where she sat, giggling gleefully and starting to work the leather knot loose. As she tossed it to the side, a teeny, tiny detail nearly escaped her attention.

Caleb hadn’t looked up from his book during the exchange, and he hadn’t responded to the question. But, behind the veil of worn binding and old paper, she could see the tell-tale light in his eyes.

He was smiling.
The days and travel from one small town to the next were smooth and uneventful. Jester surprised herself, discovering that she felt gratitude for the peaceful mornings, lulling afternoons and nights filled with cricket song and the soothing crackle of their campfire. It was an odd thing to notice that there’d been a time this would have driven her nuts; she was supposed to be out on wild adventures! Kicking ass, taking name, and spreading the word of the Traveler… anything that would have been more exciting than her time spent carefully monitored and sheltered. But the longer she watched the fire, its gold and orange flames licking away at the wood and the pulsing glow of the coals, the more she appreciated these slow moments. Where everyone took comfort in each other’s company. When everyone felt safe. Cicadas joined in the evening cradlesong, and she let her gaze trail away from the fire, and to the face its light gave form.

Caleb stared through the logs and twigs and coal. The vibrant, warm colors from the fire almost seemed to cancel out the blue of his eyes, casting the illusion that he didn’t have irises. It’s an eerie image… and, combined with the hollowness of his expression and how still he sits… it’s not one she likes. Aside from the fire and wildlife, the only other sound in the area is the soft scrape coming from the bowl in Caduceus’s hands as he crushes a mix of flowers and herbs. Jester finally huffs, pushing herself to sit up. She wasn’t going to be sleeping anytime soon, anyway.

“--Hey, Caduceus?”

Caduceus looked up, his ears swinging forward and flopping against his jawline. Jester smiled.

“Do you think we could, ahm, swap watches, actually? I’m not all that tired yet. If you’re sleepy, you could take mine with Beau!”

“... you’re sure?” Caduceus asked. Though the flames between them blurred his features, she could tell he was studying her. Gently… but in the careful way that he always had. She nodded her head. Caduceus maintained eye contact. There was a new softness in his eyes. Like there was something he knew that she didn’t… even though it felt like she should. But he nodded his head and set his bowl aside, scooting a little further into the night’s shadow. Jester pursed her lips and tugged her legs out from under her blanket. She crab-walked the small distance to sit at Caleb’s side, hugging her legs to her chest and propping her chin on her knees. He didn’t look away from the flames.

Crickets kept singing, their tiny, high voices speckling the breeze. Jester stayed quiet for a long while, waiting to see if Caleb would react at all to the swap between her and Caduceus and that she’d moved to sit beside him. He didn’t even blink.

But something was moving. Caleb’s stillness pronounced it, made the tiny twitches and fumbles all the more noticeable. Jester looked down to where his hands were folded in his lap. His fingers were fidgeting with the cuff of his coat, caught between the decision to push into the fabric or merely rest on it. Like his consciousness knew not to touch his arm but his subconscious begged to.

Jester knew she should keep her own hands to herself. But she reached out, gingerly pushing his fingers away from his arm. Caleb jumped, the touch spooking him out of whatever trance he’d slipped into. Jester pulled her hand to her chest. She smiled, waving at him, and rested her hands on her knees. Caleb blinked at her.

“I… thought Mr. Clay was on watch with me. --Is it time to swap?”

“Oh! No,” Jester said. “I couldn’t sleep, so I told Caduceus I’d switch places with him!”
“Ah. I see.” He frowned slightly. “Is something troubling you?”

“Nah. Just a little wound up, I guess. I feel like I could climb a bunch of things or run super far. Kind of like… when trying to make yourself go to sleep actually makes you super, like, annoyed or something. You know?”

Judging by how he was staring at her, she realized this must not be something he experienced often. Jester pressed her lips together, popping her shoulders in a shrug and leaning back. “--Anyway. Um. Can I check on your tattoo? I’m sure it’s doing just fine, but it’s best to, you know, keep an eye on it and make sure it’s healing okay.”

“Oh--ja. Yeah, of course.” Caleb sat up, easing his sleeve up his forearm. She noticed he only lifted to the top of the seahorse, leaving the rest veiled by his coat. She reached out and took his forearm in her hands, turning it with care, so it caught the firelight better. The skin looked dry at worst, but that’s normal. She nodded, tenderly pressing one finger to the seahorse.

“It looks good!” She said, glancing at him with a smile before returning her attention to his arm. “I can ask Caduceus to help me make maybe, like, something to put on it every day, so it’s not all dry and stuff. --Does it itch at all?”


“Okay, well, don’t scratch it. Just let Caduceus or I know, and we will make something to put on it, so it doesn’t itch as much, okay?”

Caleb nodded again.

Jester let him have his arm back, and he drew his sleeve back down, resting his arms across his knees. She maintained her smile, hugging her legs and propping her chin on her knees once more. “Sooooo. You have Frumpkin out and running around to help keep watch, right?”

He nodded.

“Where is he?” She asked. No sooner had the question left her lips did something headbutt the small of her back. Jester squeaked and turned, grinning as Frumpkin rubbed against her and made his way around to stand on the toes of her boots. She giggled, reaching out and scratching behind his ear and the side of his head. “There he iiiiiisss… helloooooo, Frumpkinnnn. The fearsome Fey Kinnnggg.”

Frumpkin shoved his head against her palm. He purred loudly, the soothing rumble blending with the crackle of the fire. Jester uncurled her legs and crossed them beneath her. She gingerly scooped Frumpkin into her lap, continuing to scratch his head as he made biscuits in the folds of her dress. She smiled at him, turning her head to look at Caleb. “He’s a very sweet boy.”

“Ja. He is,” Caleb said. He looked up at her. “Would, ah. You like him to keep you company the rest of the night instead of prowl the area?”

Jester blinked. “Are you sure, though? I know you like to have him just outside the dome.”

“Perhaps. But, ah. He gets lonely after a while. And it’s been quiet the past few nights. I’m sure he’d appreciate a bit of companionship.”

Jester smiled. She did love the sound of Frumpkin’s purr… and any gentle noise to ward off complete silence would make falling asleep much more comfortable. After a couple seconds, she nodded. She’d appreciate the companionship, too.
The ointment Caduceus made provided some relief. Still, the temptation to scratch at the itching skin remained constant in the back of his mind. Caleb tried distracting himself with reading; it didn’t matter if the passages were old or new. He worried more and more about pestering Caduceus, opting instead to find other means. He’d tolerated worse than a bit of itching. It was more annoying than anything else.

A week came and went. With it, new injuries, new experiences, new faces. Old worries. Old dreams and nightmares. Old feelings. Jester’s work remained on his left arm and only his left arm, but he’d wake with a phantom prickle in his right, needling its way from his wrist to his elbow. *It’s okay*, he told himself. *It will pass. Just have to wait it out.*

Caleb kept her hand in his as she took to printing the next portion of the tattoo, and his eyes fixed on a massive storm cloud creeping down the horizon. The air grew crisp, and the wind felt electric as it ghosted across his face and bare arm. Even at such a distance, the storm made its presence known.

Jester shivered under the next gust. She huffed, gingerly repositioning his arm in her lap and sitting upright. Caleb arched a brow, and he tilted his head.

“**III***thought you relished the cold, Jester.”

She puffed out her cheeks. “*Yeah, I do, but, like… the wind being all tickly on your neck still feels pretty creepy. Like someone’s breathing on it and stuff? Only it’s cold air, not hot air, and it’s all weird and stuff. You know?’’*

“**Absolutely,**” he said, tone flat as he could make it. Jester squinted at him. The glint in her eyes told him she’d caught the gentle jab, and she stuck out her tongue. He looked back to the cloud.

“You think we’ll reach the next town before it gets us?” Nott asked. She looked up from the section of his arm Jester had chosen to work on. In the grayed environment, her yellow eyes stood out like candle flames. “Because, on ONE hand: it’d really *suck* to get stuck out and drenched by a lot’a cold rain. But on the OTHER hand: if Yasha’s friend decides to drop down again to meet her in the pit, it might be best we weren’t around a bunch of easy to kill townsfolk.”

“The storm is not even coming our way,” Caleb said. He threw a vague gesture in its direction. “We’ll be fine, either way. No reason to worry.”

“Ahh… –hey, Jessie! Uh, say Caleb gets his arm real dirty. Would that be bad?”

“Well, it wouldn’t be good,” Jester said, peeking up from her work. “We would need to wash it really gently and super careful. Tattoos are kinda like open wounds, you know? We…”…ahm…”

She trailed off. Caleb could feel the wince twisting her features through her tightening grip on his hand. He shook his head, offering her a fleeting smile. “It’s alright.” He muttered. “It’s, ah. Good to know. Thank you.”

“Mn.” Jester bit the corner of her lip. Silence fell over them a while longer before Nott gasped softly and spoke up.

“Oh, wow, Jester! That’s going to be really pretty.”

“I know right?” Jester said, the grin evident in her voice. Caleb’s fingers twitched, almost in time with the needle. He wanted to look down. He knew better, but…

He turned his head, glancing at what of his arm he could see through the corner of his eyes. The image was abstract, at first, but as he realized what it was, he turned his head in full. Jester froze,
looking up at him in half surprise and half… what he could only describe as caution. The tip of her
needle rose, pulling away from the tip of the peacock feather.

Caleb stared at it. He knew he was feeling something, but his brain failed to translate it. The feather
sprouted from blades of grass and flowers, swaying its way up his arm as it became part of the plants
that housed the seahorse. One of his scars formed the ‘eye’ at the feather's end. Jester squeezed his
hand, ducking forward in an attempt to meet his eyes.

“--Is--is it okay?” She asked. “--If it’s not, I can turn it into something else! It’s still super early, and I
can add some details to make it, like, a bird or another flower or--”

“--Jester,” he interrupted softly. She clamped her mouth shut, and he smiled. “No. It’s okay. ...it’s
perfect.”

She blinked once, violet eyes brightening. Somehow, he managed to hold her gaze until she grinned
and nodded at him. Jester ducked down again, returning to her work. Caleb exhaled through his nose
and turned his head. Nott’s piercing yellow eyes caught his attention instantly. She was eyeing him.
Strangely. In a way that wasn’t quite suspicion yet wasn’t quite concern.

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The second tattooing session drew to an end. As predicted, the storm stayed at a distance, and the
remaining day or so of travel went without a hitch.

They arrived in the next town around midday. Fjord and Caduceus went to make arrangements with
the inn while Caleb, Nott, Jester, and Beau opted to scour the market. Yasha… Caleb actually wasn’t
sure where she went. For such a towering woman, she had a talent for disappearing.

Caleb kept his pace slow and his head bowed, adjusting his steps as needed so Nott could easily fall
into the shadow of his coat. Jester pranced ahead of them, Beau near her side, chattering about
everything the town had to offer: from the color the shops were painted, the tapestries decorating
vendor stands, and any and everything displayed in passing windows. Caleb kept his ears open to
their surroundings, making a note of any eyes that shifted in their direction or conversations that
lulled. Thankfully, travelers seemed commonplace, here. They drew little attention. It allowed him to
stretch his focus, just enough, to catch pieces of Jester and Beau’s exchanges. In all the afternoon
voices, the sounds of carts and knives chopping produce and meat and heavy footsteps, it brought
him a thread of familiarity and calm. Something to distract himself from the sensation of insects
crawling up and down his arms. Their muted conversation made it easier to breathe.

Nott zipped a small ways ahead of him, pulling the tail of his coat along with her (which, of course,
yanked her right into place). She pointed a gangly finger toward a small, tented stand across the road.
“Caleb! Look! That shop’s selling books! Maybe we could find you something new!”

“Mm.” Caleb eyed the stand. His gaze drifted to the stand where Jester and Beau had stopped, the
latter eyeing the crowd around her. Her eyes caught his, and she tipped her chin upward. Caleb
nodded. He turned back to Nott. “Yes. Let’s give it a look.”

Nott slid back into the shadows of his coat as he stepped forward to the tented stand. He tilted his
head, leaning enough to peer into the dim interior. A humanoid figure moved around in the back, and
he cleared his throat. They stiffened and turned to the entrance, remaining still even after he’d lifted a
hand in a small wave.

“Ah, sorry to, ah… interrupt,” Caleb said, stopping at the stand’s front. “You sell books?”
The figure stared back at him. After a second or so, they nodded their head and stepped toward the light. They were a lean and slightly frail half-elf, their dusty brown hair cropped close around their ears. There was a familiar emptiness to their gaze. He attempted to offer them a smile. They returned the effort. Neither of them kept it for long.

“Is… there a title you’re seeking?” They asked. Their voice rose only enough above the crowd so it could be heard. Caleb rolled his lips together, shaking his head.


They tilted their head, expression inquisitive. He watched as they turned to one of the book stacks, placing a thin finger to the bindings and tracing down the spines. “Mmm. A preference of history? Branch of arcana?”

Caleb shrugged. “No.”

They nodded. A tug on Caleb’s coat brought his attention down to Nott, and she peeked up at him from beneath the flap. “Should I sneak around back?” She whispered. Her eyes twinkled, and he could see the tell-tale twitch in her hands. “Maybe I could find something… off-shelf?”

He hesitated, then nodded. Nott waited for the half-elf to crouch at the bottom of the book stack before she dashed from beneath his coat, rounding the stand in a blur. Caleb returned his attention to the half-elf, shifting his hands in his pockets. He preferred silence, but running plays with Nott always made him anxious. More. Anxious. His arm had started itching again. It felt like fire ants.

“Do--ah--what do you tend to carry?” He asked, maybe a bit louder than necessary. “Ahh, ah--ah, I mean to say, do you prefer storybooks to scholarly, or… ah… --fiction. Yes.”

“…I love stories,” the half-elf said. They stood, three books cradled in their arms. Two were thin, but the third was fairly weighted and worn. Caleb felt a new spark of anxiety in his chest, only this one came birthed from curiosity. He didn’t recognize two of the titles. The half-elf placed the books on the counter as though they might shatter from misplaced impact. “They remind me that we’re capable of… creating. I take comfort in that.”

Something flickered across their face. Shame, maybe. Surprise at their own sudden confession. They shook their head, clearing their throat. “--Sorry. I’m sorry, that… was too much, you didn’t ask…” Their voice trailed away, and Caleb frowned.

“No. It’s alright.”

He wanted to say more. He should say more. The silence hung between them, thick as fog.

Caleb watched as they bound the books with thick twine. He stole a glance over their shoulder, spotting Nott scouring the other piles of books. She gave him a thumbs up, and he shifted his attention back to the half-elf. Their fingers fumbled, and they cursed under their breath when the twine’s tie fell loose for the third time. There’s an unevenness to their breathing and tension in their muscles.

He recognized the kinesics. He’d felt them in his own bones for many years. He could feel them, now, writhing nervously beneath his skin. Could it be, he wondered, that those who had undergone loss were connected? Flies, caught in the ghostly silk of a spider’s web, invisible to the rest of the world? And not loss in the way that everyone experiences loss… but in the way that undoes your life. Undoes yourself. To the point your reflection no longer belongs to you. His stomach tightened, and his hands fidgeted in his pockets.
The half-elf slid the books across the counter, and Caleb dug the payment from his coin purse. He held the coins out, gently dropping it into their open palm. They gasped, eyes widening at the gold pieces. “–O-o-oh, sir. This… is too much,” they said. Caleb shook his head, holding up the hand.

“No,” he said. He shot a glance over their shoulder, meeting Nott’s eyes. He shook his head, and his gaze flicked back to the half-elf. “Please. Take it.”

They stared at him for a long moment before their hands closed around the coin. They pressed their hands to their chest, ducking their head and stepping away from the counter. Caleb gathered the books under his arm and walked away.

“Jess, that’s gotta be the fourth time you’ve picked up that stupid bottle. Can you just pick one so we can go? I’m starving.”

Actually, it was the sixth time she’d picked up this bottle. Jester giggled to herself, smiling at Beau from over her shoulder. She set the bottle of blue ink back on the shelf. “In a minute! I just–I want to make sure I find the **BEST** color to use for Caleb’s tattoo! I want it to look **super** good. So he actually wants to show it off a little, you know?”

Beau’s brow rose, ever so slowly, until it curved a deep arch above her half-lidded eyes. “Caleb? Showing off? Next, you’ll be telling me Fjord has a smut stash under his bed that he reads willingly.”

“How do you know he doesn’t?”

“We don’t have our own beds, Jester, we crash at inns.” Beau’s tone tried to be annoyed, but Jester could hear the chuckle hiding in the empty spaces. She winked and turned back to the shelves of bottled ink. But she’d already eyed all of these colors several times. Nothing stood out.

“–hey!!” Jester side-stepped to the stand’s counter. She smacked her palms on the surface, leaning on them. “Are these **all** your tattoo inks?”

The human shopkeep looked up from a bowl of roots and beetles she’d been crushing. Her skin had clearly become her own canvas years ago, riddled with symbols, creatures and elaborate twists of colors. She eyed Jester almost cautiously, a glint in her gaze. “You find my selection unsatisfactory?”

“Eeeehhhhh,” Jester whined, squinting one eye and raising a hand, flipping it over and back a few times. “It is just a little boring. You know? I was hoping to find something really, really special, here. Something I couldn’t find if Iiiii went to, like. **Another.** Shop, maybe.”

The woman stared her down. Didn’t look like she cared if Jester decided to take her business elsewhere; the look on her face said ‘**your loss, sweetie.**’ Jester exhaled through her nose, dropping her hand onto the counter. In any other case, she might have moved on. But this wasn’t ‘any other case.’

“Look,” Jester said, voice lowered. “I’m doing a really, **really** special tattoo right now. For a friend? And. I want it to be **super** cool, and **super** unique, because it would mean, like, a **lot** to him to have a really, **really** cool, ahm, thing to see. Instead of… what’s *there*. Right now. And I want it to be, like, something **no one else** has. So it’s **really** good. You know?”

Silence. The woman’s expression hadn’t changed. Jester felt herself deflating, and she closed her fingers against the counter. Just as she was weighing her few remaining options, the woman stood up and set the bowl aside. She crossed to the counter and folded her arms. “Do you have samples of your work?”
A spark of hope!

Jester inhaled sharply, reaching into her bag and digging around. She produced her sketchbook, smacking it down on the countertop and quickly flipping to her most recent pages. The smallest sense of unease curled in the pit of her stomach; she preferred to show her drawings to the Traveler and only sometimes to friends. Strangers? ...even if most of her notes were scrawled in Infernal, it felt a little strange.

The woman leaned down. She lowered one thick hand, resting her fingertips among the loose sketches, the process doodles, and the final designs for Caleb’s tattoos. Jester held her breath. She watched as some of the cool expression melted from the woman’s features and the way her eyes almost softened as they took in the pages.

“...you designed these?” She asked. Jester nodded.

“Yes!!”

The woman nodded. One of her fingers drummed against the page. “What were you hoping to find?”

“Um…” That was a good question, honestly. She’d gone into the market hoping to find something unusual and special. Specifics hadn’t really crossed her mind. “I don’t know. I was going to finish up the fungi--right here? And I wanted it to like… --aaahhh--be a little weird--like good weird, you know! Different? Not like normal…” She was talking in circles now, wasn’t she? Shit.

“...I think I might have something,” the woman said. Jester straightened, her eyes blinking widely. She side-stepped with the shopkeep, inhaling a quick breath as the woman opened the half-door that separated them from her. Jester almost ran into her hand when she raised it, stopping Beau from following the two of them back. She stared at Beau, gaze hard and stern. “Just the artist.”

Jester’s stomach knotted.

She looked over her shoulder, meeting Beau’s eyes. Beau frowned, but she didn’t speak up. Instead, she merely stepped backward and folded her arms across her chest again, shifting her attention to the shopkeep. Jester smiled (for herself or for Beau?), and she slipped through the narrow opening, following the woman further into the shop.

It didn’t run that deep. And it was stupid. It was so stupid. But Jester a creeping sense of dread pool deep in her gut and trickle through her veins. Was the air getting thinner? No, that was ridiculous, of course it wasn’t! She was tough, she thought. Capable. ...Still didn’t stop the unease of knowing she was out of Beau’s line of sight. Jester twitched her fingers, one hand curving so her fingers nearly formed claws behind the folds of her dress. The woman stopped after opening a door to a storage space, and she stepped into it. She pointed to a tattoo of a bird skull on her right shoulder.

“You see this?” She asked. Jester must have nodded. The woman motioned for her to enter the storage space, and Jester hesitated. She caught herself considering how quickly she could use inflict wounds and run before the woman had a chance to react, and she could have kicked herself for it. That was stupid. She was being stupid (stupid for what? for being so ready to fight or for going back here in the first place?). She bit down, hard, on her lower lip, to the point that her fang dug into the chapped skin. She stepped inside. The woman nodded. “Close the door.”

Jester yanked it shut before she had the chance to second guess herself. The room went pitch black, and she gasped.
The eye sockets of the bird skull… were glowing.

“HOLY SHIT!!!” Jester whispered. She stepped forward, grabbing the woman’s arm. She tugged it down to get a better look. The eyes shone mostly white with just the smallest hint of gold, their light somewhat dim. Her ears perked at a faint rumbling that she realized was the woman’s soft laugh.

“It’s an ink of my own design,” she said. “The glow is a bit dim right now since I’ve been in my shop all day and it hasn’t received much sunlight. But a full day under the sun? Lights up like a firefly.”

Jester couldn’t believe it. Well, she could! But she also couldn’t because—what a stroke of luck this had been! It was PERFECT. The buzz of excitement filling up her chest was almost too much to bear. She looked up at the woman, releasing her arm and fisting her hands to shake them up and down. “Oh. My. Gosh. --YES. This is PERFECT--this--this is EXACTLY what I need--THIS--!!”

The words scrambled to an incoherent mess of chatter.

The shopkeep reached past her and pushed the storage room door open. As the light filled her face again, Jester could see the hint of an amused smile. The woman nodded, and she raised a hand to motion Jester back out.

Jester rushed through the shop and vaulted over the counter’s door, nearly plowing into a passing pair of halflings as she landed. She stuttered a clumsy apology and turned to where she’d left Beau. Caleb had joined the monk at the front of the stand, a small stack of books under one arm and Nott lurking beneath the tail of his coat. Jester beamed.

“--Beau! --CALEB!! I found. The BEST. Ink. For the tattoo. This is SO great. Oh my gosh!!! Caleb, it’s gonna be SO GOOD!!!”

Caleb blinked at her, and it was only now that Jester realized he looked… more tired than he had before. A bit of the buzzing in her chest died down, but she refused to let it snuff out. She whirled to face the counter, fishing her coin purse off her belt as the shopkeep returned with two bottles. Both appeared to be white, yet closer inspection would show one had a golden tint and, the other, the faintest of mint green. The latter would be perfect for fungi.

“Uuuuh, so what’s so special about those inks?” Beau asked. Jester grinned at her, pulling a few gold pieces from her purse.

“Get this: it. Glows.”

Beau lifted her eyebrows. “Whoa, no shit? That’s pretty sweet.”

“Wow!!” Nott whispered from Caleb’s side. “Did you hear that, Caleb? They’re going to be prettier than I thought!”

Caleb opened his mouth, but he said nothing.

They made their way back toward the tavern. This time, Jester kept her pace on the slow side. She wanted to walk with Caleb and Nott instead of ahead of them. Beau either kept quiet about the change or remained oblivious to it; she stirred up a conversation with Caleb a time or two, though their exchanges were short-lived. It gave Jester the chance to look down at the bottle of ink in her hand and think back to the shopkeeper. She bit her lip, closing her fingers gently around the glass.
—Beauregard. Why don’t you and, ah, Nott go ahead?” Caleb said, drawing Jester from her thoughts. “I was going to ask Jester to show me what, ahh…—ingredients are necessary to create the ointment solution Caduceus makes. I would like to return what has been borrowed.”

Jester blinked, pausing her steps to frown up at Caleb. She stayed quiet.

Nott stepped out of Caleb’s shadow, wringing her hands. “Are you sure, Caleb? I wouldn’t mind walking a bit longer.”

“It’s quite alright, Nott. It’s been a long trip and, ah, uh—you could ensure that supper is ordered on time, ja? See to it that we have a room secured? —put my books upstairs?”

Nott thought this over, and she nodded, reaching up to accept the offered stack of books. “Right! I’ll send you a message!”

“Sure, yeah,” Beau muttered. She eyed Caleb, shrugging and letting her arms drop. “Just don’t be out too long or we’ll eat everything without you. I’m fucking starving.”

The two moved on, and Jester turned to Caleb.

“Caleb, you don’t have to get anything for Caduceus,” she said. “You know he grows, like, all his stuff, and he’s happy to make you the ointment, and—”

“—I, I know, Jester, that’s alright,” Caleb interrupted. He held up one hand, quickly dropping and pocketing it. Jester tilted her head. He only held her gaze a moment or so longer before looking away and clearing his throat. “I… I just, ah…” His hand came back up, and he rubbed at his beard and mouth. Jester wanted to speak up, coax the words out of him as she had several times before. But she held her tongue. A few seconds passed before he exhaled through his nose, dropping his arm again. “You seem… not yourself.” He looked at her, this time meeting her eyes in full. He held her gaze with a stern softness. It made her chest swell. “Is something wrong?”

Jester blinked at him. “What? Wrong? Why would you think something is wrong, Caleb? I just found the greatest ink EVER for your tattoo—no one else, except for that lady, will have this. It’s so cool!”

“Yes, yes, but, ahh…” His voice had gotten quieter. He’s second-guessing himself, maybe. He’d looked away again. “You were so… openly excited back at the stand. But as we’ve been walking back just now, you’ve…” He gestured vaguely at her before scratching at the side of his head with the same hand. “Changed.”

“…oh.” Now she was the one to look away. Jester’s eyes fell to the bottle in her hand, and she turned it with her fingers. “It’s nothing, Caleb. I, ahm. I just felt kinda bad, I guess.”

“You felt… bad?”

“Yeah, because, like…—ugh,” she let out an exasperated sigh, dropping her arms and letting her head tilt back. She lifted it again, frowning at him. “She asked me to go back behind her stand, right? So she could show me the ink glows? She was going to do something special just for me and stuff, but while we were walking back there, I…”

She trailed off. She could feel Caleb’s eyes narrow, though more from trying to understand than from suspicion.

“…did you steal something?” He asked. She tilted her head drastically to one side, puffing out her cheeks.
“No, Caleb, I didn’t steal anything. I didn’t even rearrange her stuff, so it was a mess.”

“Oh. ...what, then?”

“I was scared?? I think?” Jester blurted. She let out another huff, folding her arms tightly across her chest. “I don’t know! I just suddenly didn’t like it. Going to the back of the shop where Beau couldn’t see me anymore--and into a small room--and it was super dark, even for me--and it got kind of hard to breathe and--and I think I was going to inflict wounds on her?” She looked up at him. “All she wanted to do was show me something cool and help me, but I was worried it… that she…” The words wouldn’t come up.

Caleb’s stare had changed. She could see something akin to concern in the backs of his eyes. Something guarded, too. Jester looked down at her boots, giving an absent kick to a rock that had been minding its own business. It tumbled away with a clatter.

“There is nothing wrong with being careful, Jester,” Caleb said gently. “You should feel no guilt in that.”

“But I don’t WANT to be careful!” Jester said, half-heartedly stomping her foot. “--I mean, yeah. I do! I don’t want to do something stupid or whatever--but, you know? I don’t want… --I don’t want to treat everyone like… --like they’re all bad! You know? I know there’s a lot of bad and evil out there that I didn't know about before, but… there’s a lot of good, too! I know there is.”

She looked up again, and she almost stiffened. Caleb stared through her, something in his eyes now distant. Jester bit down on her lip.

“...that… is a noble desire. Jester.” Caleb spoke carefully, slowly. He rolled his lips together, exhaling through his nose. “But. You’re right to be cautious. Not everyone has intentions as good as your own. And the people who do would understand your hesitation. ...or, I would hope that they would. ...I--...” He paused, clearing his throat. “...anyone who comes to know you would not want something to happen to you. They would want you to look out for yourself, even when it may seem unwarranted. Your safety and your comfort... it comes first.”

Jester chewed the inside of her cheek. Her gaze drifted from his eyes to his forearms. Though his coat’s sleeves still veiled his skin from sight, she could picture where each and every scar lay marred and carved into the flesh. Not everyone has intentions as good as your own… he would know that better than any of them. Wouldn’t he?

She could see his hands tensing at his sides, and she forced her eyes back to his. He’d clenched his jaw, but he hadn’t looked away. Jester smiled. It felt weaker than she would have liked.

“Thank you, Caleb,” she said. He eyed her. His lips twitched upward. Just enough for her to see. Then, he turned and began walking in the direction of the inn. Their conversation had come to an end. And as she fell into step close behind him, she found herself wishing that it hadn’t.

Caleb drummed his finger on the table’s surface. He’d hoped the action would chase off the anxiety, the itch, the pulsing awareness in his mind of how the skin on his arms crawled and twitched and ached. The active tavern and upbeat music from its band drowned out his finger’s rapping. Maybe that’s why it failed to be an adequate distraction.

He’d selected a table in the back. An old habit. Jester had disappeared upstairs a half hour ago, and the others had begun to file into the inn’s tavern little by little. They’d yet to notice him… and he sort of found himself wanting to keep it that way. Even as Nott scuttled along by Caduceus’s side, he
decided it may be best to keep a distance for now. Caleb didn’t want her to pick up on his nerves, to ask questions… he needed to collect himself before he returned to them. He wouldn’t have long before Nott began to get worried.

A familiar, sudden squeal of elation caught his attention, and Caleb looked up. Jester came tearing down the stairs, nearly running Beau and Fjord over as she pushed past to get to the ground floor.

“I LOVE this song!!” She shouted. Caleb blinked, frowning. Then she must know it’s almost over.

The last notes played, and the small band prepared for the next tune. Jester’s voice could still be heard above the tavern’s rolling chatter.

“Can you play it again?! Please?? Pretty, PRETTY please?”

Caleb’s gaze moved to the barely raised stage. The one he assumed to be the leader of the band, a slim elven man with thin eyes and an impatient gaze, didn’t even glance in Jester’s direction. He waved the other musicians into the next song, and the music continued into the next piece. Caleb pulled his attention back to the crowd, skimming it until his eyes found the violet-blue of Jester’s hair. She marched herself to the table where Caduceus and Nott had settled down, leaning her hands onto its surface. Caleb couldn’t hear her anymore, but judging by her expression and the quick movements of her lips, she must be frustrated. He frowned, fingers curling to press his nails into the pads of his palms.

It’s a minor inconvenience, really. Everyone has entered a room once in their lives and heard only the final strum of notes to their favorite song. It is an irritating experience, he admits to himself. Puts one in a melancholic mood.

Caleb rolled his jaw. He cursed himself once. Twice. But his hands still pressed to the table top, and his legs still pushed him from his chair. He made his way around the crowd and tables, keeping close to the walls and avoiding attention. One hand dug into his pocket as he neared the small stage, and he cleared his throat.

A dwarven woman playing the lyre turned to face him. She scowled, clearly irritated to be approached mid-song.

“Pardon my intrusion,” Caleb muttered. He produced two gold pieces, held loose between his pointer and middle fingers. The woman’s eyes widened, snapping to the gold to his face, to the gold and back again. He nodded. “Would it be possible to play that last ditty again for the lady?”

The dwarf eyed him. She squinted. Then, her lips curled into an impish little smirk, and she held out three fingers. He’d expected as much, and he pulled his other hand free from its pocket. A third gold piece glinted from between his forefinger and thumb. She held out her hand, and he tossed her the coin. Just as quickly as he’d come, he ducked away from the stage.

Caleb slowed as he passed the entrance to the tavern. Getting up and walking, and having a reason to do it… it’d helped. Only now, as he’d slowed and stopped by the doors, had he become aware of the sensation creeping across his skin. He needed to get back to the others before Nott grew worried. But sitting still? It sounded like torment.

Another shrill sound of utter delight dragged him back to full awareness, and Caleb sucked a breath through his nose. The song had started to play again, and the cry had no doubt come from Jester. He could hear her begging Beau to join her in the dance circle and the laughter from patrons who must have found amusement in her energy. Caleb lifted his head, and he looked to the doors. His skin itched. His fingers twitched, begging to scratch and dig.
You did this for her, he tells himself, jaw locked. You did not do this for you. Find another way. Find another distraction. Go.

But even as he thought this. Even as he knew he didn’t deserve to bask in her light. Caleb turned around, and he looked to the dance circle.

Jester and Beau, one blue and one clad in blue, stood out in the tiny tavern’s crowd. They danced, feather-light on their feet and laughing with each other, to the sway and beat of the song. Beau swung Jester and moved with uncanny grace and brilliance, so in tune and in control of every inch and muscle of her body. Jester, meanwhile, swayed and bobbed with less coordination and practice, every bounce and twirl sided with a grin that would outshine any dancing light. She cared little about looking foolish. If she was having fun, how foolish could she look?

Caleb sighed, allowing himself to slowly ease into the wall behind him. He could feel the tension trickling out of his shoulders, leaving his body from the top and slowly, so slowly, to the bottom. Though Beau and Jester’s dancing grew clumsy and silly, as their abilities and styles clashed, the two never hesitated once. They glowed with a freedom and joy that he envied… the type that existed when two people forgot there was such a thing as the world around them. He’d known that freedom once… ...it felt like a memory too distant to be real.

“Surprised you’re not joining them.”

Caleb just about lept out of his skin.

He turned toward the low voice that had spoken just beside him, coming eye to eye with a bulky human man. The man’s pale face was clean-shaven, showing a series of scars that littered the areas below his ears and around his jaw. It looked as though someone had attacked him with the intent to carve out his mouth… and judging by the twisted smirk that curled his lips, Caleb quickly got the feeling he understood why.

Caleb cleared his throat, scratching at his beard. “I, ah. Don’t… --why would you say that?”

The man’s green eyes glinted, and he leaned closer. Caleb didn’t budge.

“Ahhhhhh, I get it, I get it. You’ll play the owe-ya-one card later. When it’s more convenient.”

“...Excuse me?”

The man sighed, rolling his head back, so it lulled more to one side. He dropped against the wall beside Caleb, the wood shivering under his weight, and he jabbed a thumb in the direction of the band. “I saw you go up there and bribe the band. Now you’re standing here, watching the results.” He waved to the dance circle just as the song began to wrap up, and the tables around the floor clapped. “Drinking it all in like a fine ale. You’ll flag her down later, though. Make sure she knows you did her the favor.”

Caleb bit down on the back of his tongue. His face felt dozens of matches had ignited beneath his skin. He kept his eyes locked on the circle. Fixed on Jester as she and Beau curtsied and bowed to each other respectively.

“...y’know, I pride myself in being able to read people. Roads around here are rough, and you’re a scrawny little fellow,” the man continued after a moment. He cuffed Caleb’s shoulder, and Caleb managed to keep himself from flinching. “Makes sense that you’d fancy a devil. Just think twice before you make a pact with one. There’s always a catch.”

With a laugh, the man pushed off the wall and walked away. Caleb’s eyes shifted to watch him as he
joined the company of two more humans and a half-orc. The group cast a look back at him, each with a mild smirk before they disappeared further into the tavern crowd.

The man had watched him approach the band. Which would mean he may have followed his path from the table to the stage. Had he been watching even before then?

Caleb waited two minutes before he left the wall, too, and made his way to the table where the others had gathered. Nott sat up immediately, almost standing in her chair.

“Caleb!!! THERE you are!!!!” She exclaimed. “Jester said you came back to the inn with her--but we didn’t see you anywhere! I was… --I knew you wouldn’t have, um! --I figured you’d just gone somewhere to read, and--!”

“I know,” Caleb said, lowering into a chair. He shifted as Fjord and Caduceus tilted their heads to try meeting his eyes. “I’m, ah, sorry. I… thought that perhaps I had left something in the cart and went to check. I didn’t mean to cause trouble.”

“Quit your worrying,” Beau said. She flicked a peanut that had fallen out of the table’s center bucket at him, and it bounced off his bicep. “We know this shit isn’t your thing. You can go upstairs, and we’ll bring food up to you or something.”

“--Did you find what you were looking for, Caleb?” Jester asked, leaning forward.

“Ah, no.” He shook his head, keeping his eyes on the now rolling peanut. “I thought I had, ahhhh, more incense. I must have lost track and used more than, ah, ahh, expected the last time. It’s alright, though, I’ll purchase more in the morning. We should rest, now. The market can wait. I just don’t think we should stick around longer than necessary.”

“What makes you say that?” Caduceus asked. He used that tone of voice that Caleb learned meant lying wouldn’t pass. A whole lie. Anyway.

Caleb rolled his lips, casting a quick look at the surrounding tables. No sign of the scarred man and his group. He turned his attention to Caduceus, frowning. “When I returned from the barns, there was, ah, a group. I think they were sizing me up.”

“Sizing you up?” Beau repeated, and Caleb could hear the smirk on her voice. He turned to rebuttal, but Fjord spoke up first.

“No, I think Caleb may be right. Earlier? There was a guy watching Dueces and I move stuff on and off the cart. He was lingering real close-like. I thought ‘bout confronting him, but he’d left by the time I’d decided to do it.”

“Yeah,” Caduceus muttered. “It was weird.”

“You think they might be planning to jump us after we leave town?” Nott asked, her gaze darting from Caleb to Fjord to Caleb to Caduceus. “Should we leave tonight, instead?”

“Nah,” Fjord said. He rubbed his hand over his lower mouth, folding one arm over the tabletop and leaning into it. “We should leave earlier than planned in the morning, though. Maybe a lot earlier. Get a head start before sunrise, take a different route to the next town. If they manage to follow us after that, at least they won’t be able to get the jump on us.”

“Great,” Beau muttered. She sat back in her chair, slumping and folding her arms with a growl. “Fucking great.”
“Hey, hey, it’ll be fine,” Fjord said quickly. He held out his hand, locking eyes with Beau and weighing his palm in the air. “Look. I know we’re all whipped. And I know we all wanna catch a break. We’re on our way to a bigger, better, uuuuuh, managed city. We can get some shut-eye and R ‘n R, there. Until then, we gotta keep on our toes.”

The group seemed to share a collective sigh, and silence fell over the table.

“...well!” Jester said after a while, sitting upright. She flashed the others a bright smile and bounced her shoulders in a shrug. “At least we got some super cool stuff in the town market! I cannot. WAIT. For you to see Caleb’s tattoo, you guys. It’s going to be: so. Cool. You’re not going to belieeeeeeve iiiiiit!!”

She continued to talk, but her voice drifted and drifted until it sounded rooms away. The mention of the tattoo had reminded him. Had reminded his skin. And Caleb’s gaze sank into the old tree rings that circled their table’s surface. The non-existent fire ants were back and biting, tearing at the scars and reminding him. How the skin would heal only to be opened again. Invaded again.

When they separated to their rooms and settled into bed, Caleb couldn’t bring himself to sleep. He laid atop his blankets, arms forcibly pressed into the mattress on his sides, and listened to Nott’s steady breathing. He stared at the ceiling until daylight chased away the shadows.
and the world goes blind

Chapter Notes

lmao.... if y'all want the soundtrack for most of this chapter: here it is. i'll leave a timestamp at the end for a specific moment. you'll know what i mean. hue hue ᕕ( ḷ )ᕗ

See the end of the chapter for more notes

They rose early as planned, silently gathering their things and collecting at the cart. Caduceus guides the horses on foot, Fjord at his side, while only Nott rode in the back of the wagon. Caleb, Beau, and Jester (and Yasha, who had reappeared overnight) followed behind in hopes that a lighter cart might be a bit less creaky.

The morning air felt refreshing and cool against Jester’s skin, and she breathed in a deep breath of it as they exited the town. She could feel dew sprinkling her hair and the tips of her ears. It made her smile to think that the droplets might glitter once the sun rose in the sky.

Morning chill dissolved to warmth as the double moons faded into the blue, and the breeze seemed to slow to a consistent, easygoing gust. The air felt dry, and Jester noticed the thick clumps of bushes lining the forest around them. The leaves were kind of curled and more yellow in color than she thought they should be. She frowned softly, feeling pity for the plants. Maybe it would have been better that the storm they’d seen the previous day had found its way over here. Maybe it still would! It was just taking a really round-about way.

Beau stretched her arms high over her head, groaning as she dropped them to her sides.

“Shit, how long have we been walking?”

“Two hours,” Caleb muttered. His hands were deep in his pockets, one fidgeting with the contents. “It’s thirteen past seven.”

Beau squinted at him. “You know, no one cares when you get specific like that. Just say seven. Round it down.”

“...fourteen past.”

“Haha. Cute.”

“I think we got a pretty good start, you guys!” Jester said. She let her pace slip into a light skip, swinging her arms as she pranced ahead of them. “See? Like Fjord said, it’s fine! We totally outsmarted them.”

Jester looked over her shoulder. Both Beau and Caleb remained silent, and they were frowning. She hadn’t expected them to agree with her.

By early afternoon, the tree canopy shielded them from the sun. Caleb had moved into the cart, a book in his lap and Nott had curled up beside him. She dozed off and on, sometimes asking questions about the contents of the book, occasionally muttering incoherently about wanting her flask
back (or she’ll cut your fucking tongue out!!... then eat it!!).

Jester and Beau remained on foot; Yasha had long since moved herself to the front of the group, walking alongside Fjord and Caduceus. Jester searched the trees, trying to spot a new sort of bird she hadn’t seen before. Maybe a squirrel or something, too. She turned her head, opening her mouth to ask Beau if she’d seen anything, but paused. Beau stared ahead, her sharp gaze fixed on Caleb. Though she didn’t look wary… she looked… worried.

“...Beau?” Jester said. She kept her voice low enough, so it stayed between them. “What is it?”

“Is it me, or is Caleb twitchier than normal?” Beau asked.

Jester blinked. She wrinkled her brow, looking ahead to where Caleb sat in the cart. He seemed okay to her. “Ahm. What… do you mean? --He was just worried about those guys back at the tavern, you know--I’m sure once we’re further away, he’ll stop being so freaked out.”

“It’s not the bozos back at the tavern,” Beau grumbled. “At the market, after you’d gone back with that tattoo artist? He wouldn’t stop moving his books from one arm to the other. He had this look in his eye. It was weird.”

“You think one of them talked to him before the tavern?”

“...I dunno. I guess. It just… --I dunno,” Beau snorted, folding her arms. “Fuck, he’s probably fine. Idiot.”

Jester frowned. Now she was worried. “Should we ask him?”

“Nah. Usually, that just makes it worse. He’ll get all quiet and won’t look at us for a whole day, and I’m not in the mood to deal with that shit.”

“Beau.”

“--What? It’s obnoxious because we can’t do anything if he doesn’t--... nevermind,” she growled, drumming her fingers on her arm. “You can ask him if you want. He loosens up around--”

Beau stopped walking. Jester half-stumbled, stopping beside her as her eyes widened. She opened her mouth, following Beau’s eyes to the area ahead. Caduceus and the horses had also stopped, and all three of them were swiveling their heads. The horses snorted, their nostrils quivering as they stomped their hooves in the dust. Yasha’s hand rose to hold the hilt of the Magician’s Judge, and Caleb had set his book aside, standing in the cart.

“...alright, we know you’re here,” Fjord called out. He took a few slow steps forward. "You can come on--"

An arrow shot out of the canopy, slamming into the dirt inches from Fjord’s feet. He sprang backward, one arm raised in preparation for a spell. Yasha drew her sword, and Caduceus side-stepped away from the horses. Three figures stepped out of the trees.

The first was a stout human man with dozens of scars scratched all over his lower face. He had hungry green eyes and the sort of cocky smile that made Jester’s skin crawl. A tall, lean elf woman glided up behind him, her golden hair tightly braided into a ‘crown’ around her head, and beside her, a human woman dropped from the trees. She wore a dark green cloak and carried a longbow. Jester heard a rustle and snap of branches behind her and turned. Two half-orcs and another human man had emerged from the foliage. Her throat tightened.
“Afternoon,” the green-eyed man said. Too casually for good intentions. “Fancy seeing you all here.”

“...likewise,” Fjord returned. His voice had lowered. “What brings ya to this neck of the woods? Can’t be the camping opportunities.”

“Business,” the man said. He shrugged as though this was the obvious answer. “Name’s Kegan. We work for a… collector, of sorts. And couldn’t help but notice the firbolg and goblin in your company.” His eyes flicked to look past Fjord. Judging by the way Caleb’s spine went stiff, Jester guessed he’d looked at him. Kegan continued, “I took a bit of a gamble. There were three ways it could have gone: you left town and took the main road, you left and took the round-about, or you off-roaded your trip. The third would have been the most challenging to work with, buuut…” A slow, easy grin curled his lips, and he tapped just beside his right brow. “I told you, scrawny. I pride myself in being able to read people. The lot of you were paranoid... but not paranoid enough.”

Caleb’s hands curled into tight fists. He side-stepped to stand in front of Nott, blocking her with one hand when she tried to shift back to his side.

Jester bit her lip, slanting her gaze enough to peek at Beau. The monk had already lowered into a ready-stance, staring down the two half-orcs and the human behind them. Her eyes were calculating, looking the group up and down. She had to be sizing them up. Figuring out who would be the easiest to take down first.

“Look,” Fjord said. His voice had sharpened. “It doesn’t have to go like this. Why don’t you all back off and be on your way?”

Kegan chuckled, shaking his head. “Mmno, no. I’m afraid our boss wouldn’t like that. You see… we already told her who’s traveling with you. And she’d be delighted to have something so--” his eyes snapped to Caduceus “--unique.”

Caduceus took a slow step back, clearing his throat. “Flattering as that may be, I think it would be best that we all--”

The human woman standing behind Kegan stepped forward. She threw out an open hand, and Jester felt a chill crawl up and down her spine. The air around them thickened. It got wet--got cloudy--got cold. Jester grabbed for her shield and stepped backward as a dense fog swept into the spaces between and around them, filling the forest path. She didn’t have the chance to warn the others when her eyes caught a sharp, immediate flash of light.

Lightning tore through the air. Jester threw herself backward, her cry drowned out by the snapping and popping of electricity, and the scream of their horses. She felt a force rip across her shield and let it throw her off her feet. She hit the dirt with a squeak, the impact still ringing through her bones as she scrambled to stand again. A snarl rang out, and she whirled to face the massive half-orc charging through the fog, a whip raised. Jester swore and threw her shield in front of her, bracing her feet in the dirt just as a crack cut through the air. The whip deflected off her shield. Jester darted to the right. The half-orc wheeled after her, and Jester saw the flash of her war pick. Again, she raised her shield and, again, she deflected the blow. This one sent her stumbling backward.

“Fuck off!!! Or we’ll kick your ass!!” Jester shouted. The half-orc merely grinned and yanked her arm back, and Jester felt something snare her ankle. She didn’t even have time to shriek as the whip tore her leg out from under her and dragged her through the dirt. Fog swept over her. The half-orc, now looming above, raised the war pick high over her head. A jolt of terror seized Jester’s lungs. For that split second, she couldn’t breathe. Her muscles acted for her. She ripped her shield into place
over her upper body as the war pick swung down, but it never made an impact. There came a heavy clash of metal. A grunt more akin to a snarl. Jester peaked from beneath the edge of her shield.

Yasha swept from one swing of the Magician’s Judge straight into a second. The greatsword caught its target clear across the shoulder, splattering blood across the half-orc’s face as she shrieked and stumbled away. She’d dropped her whip during Yasha’s attack. Jester shoved herself upright, yanking the thick leather off her ankle.

From somewhere in the mist, Fjord swore. The splitting scrape of swords ripped through the air, and she swore she saw some sort of spark flicker--just for a second--maybe two yards away.

“JESS!!”

Beau sprinted out of the fog. She slid to a stop and extended a hand; Jester grabbed it.

“Did anyone get hit by the lightning?” She asked, letting Beau pull her to her feet. Beau shook her head.

“I think we all scattered just in time.” Beau looked over her shoulder, scowling. “Caleb and Nott took cover. Deuces is--”

She reached out, grabbing Jester’s shoulder and shoving enough force into it to make her duck. Something whistled past Jester’s ear. She shivered.

“--he’s somewhere. Yasha’s dancing with your friend.”

“She can keep her,” Jester said. Her ear twitched. Footsteps.

Jester swung herself to guard Beau’s back. She lifted her shield in time to perry a sword from the human man. He grunted as the sword redirected but wouldn’t have any more time to react. Beau had already rounded Jester with the fluidity of water. She struck the man between the shoulder and collar--just below the ribs--clean in the nose with a sickening crack!--all in the time it took Jester to inhale. The man blinked, coughed, and he collapsed.

“That bitch who conjured this fog had a bow,” Beau growled, flicking her hand out. Blood speckled the ground at her feet. “She’s trying to snipe us while we stumble around like idiots.”

“Should we find her?” Jester asked. “--Caleb and Nott might find her since they--”

Beau stiffened. “--DUCK.”

Jester let her knees buckle, curling into herself as Beau swung a sweeping kick over her head. She reached for her belt and pulled her handaxe free from its strap. The second half-orc who’d charged them was mid-stumble when she spun and slammed the blade deep into his calf. He howled, falling to his hands and knees. Jester didn’t hesitate. She leapt to her feet and tore the handaxe free, inhaling through her nose as she swung it down into his waist. It landed with a horrible sucking sound, burrowing deep into the flesh and muscle. The half-orc dropped to his side, gasping. Beau rounded to his upper half, and she lifted one foot high above his head.

“Sucks to suck,” she growled, and she slammed her foot into his neck. Jester cringed as something wet snapped in his throat. She looked up as Beau stepped away.

“That was too easy.”

“Newbs,” Beau said. “I think they were the least of--”
Yasha’s voice cried out. They turned, eyes wide. Beau cursed under her breath. “--I’ll find her--you find Fjord and Deuces--they want him!”

She bolted into the fog, vanishing before Jester could protest. Jester swallowed, whirling on her heel and darting in the direction she’d heard Fjord just moments ago. She hoped wherever Caleb and Nott were that they were okay.

Where is she?

Caleb drew a slow breath through his teeth, peering around the trunk of a scorched tree. The area around him glowed with small embers, and for once it wasn’t his fault. Unwise to use lightning so soon, he thought, curling his fingers around several of the stray, scattered twigs that hadn’t disintegrated. Two can play that game, and you’ve given me the key.

The archer was going to be trouble. One of her arrows clipped Nott in the ear, and he’d been forced to separate from her to find cover. Now he’d lost sight of both of them. Shit.

He rolled onto his hands and knees, half crawling, half crouch-walking, from the tree, past a bush and behind a large boulder. Caleb peeked over it. No sooner had his eyes gotten a glimpse through the thinner sections of the fog to the trees across did something glint. He let his weight drop, and an arrow whistled through the air where his head had been. He hissed, pressing his back against the rock. He leaned around it. Just enough to try seeing through the thicker sections of the fog.

A tall figure moved several yards ahead; Caduceus, he assumed, and this assumption confirmed itself as the light of guiding bolt streaked through the mist, colliding with a smaller, stout silhouette. The elf had been taller. The half-orcs taller and thicker. Either that had been one of the human lackeys, or Cad had just struck their leader.

Somehow, despite the clash of metal and occasional grunt or yelp from battle, Caleb’s ears caught a tiny, yet alarming, sound: the scrape of boots on stone.

He threw his upper body into a turn, tongue twisting as he stuttered an incantation and moved his hands, shoving his thumbs together and raising them above his head. In a heartbeat, before flames shot from his fingertips, he met eyes with the archer. Her fingers pressed to the corner of her lip held the tails of two arrows. Her eyes widened as the orange of the flames filled her pupils.

Gold and white light filled the air. The archer dove off the rock and Caleb fell backward as a cone of fire burst out of his fingers with a deafening hiss. His head hit the grass at the same time one of the arrows slammed into the dirt. No time to react. He rolled over onto his knees as the archer shouldered her bow and drew her shortsword in two motions she somehow made look like one. She lunged for him, sword raised for an arc. He managed to throw himself onto his feet--albeit off-balance--barely avoiding the first swing by mere inches. His ankle caught something hard and unmoving, and his breath stopped short in his lungs as he fell back again. As his spine hit the ground, the archer seized the moment to curve her previous swing around and high over her head.

Caleb hiked a knee to his chest, sucking breath through his teeth. As the sword came down, his foot went up. A jolt of pain rang through his leg when the blade caught the sole of his boot. It vibrated like a bell, rattling through his bones. He grunted, digging his fingers into the grass. With a twist, he swung his foot down and inward. The shortsword, firmly lodged in the thick leather of his boot, went with it, and the archer grunted as it forced her with it. Caleb used the momentum to roll onto his knees. He’d just regained balance when he realized the archer had released her sword and drawn a dagger instead.
She twirled it in her fingers--drew it back--dove with an outstretched arm for him--

two crossbow bolts slammed into her shoulder, one after the other. The archer gasped, stumbling off course, and Nott darted from the bushes.

“GET LOST IN YOUR OWN FUCKING FOG,” Nott snarled. She slid into place between Caleb and the archer, crossbow raised and already re-loaded. “Or the next one goes between your eyes!!”

Caleb shoved to stand, only remembering the sword was still wedged in the sole of his boot when he put his weight on it. The force drove the blade further into the leather, and it sliced his skin. He swore sharply, and Nott whirled to look back at him.

“--Caleb?!”

Mistake.

The archer seized her opportunity, and she lunged with the grace of a wild cat. Her hand caught Nott by the throat. Nott squeaked, coughing and gagging as the archer’s knee planted on her chest and pinned her to the ground. She brought her crossbow up, but the archer snatched it, throwing it behind them. Caleb stopped breathing.

“--Pest--” was all he heard the archer spit. He saw a flash as her raised dagger caught sunlight leaking through the canopy.

His hands were already moving. They closed so tightly around the twigs in his pockets that they splintered his skin. He may have been shouting the incantation because the archer froze--looked up at him--and he saw her face go white as he thrust his fists forward, one finger directed at her.

A flash of near-white blue flew from his outstretched hand. The air around and between them crackled, fizzed, and the source of the light hit his target with enough force to throw her off and away from Nott. But it didn’t disappear on impact. The bolt of lightning sparking from the twigs and his hand convulsed in the air, flashing, striking the grass beneath it, burning stripes of black into the blades. The archer screamed. She screamed as her body spasmed. As it twitched. As it burned.

There wasn’t anything to break his concentration. He didn’t look away.

She jerked. Lurched. Her arms and hands twisting into unnatural, ridgid positions. He didn’t look away.

“--CALEB--!!!”

Something small slammed into his shin. It’s enough to draw his attention downward, where Nott has latched onto his leg and grabbed the flap of his coat. She yanks at it, gold eyes almost white under the blue light. “--Caleb--that’s enough--I’M OKAY, I’M OKAY!!!”

He blinked. A sharp intake of breath brought feeling back to his fingers; he clamped them shut. The witch bolt shivered and broke, scattering sparks across the grass. The archer’s body gave one final jerk before collapsing. She lay unmoving.

Caleb’s throat tightened. He felt sick. Dazed. Nott kept her arms wrapped around his leg as though to anchor him, and she patted his knee.

“See? --See, I’m alright! Heh! Just some rib bruising but I’ve had sooOooooOooo much worse! Nothing some whiskey can't fix! We’re cool!”
“Nott…” Caleb’s voice emitted in a croak. He tried to swallow but found it impossible. “…I …”

“VERONA?!”

Caleb and Nott turned.

The fog that once blanketed their battlegrounds had vanished, the source that conjured it now slain. Caleb could see Yasha and Beau tag-teaming the female half-orc. Fjord, Caduceus and Jester had the elf cornered by the treeline. The other two lay dead on the road. Kegan ran toward them, eyes locked on the ranger’s--Verona’s--crumpled form. He stumbled into a kneel once he reached her, attempting to lift her into his arms only to reel away from the heat of her flesh. The smell of death began to creep more and more into the air, and Caleb’s stomach grew heavy.

He hadn’t… --no, but he had. And he wasn’t sorry. Of course he wasn’t. She’d meant to kill Nott-- she would have driven that knife through her neck if he’d done nothing. Nott would be dead. Nott would have been dead.

Kegan looked up, his eyes locking with Caleb’s. His lips peeled away from his teeth, and his face darkened to a crimson red. He drew a breath through his teeth and bellowed, “DAEPHINE!!!”

Caleb turned toward the ensuing fight. The elf looked toward them, and her eyes flashed. She whirled her arms up and over her head, creating a familiar veil of silvery mist.

“--stop her!!” Fjord barked, and Jester unleashed sacred flame into the mist cloud. But Daephine had already disappeared. She reappeared thirty feet from the group in another cloud of glittering mist, sprinting toward Caleb and Nott. Caleb turned to look at Kegan again. The man growled, teeth bared.

“An eye for an eye.”

He spat an incantation and--just as Caleb recognized it--dropped through a dimension door that opened in the earth beneath him. Nott bounced forward, pointing at the spot he’d knelt in. “What the FUCK?! He ju--”

“--Nott, MOVE--”

A blast of magic missile hit them both. Caleb yelped as it threw him back and Nott flew into the bush beside her. Something caught his foot but immediately released it, and as he forced himself into a roll back onto his hands and knees, he saw the shortsword had been knocked free from his boot. One good thing. That was all, unfortunately.

Daephine smiled as she slid to a stop, her eyes sparking, as she drew a crystal vile from her sleeve. She uncorked it, waving her long fingers around its top. Caleb shoved onto his knees, raising his hands and pressing his thumbs together. But he didn't move fast enough. Color twisted and wove through the air. It spread in a blink, filling his eyes and vanishing in a moment’s notice.

Caleb’s mind went numb.

One second, the elf had been right in front of them. The cloud of mist went up, and Fjord charged to try and halt the spell before it could entirely cast. Jester threw sacred flame into the cloud, but she’d been a second too slow. It shouldn’t have surprised her when Fjord turned and took off in the direction the elf reappeared, casting misty step on himself, as well. She almost cursed him under her breath as she turned to follow suit.
Across the field, the elf had cast a colorful enchantment. Caleb stood just outside the treeline, his posture stiff and his eyes vast and empty. Her heart dropped.

“--Caduceus!!” She shouted. “Caduceus--we have to help them!”

She took off running. Caduceus’s heavy steps followed behind her. “Three of them are down!” He called. “I think we--” His voice cut off with a wet grunt and a loud THUD vibrated through the ground. Jester skidded to a stop, looking behind her.

Caduceus had hit the ground, one hand clutching a bleeding ankle. Kegan pulled himself from a portal in the grass. He had a dagger in hand and madness in his eyes. Jester’s bared her teeth, raising her hands and splaying her fingers in the air. “Get the FUCK AWAY FROM HIM!!!”

With a flash of brilliant, glittering light, her spiritual weapon conjured in the air feet above where Kegan rose. He turned to look at it, and she got a split second of satisfaction at the look on his face as he said, “what the fu--”

The lollipop whirled in a broad arc, slamming into him and sending him tumbling through the grass. Jester looked to Caduceus, taking a few steps toward him. “Caduceus, are you--”

“I’m fine, Jester--I’m fine!” Caduceus said. He shoved his staff into the earth, using it to pull him back to his feet. He grimaced, but raised his hand and curled his fingers in the air, aiming it in the direction Kegan flew. A flash of guiding bolt launched from his palm. Kegan narrowly dodged it, stumbling to the side. He snarled and swung his hand out, fingers forming a claw.

The sound that rang through the air felt like a bolt to the head. Jester screamed and clamped her hands over her ears. Her vision blurred, but she pushed herself past it. Forget the pain, she told herself. Forget it--he’s going to hurt Caduceus if you don’t--forget it, forget it--not again--not again. She gritted her teeth, and she forced her eyes open. Kegan sprinted toward her. Jester growled, raising her hands again. The lollipop spun in the air, and she swung it down. She knocked the fucker clean off his feet. He grunted as he slid through the dirt, arms flailing for purchase.

“No, you don’t,” Jester hissed. She ran forward, swinging her arms high above her head. She was going to bring the lollipop down on his head and crack it open like a--

--she froze. No, like. Literally froze. Her arms wouldn’t budge, and even the air seemed caught in her lungs. An ice-cold fear trickled through her veins as she realized what had happened. Hold person. That asshole had cast hold person on her.

Kegan pushed to his feet. In his extended hand, he held a straight piece of iron. In his other hand, he pulled a mace from his belt. Her eyes fixed on it. She tried to move, her muscles desperate to be released. Kegan chuckled, moving slowly toward her as he weighed the mace in his hand.

“Sorry, love,” he muttered. “But I got a score to settle.”

Jester spat Infernal. Or she hoped she had. She tried to throw her arms from their place in the air, tried to wiggle her way out of the invisible grip. He was getting closer. There had to be something she could do--she couldn’t think. Her heart raced, the blood in her ears roaring as Kegan’s pace quickened. He ran toward her, lifting the mace, his eyes black and wild. Traveler, where ARE y--

--the heat ripped across her face and arms.

Jester screamed as she fell backward, released from the bindings. She dug her nails and heels frantically into the ground and scrambled back as the wall of flames that had sliced through the road grew higher and higher. They bathed the area in orange light, blinding and hot enough to drag tears
from her eyes. She blinked, choking on the dry air as it raked down her throat and filled her lungs. For a moment, she thought the attack had hit Kegan. But she saw the faint shadow of his form fumble to his feet… and a second silhouette cross toward him on the other side of the barrier. Even if she hadn’t recognized the posture, the shape of his coat billowing away from his legs, she would have known who it was.

She scrambled to her feet, and she screamed.

“CALEB!!”

His skin boiled. Everything passed in a haze, blurred by a molten veil.

Yet.

Kegan. Cowering from the roaring wall. Is clear as a wick.

“...about what you said at the tavern…”

His voice felt like sandpaper. Kegan spun to face him, the whites of his eyes almost glowing in the firelight.

Caleb drew his hands apart, the mix of guano and sulfur running down his wrist as he raised his palm. He locked eyes with Kegan, and he curled his fingers to a point.

“...I’m afraid you were mistaken as to who the devil was.”

She saw the thread-thin beam of light cut behind the flames. Jester’s stomach dropped, and she threw herself into a sprint. What started as a low growl erupted into a roar, and a blast of scorching air threw her forward as the fireball exploded. She rolled through the grass, covering her head with her arms and curling into a ball. Heat tore over her in waves; it felt as though the skin on her arms and neck might peel away.

“JESTER!!!”

Her eyes opened, and Jester sat up, looking frantically around the field. Fjord and Nott ran toward her. Yasha and Beau weren’t far behind them, and she looked up to see Caduceus lowering to kneel beside her. He pressed a hand against her shoulder, and she grimaced. A glance at her arm showed her sleeve had burned away. The skin beneath Caduceus’s hand looked dark.

“Even breaths,” Caduceus muttered, and she nodded.
“What the fuck!” Fjord skidded to a halt, craning his head back to stare up at the fire. “--Shit--where’s Caleb?!”

“I haven’t seen him since I snapped him out of the stupid trance that elf put him under!” Nott said. She looked between them, eyes wide as she turned toward the fire. “Oh shit.”

Jester stared at them. As she looked from Fjord to Nott, to Caduceus, and Yasha, and Beau, a horrible realization sank over her. … he’s alone…

“--He’s on the other side!” She said. She reached around and grabbed Caduceus’s shoulder, using it to help her stand again. Her knees were shaking, but she forced herself upright. “We have to get over there--we have to help him!!”

“We need to put that thing out!” Fjord yelled. “Or at least force an opening--Caduceus! Gimmie a hand, we gotta find some water!”

“Not fast enough,” Beau said. She cuffed Yasha’s arm, pointing to one of the trees at the edge of the firewall. “Boost me!”

Jester opened her mouth to protest, but Yasha had already bowed. She let Beau step on her forearm and cupped her other foot in her hand, hefting her once, twice, a few inches before swinging into a full throw. Beau sprang out of her arm toward the wall. Jester held her breath, only releasing it when Beau landed on one of the thick branches and raced across it to the trunk. She disappeared behind the curtain of leaves and smoke.

“Jester, come on!!” Nott shouted. “We might be able to find the end of the wall--we can go around before it spreads any further!!”

Jester nodded, swallowing as she took off behind Nott.

The last branch broke under her weight, and Beau windmilled her arms for any sort of hold. Her efforts proved fruitless. Her shoulder clipped the side of the trunk, and she plummeted the remaining distance to the ground. If the earth hadn’t already been coated in a thin layer of glowing coals, the impact still would have sent a burning sensation through her skin and bones. She snarled, pushed to her feet, and bolted into the smoke and woods.

“Fucking spellcasters,” she growled. She dodged left, raising an arm to shield against a cracking branch and the shower of embers it spilled. A few flicks and the glowing pieces of bark fell off her skin. “Fucking--CALEB?? CALEB, WHERE THE FUCK ARE YOU??”

Probably wasn’t the best idea to be shouting in such low visibility when a fucker was still running loose, but when had she ever been about the ‘best ideas’? Beau bounded over some roots, ducking beneath some branches and dancing around bits and pieces of root and bark that sizzled and snapped with flames. He was going to burn the whole damn forest down if he wasn’t careful. Of fucking course, it was the dry season. Fucking shit.

“CALEB?? CALEB, WHERE--”

A low phoom rumbled through the trees. Beau slid to a stop, whirling to face it. She watched as several trees--maybe six or seven yards away--began to curl, crumble and shrivel. Immediately, the flames pounced, enveloping the blackened bark and setting them ablaze. Beau swallowed as she realized what she’d just seen. Some spell had just sucked every bit of water out of those damned trees. And she didn’t know who had cast it.
Fuck.

This time, she thought better about shouting.

Beau tore through the crumbling forest. She could feel the heat starting to best the leather of her boots already, cursing under her breath as each step started to burn. But fuck that. No turning back, now.

A flash of light from her left caught her attention and, again, she slid to a stop. This time she threw her arms up to shield her face, and a molten blast of hot air swept through the empty gaps in the trees. She growled as it tore through her arms and stomach, turning to face it as the light died down.

“CALEB?!”

She dove forward, dropping down a small slope and darting toward the source of the blast. She rounded into the small clearing and froze, every muscle in her body locking into place.

Caleb stood feet away, his back to her. Despite the smoke and steam and debris floating through the air, she could tell he was shaking. His left arm twitched erratically at his side, and his right almost seemed to clutch the air in front of him. She let her gaze trail from the point of his finger to the boulder ahead of him, and she sucked a slow breath through her teeth.

Slumped at the base of the boulder were… barely remains of a human. Flesh and muscle almost dripped off the bone, and what little tissue remained on the skull had sunken through the sockets. The sight made her immediately aware of the foul odor in the air, and she had to hold her breath to prevent herself from heaving.

Shit. Beau thought, soundlessly spitting to her side. *Shit, he’s out of it… he’s really out of it.*

Beau slid a foot forward, ignoring the needling sensation of the coals beneath her boot. Slowly, she raised and readied her arms, right fist closed, left-hand opening. She’d have one shot at this. Chances were she’d either succeed… or she’d become tar pals with mister melt over there.

She rolled her shoulders back and exhaled, steadying herself.

She rushed forward.

Caleb whirled around, raising his left arm as another beam of light flared from his finger. Beau bit down on the inside of her cheek. She swept up with her right arm in an arc, deflecting his arm, so it pointed skyward just as a bloom of fire exploded from his hand. Her left hand came down in a chop, slamming side-first into the base of his neck. His muscles seized, and a choked sound emitted from his throat. Beau grabbed his face between her hands, forcing him to look at her. His eyes were wide and feral.


His breathing came in slow, heaving breaths. His eyes searched Beau's face, and slowly, ever so slowly, she could see clarity beginning to leak back into them. She encouraged it with a nod of her head, lightly smacking her palm against the side of his face. “See? I’m still an asshole. I just hit you, and you can’t do anything about it, you nerd.”

Caleb sucked in a breath, blinking a few times as his muscles eased and the stun wore off. He was shaking worse than before, now. Despite the smoke and embers, Beau realized his skin felt cold.
“... I-I...” Caleb stuttered. He blinked again. He started to turn his head toward what was left of
Kegan, but Beau forced it back around to her.

“Hey. I said to look at me, book brain,” she muttered. “We need to get out of this--”

Caleb turned in the other direction, doubling over and vomiting into the dust. Beau acted
automatically, gropping after him to scoop his hair out of his face and knot it at the back of his neck,
grunting and briefly looking away with a shake of her head. “Fuck, Caleb.”

She thought she heard him cough out a meek apology, and she started to shake her head. Caleb
 crumbled, and she swooped down, scooping his arm over her shoulders and lifting him upright
before he had the chance to fall. “Easy, you dumbass, I gotcha. C’mon. We gotta get you outta here
and make you drink something.”

They stumbled away from the scorched patch of trees. Beau kept her stride narrow, giving him time
to collect his footing and hobble along with her. She coughed, finally feeling the effect from all the
smoke, and pressed forward as she bowed her head. They moved slow but steady. She didn't know
how far out from the road they were, but she knew they had to find it as soon as possible. Caleb
wasn't going to last long if he didn't get water back in his body, and she really didn't want to go out
thanks to a bunch of fucking smoke. She'd just begun to weigh her options when Nott's voice rang
out, followed by two sets of boots on snapping twigs.

Jester and Nott sprinted toward them. Nott all but threw herself into Caleb's legs, nearly knocking
him over and taking Beau with him. She grunted as she pulled him back up.

"Oh, Caleb--we were SO WORRIED," Nott exclaimed. "Caleb are you--Beau!--Is he--"

"He needs water," Beau said, her voice clipped. "Now."

Jester nodded. She breathed shakily as she stepped forward and gingerly guided Caleb's chin up. He
blinked wearily and let her cup her hand by the corner of his mouth, water slowly pooling in her
palm and spilling between his lips. Jester looked up at Beau. Her face had gone white as snow. "H-
he's going to need a lot more, Beau."

"I know, but if we give it to him too fast, he'll just puke it up again," Beau said. "Come on. Help me
get him back to the cart. Get his other arm over your--yeah, like that. Nott, let go of his legs. Scout
ahead, see if you can find us the shortest route."

"On it!" Nott said. She whirled and darted through the blackened trees.

Jester and Beau, with Caleb balanced between them, trudged on. Every couple steps, Beau patted
Caleb's shoulder and Jester nudged his cheek with her horns to keep him awake. Everything reeked
of smoke and decomposition. The two bodies lying in the road had been burned by the wall of fire,
their corpses unrecognizable beneath the blistering flesh and muscle. Beau bit down on the inside of
her cheek, focusing her eyes forward as Jester sucked in a breath and looked away from the dead.
Nott had reached the others, and Fjord had already dug a canteen from their supplies. Beau looked
down at Caleb.

His eyes were empty, as though the body they were carrying was nothing more than a husk.

Chapter End Notes
as promised, here's the specific timestamp for the moment kegan catches jester in "hold person", those few seconds of anticipation, then the moment caleb's wall of fire cuts through. you could also refer to this score for when beau finds him.


**debris**

*Does it still hurt?*

_No. I think I’m getting used to it._

He sees boiling orange. Molten yellow. A white so hot, his eyes burn.

... *is that a good thing?*

*Why wouldn’t it be?*

Screaming.

No. ...no, not screaming… the sounds of pigs. Squealing. Inhuman. Primitive. Hysterical.

*Bren. Why wouldn’t it be?*

It hurt. He wanted to dig them out. Had to dig them out. They didn’t belong there.

*But they do, Bren… This is an honor. Think of everything you could accomplish.*

Take them out. I don’t want them.

The man holds up a hand, the other clutching fruitlessly to the armor melting into the flesh on his side. He’s begging. He'd been so cocky, so bold before. And now? Now, what are you?

*Please, don’t. Please, take them out.*

Pathetic.

Curled in the maze of shelves and books, the scent of ancient parchment lingering in the air between the three of them. Away from hollow eyes. A moment’s clarity that slowly twists back into madness.

*Bren, it’s okay.*

*Trust us. It hurts, but I think we’re getting somewhere.*

*Trust us.*

*We’re together in this, yeah?*

*We’re all we have left.*


Black and red faces, melting off bone. Eyes vast and voiceless screams, lost to the roar of flames.

And what are you now, Kegan?

*Trent?*

*An eye for an eye.*

*Trust--*
A flare of pain ignites in his arm, and he gasps. The library, the shadows, the young faces—all pull away into the horizon, leaving him blinded by sunlight. Caleb blinks, arm curled to his chest as he chokes and coughs on his own air. His eyes adjust. He looks around.

He’s sitting in a cart in a forested area. There’s sunlight bleeding through the canopy, leaving speckled patterns across his legs and the floor of the cart. He’s missing a boot, and there’re wrappings around the arc of his foot. He can hear the soft passing of voices nearby. Voices he recognizes. Caleb looks to the other passengers in the cart.

Beau is perched on the cart’s side. Nott, he realizes, is crouched by his legs—she’s saying something, but he can’t hear her—and Jester is by his side. Her arms have withdrawn to her chest, and there’s a startled, cautious gleam in her eyes as she stares back at him. Sound leaks into his awareness like water, and he can suddenly hear his own heartbeat again.

“Hey.” It’s Beau’s voice, and he looks up at her. This seems to relax her; her shoulders lower, and she almost deflates with a slow exhale through her nose. “...welcome back.”

Caleb stares at her, blinking with every slight movement of his jaw, every inhale. There’s lost time. He remembers the archer attacking Nott. Remembers killing her. Eyes. A seething, bubbling rage surging through his chest. Then nothing. Just red. ...just red…

“Here, Caleb.” Nott’s moved a little closer to him, and she offers him a canteen. “Beau said you probably got hit with some kind of… water… destroying spell?” She looked to Beau for confirmation, and Beau grunted.

“Sucked the trees dry,” she grumbled. “Don’t down it all in one go, though, or you’ll puke up your stomach.”

Jester inched a little closer, too. She extended a hand to him. “May I have your arm back, Caleb? I was cleaning it. A bunch of stuff got all over it… I don’t want it to get infected or anything.”

Caleb hesitated. He swallowed, wincing at the dryness of his throat. He offered his arm back to her, and she took it between her hands. What of the tattoo he could see was coated in soot, dirt, dried guano and something he couldn’t identify. A pungent smell filled his nose, burning it like acid, as though his senses only woke up when he looked at his arm. He could feel his stomach curling in on itself. The bile began clawing its way up to his throat.

He’s aware of Nott wedging the canteen into his other hand. His fingers shake as they close around it, and he lifts it to his lips. It’s lukewarm, but the relief it brings is unspeakable. He nearly chokes on it, pressing the back of his hand to his mouth as Nott snatches the canteen back.

“--easy, easy!” She says, patting his shoulder. “Shit, you’re covered in soot, too, that can’t be helping.”

Caleb blinks his eyes as she pats and wipes at his face, smearing the back of his palm across his mouth. His senses were returning to him in heaps. The pain in his arms didn’t exist for one moment but, with an exhale, he would feel it all at once. His stomach tightened. He clasped his hand over his mouth with a shiver, and suddenly Jester’s hand pressed into the back of his head and forced him forward, positioning his head between his knees.

“--Don’t barf all over yourself! --here--sit like that. Breathe slow and stuff! --Beau do we have a bucket??”

“Why the fuck would we have a bucket?”
“I dunno! For puke and stuff?”

“Just lean over the edge of the cart!”

“–Hey, hey!!” Nott’s voice cuts through their exchange, and Caleb locks his focus onto it. “You guys are stressing him out! Do something helpful or be fucking quiet!”

He’s one part grateful for the order, one part guilty. He’d been the idiot who went off and almost got himself killed… Beau had gone in after him. No one asked her to. And Jester was just trying to help, as she always was. She had only good intentions. Genuine concern. Everyone had to be tired.

Caleb tried to clear his throat. His voice felt as tangible as swallowed glass. “Where… are the others…?”

“Well, uuh,” Nott started. “Yasha is kind of circling us right now while Fjord and Duceus do some scouting. We’re in… a bit of a pickle.”

“That sorceress bitch fried our horses,” Beau said. She scoffed. “We’re trying to figure out how much we’re going to have to leave behind if it comes to that. And if there’s a less risky route.”

A jab of pain shot through Caleb’s arm, and he nearly yanked it back to him. Jester must have felt it because her hands loosened around his forearm. When he managed to keep it still, she carefully wrapped her hands back around his wrist, tenderly rubbing at the muck dried on his skin. Her touch is light, but… the feel of friction on his forearms is comforting. It quells the itching. No more itching or throbbing. At least for now. He wants her to use her nails. If she digs in, maybe she could cut it out.

“Is Caduceus alright?” Caleb asks, admittedly more for further distraction.

“He got a pretty bad cut on his ankle,” Jester said. “But after he made sure we were all okay, he let me heal it. …I think he’ll be okay, now. That like. Everyone else is, you know. Dead.”

“Except for the sorceress bitch,” Beau growled.

Nott huffed. “Yeah, she gave us the slip after--... after we kinda split up. Must have seen her side was losing and she was outnumbered… and out-skilled.”

Caleb’s stomach knotted. So one of them had escaped… that was one too many. He sat up a little more, forcing his breath out with a grunt. “We… need to find her.”

The words hadn’t even exited his mouth in full before Nott and Jester had their hands pressed into his chest, forcing him to lean against the cart once more. Beau stood up. She folded her arms. “Fat chance,” she said. “If she wants to follow us and try to beat us all on her own, that’s her death wish. You need to rehydrate, and the rest of us need to figure out how the hell we’re gonna move our shit from point A to point B.” She paused, her eyes looking past Caleb’s shoulder before she tilted her chin upward in a nod. “He’s ‘awake’ again.”

Caleb looked behind him. Yasha stepped out of the treeline and up to the cart. Splashes of blood still stained her clothes and the white sections of her hair. The wild light in her eyes hadn’t quite faded, and she scanned the trees again even as she reached them. “I didn’t see her. Unless she’s really good at hiding, she’s tucked tail and ran.” She brought her eyes back to Caleb. Something in them softened… in a way he’d learned to recognize from only Yasha. “It’s… good to see you, ah. Aware. You wouldn’t respond before, and we were worried.”
“I’m okay,” Caleb said. He nodded, scratched at his shoulder. “Just, ah, dehydrated. Ja. As Beauregard said, I’m sure.”

“Sure, sure,” Nott said. She patted his shoulder. “But still take it easy. Alright? Losing all that water is pretty serious.”

A brief beat of silence. The energy in the air is thick and humid.

“Jester, how much of our supplies do you think you could carry?” Yasha asked. Jester pulled away and moved toward the supply crate.

Caleb pulled his arm back to him, holding it idly against his chest as he flexed his fingers. Without the scraping of Jester’s fingers and cloth, the itch began to return. Faster. More irritable than before. He could hear Jester, Yasha, and Beau discussing ways of moving their rations, but he made no effort to listen to them.

Nott took his hand and gently guided the canteen back into his palm. She gave it a gentle squeeze before she pulled away, clasping her hands at her waist. “Is there anything else you need, Caleb? ...You should probably just eat, you know, simple things—at least until you’re all watered again. I could dig out some bread? Maybe scavenger around for an apple?”

“No, nonono,” Caleb muttered. He shook his head. “I’m, aaaahhh, fine. I’m alright. I just… need a moment– need a minute.”

He kept his eyes down, focused on the soot smudged over his knees. Nott’s worried gaze lingered on him—he could feel it—but he knew she wouldn’t push any further. Instead, she stood silent by his side, and he let the conversation beside him fade to white noise.

Fjord and Caduceus returned a half hour later. In a passing glance, it was clear they were in the midst of some sort of disagreement. Fjord walked and stood with his shoulders squared, his posture stiff, so it would force him to his full height (not that it would matter, standing beside Caduceus). Caleb noticed his eye contact was somehow even more direct than it usually was.

Caduceus, on the other hand, seemed to have withdrawn into himself. His lips were pressed tightly together as he looked Caleb over, and the wizard noted a curtness to his tone. “Jester did well, cleaning your arm,” Duceus muttered. He turned Caleb’s left arm over with unmatched gentleness, one ear twitching as a passing breeze blew his hair against it. “Still. I’d keep an eye on it for infection. We closed up a wound on your foot earlier, so you shouldn’t be in danger of infection, there. You may put your boot back on if you like.”

Caleb nodded, and Caduceus patted his shoulder as he stood back up.

Caleb pressed his arm to his chest as he watched Caduceus return to where the group had huddled on the other end of the cart, around their supply crate. They weren’t making any effort not to be heard, but his focus remained wandering. Everything felt foggy, now. Dream-like. Parts of his mind even wondered if everything had really happened. Wondered if, at any given moment, Nott would shake him from his sleep.

“Look. I trust your judgment, Caduceus,” Fjord was saying. “I truly do. But… I just think this time around, you might be being a bit… uuuuuuh…”

“Superstitious?” Beau threw out.
“Not really the word I was aimin’ for, but I’ll take it.”

“It’s nicer than ‘stupid.’”

“--Beau.”

“I’m aware that it may sound a bit… yes, ‘stupid,’” Caduceus said. “I’m only asking you to understand that this would be a liminal space. Out here? On the road, far between towns? It could mean many things.”

“Or it could mean nothing,” Fjord said. “We’ve been on these roads for how long? And how many… I dunno, ghosts, specters, and critters of that variety have we actually seen outside of caves and shit?”

“And IF we do see any, Beau can just punch them!” Jester said. “She can punch ghosts!”

“I can punch ghosts,” Beau echoed.

"Considering the shit that just went down, I think it'd be best to get a roof over our heads and doors between us and everything else," Fjord continued. "Campin' is great and all, but if we have the option to be... less vulnerable, we should take it."

Caduceus let out a long sigh, the stress evident on his breath. Whatever he said next, Caleb didn’t catch. His attention drifted away again.

The others dug through their remaining supplies. Perishables were first to be set aside, followed by anything not deemed essential by Fjord and Caduceus. Caleb eventually pushed to his feet and offered to take some of the load. His efforts were dismissed, everyone insisting it’d be best he just keep the canteen and focus on rehydrating himself as they moved on. So he did that. Carried the canteen, sipping on it every few minutes, keeping his eyes locked on the dirt beneath his feet. Not helping at all.

Sunset had arrived by the time they reached a small inn just off the road. Caleb figured it must be what Fjord and Caduceus had been discussing earlier. The inn is small but well aged, probably designed to be inviting to weary travelers. A few horses were tied to water basins off to the side, and a little cart rested in the back. Seems they were not the only wanderers to arrive this night.

Fjord held the door with his ankle as they crossed the threshold, separating toward the nearest tables to set their supplies down and give their arms a break. Caleb stood by, watching in idle silence. Several times he considered stepping up and taking a pack of the rations to start moving them upstairs to the rooms, but each time he caught Beauregard watching him from the corners of his vision. So he stood. Just. Stood. As Fjord approached the assumed innkeeper behind the bar.

Once Fjord had their rooms and keys, they gathered their things again. As Caleb followed Nott toward the stairs, he noticed Jester adjust the items in and under her arms and lean a little closer toward the innkeeper as she passed by.

“Hey!” She said, voice a near-whisper, “are there any ghosts around here?”

The human woman blinked once, her brows furrowing. “Ah… ghosts? Dear?”

“Yes,” Jester said. “Our friend was worried that this place would be--you know--haunted or something. So I wanted to ask if, maybe, you have ghosts that, y’know, just kinda hang out in cornerrrrrs, or try to creep on you in the showerrrrrrr, oooooor watch you sleeeeeep.”
“I… don’t believe we’ve, ah, ever received complaints regarding…” the woman squinted. “…ghosts. Nothing of that sort, no.”

Jester nodded, turning to grin up at Caduceus. “See, Duceus? It’s totally okay!”

Caleb turned his head just a bit more to glimpse Caduceus’s face. Difficult as the firbolg could be to read sometimes, the caution remained visible in his features.

Nott pointed out their room, and Caleb ducked into it while she lingered outside swapping ghost-gossip with Jester. He walked to the bed and sat on its edge. His hands twitched as he wrung his fingers, tugged at them, rubbed his wrists. They were restless. They needed something—anything—to do. He rummaged about his coat and fumbled one of his journals from under his arm. It nearly fell out of his hands as he moved it to his lap. He thumbed absently through the pages, barely even looking at them. The words were little more than a blur, anyway.

“Whew!”

Nott’s voice made him jump. He planted both hands on the flaps of the book to prevent it from falling out of his lap, and he turned his head. Nott scampered from the now shut door and across the room. She huffed as she leaped the short distance from the floor to their single bed and tugged her hood away from her face. “What a day, right? My feet are killing me! I’m beat!” She flopped across one of the pillows with a dramatic sigh as though to emphasize this. “We could all use a good night sleep, yeah? Think it was a pretty good idea to stop here ‘stead of camping out and all.”

“Aaah, uh–ja. --Yeah, it… iiiit’s a good idea, of course.” He sounded about as convincing as he felt. “Of course. We’re, ah… fortunate. To have found this half-way place. Yes.”

A moment’s silence hung in the air. Caleb felt the old mattress shift a bit, then a light hand on his shoulder.

“Are you sure you’re alright, Caleb?” Nott asked, voice careful and gentle. He nodded.

“You’ve been drinking the water?” She asked. He nodded.

“Is… is there anything else you need before we go to sleep?” She asked. Caleb shook his head.

“Let me know if you need anything during the night, let me know. I’m sure I can sneak down and nab a snack from the kitchen if you get hungry.”

Caleb nodded, and this must have satisfied her. He listened as she returned to the pillow and dropped across it, his eyes staring through the pages of the book in his lap. He listened as her breathing began to even out. As her shifting and turning to find the pillow’s sweet spot came to an end. The room fell silent. Muffled conversation from across the hall—the other side of the wall—gave way to empty stillness.

The air lacked cricket-song and the whistle of passing wind. Their single window was too far from the treeline for branches to scrape against it. Caleb, once again, felt aware of the time but not the passage of it. He’d blink, and it would be a quarter to eleven. He’d blink again, and it would be just past one-thirty. The sound of blood thrumming in his ears had begun to dim… replaced, instead, by a low. Subtle. Hum.
A hum that came from inside, but not from his blood. From his bones. As though the sound traveled and vibrated through his skeleton like an old tuning fork. As the hum grew stronger still, the burn—the itch—in his arms tore through his skin. Like hot knives cutting fast through the surface flesh. Not enough to mar, but enough to irritate and singe the nerves. Small, but many. Shallow, but acidic, eating away the tissue.

Those tiny burns burrowed into the muscle down to the bone. The hum grew louder as they connected. It’s nearly two, now. He should put the book away and lie down, get the sleep he knows he needs. But that hum. It carries voices. Carries power. It’s coursing through his muscles, skin, blood again. A potent venom. Thriving. Throbbing. And it hurts.

_I don’t want it._ His hands peel away from the pages, rounding on each other. He’s not in the inn anymore. Bright specks of white light litter his vision as he stares down, their glow pulsing with his blood.

_Jester woke with a start, sucking a breath through her teeth. Her body flinches a second before she sits upright, and it takes her a breath or two to remember where she is. Her sudden movement caused Beau to roll over in the bed beside her. The monk blinks up at her, a thin trail of dried drool at the corner of her lips as she rubs an eye with the heel of her palm._

_“Mnnhh’esther? ...th’fuhk is iht?”_ Jester smiled sheepishly. “Sorry, Beau. I didn’t mean to wake you up.”

_Beau murmured something incoherent as she rolled over, pulling the sheets with her. Jester looked down at her feet, staring at them in silence for a moment or so before she swung her legs off the bed. She got dressed and snuck out of the room, making her way down the hall, stairs, and into the dining area._

_She found a table and sat down, drumming her fingers on the surface and looking over the small space. There weren’t too many tables. This was kind of a pit stop between cities, after all. Most of the chairs were empty, save for an elderly looking half-elf nursing a drink in the far corner and a pair of humans discussing their trip over breakfast. Jester’s brow wrinkled, and she leaned just far enough back to look out one of the windows. It’s past sunrise—the sky’s blue as a robin’s egg and speckled with soft clouds—but she otherwise can’t guess exactly what time it is. Caleb would know. She could ask whenever he comes down to eat. ...she hopes he slept alright._

_A bit of movement draws her attention back to her table, and she grins. Caduceus lowers into the seat across from her, grunting softly and leaning forward on one arm as he rests it on the table and sets his staff aside. He rarely sits back in chairs. Most of them aren’t built to support someone of his height._

_“Morning, Duceus!” Jester chirps. “Did you sleep okay?”_
you’re that tired everything feels light as a cloud.” She let her pitch get a little higher toward the end, waving a wrist in an almost dismissive manner.

Caduceus stared at her. His gaze softened, and he nodded his head. “That’s good,” he said. “I’m glad to hear that.”

“Right? --and, see? No ghosts! Everything’s alright.”

“...mm. Yeah.”

He sounded uncertain. Jester’s eyes widened. She leaned forward, lowering her voice to a not-so-hushed whisper. “Oh my gosh--did you see a ghost last night??”

“--Nah,” he said. He straightened in his chair, keeping some of his weight on his arm. “Nah, not last night. Not this morning, either. ...no ghosts, just a feeling.”

“What kind of feeling?”

He paused. His eyes narrowed slowly, expression growing puzzled. “Mm. ...I’m… not sure it’s one I could put to words.”

Jester pursed her lips. “…do you think that, once we leave, it will go away?”

“Yes. Yeah, I think it’ll clear up once we move on.” Caduceus glanced over his shoulder. Jester looked past him, spotting Nott bouncing down the stairwell steps before he turned back to her. “We need to figure out how we’re going to handle our supplies... maybe one of the guests would be willing to sell us a horse for a good amount of coin. That would free up some of our arms.”

“Seriously. I may be super beefy, but after a while, my arms were really beginning to ache and stuff.”

Nott scampered up to their table, but she didn’t pull herself into a chair. Instead, she stopped in the space beside Jester’s seat, looking up at her. The worry in her eyes made Jester’s heart skip. “--have you guys seen Caleb? He wasn’t in the room this morning when I woke up! Or the bathroom--or the showers--or in anyone else’s room--or anywhere upstairs!” Nott produced an old leatherback book from beneath her cloak, setting it on the table. “He even left this book behind--he never does that! It’s one he keeps--you know--really close!”

Jester did recognize the book. It’s one of the two Caleb keeps in those holster things under his coat. One of the two he’s always hesitant to let get too far away from him, always eager to get back as soon as possible. It’s here, right in front of her. Caleb isn’t with it.

“Maybe--” Jester started, “--maybe he just needed air! --like a walk or something! Or, ahm, uh, like, more mud and stuff--because he keeps it in his pockets all the time and--”

“Jester,” Caduceus interrupted. His long arms reached across the table, and he lightly touched the edges of the book. It was now, as she watched his thumb trace the old leather that she noticed the dark and dried bits of... something... clumped and clinging to the flaps of the book. Some of it fell away as Caduceus rubbed his thumb into it. Whatever it was, it almost had the texture of dried paint flakes. And it was a deep, almost black, crimson.

“What is that?” Nott demanded. She dug her nails into the table, trying to lift herself further to see the book. “--Is that...? ...--is that blood?”

Jester stopped breathing. Her skin went cold.
Caduceus had already stood. “We need to find Caleb. You’re positive he’s not upstairs?”

“Y-yeah!” Nott said, nodding. “I-I checked all of our rooms--and--and even the empty ones--just in case!!--but he’s… he wasn’t… --you… you don’t suppose he just… left…”

“No!” Jester said. She forced a small smile as she shook her head, and she pulled Caleb’s book into her arms as she, too, stood from her chair. “No, of course not! --I mean, you said, this is one of his super important books! And--and he’s always asking me to give it back and stuff after we get in the water so… --so he wouldn’t, you know, just… forget it. Caleb doesn’t forget stuff. And he wouldn’t just leave it here!”

“But… he did.”

“--he’s probably just out for a walk, and we’re being--being stupid and stuff. --I haven’t even finished his tattoo!”

Nott opened her mouth, but Caduceus intervened. “Let’s have a look around. Ms. Nott, why don’t you check the perimeter of the inn? You’re the most familiar with Caleb, and you may have a better idea of what nooks and crannies he may favor for hiding. Jester, walk a small distance back the way we came. I’ll walk ahead up the road. If we don’t see him after ten or so minutes of searching, we should regroup and wake the others.”

Jester and Nott nodded.

They exited the inn and split up. Jester’s steps widened as she started back down the road, Caleb’s book still held firmly to her chest with one arm as the other swung by her side. Her stomach had knotted the moment she’d stepped foot outdoors, and the weight of the situation had its chance to sink into her mind. Caleb really wasn’t at the inn. He was just… somewhere. He could be anywhere. --he could have left at any time.

A million thoughts and possibilities began swirling in her head, buzzing like angry bees.

“Caleb?!“ She called, turning her head to either side of the road, eyes searching for movement. “Caleb, are you out here?? --I have your book! Your suuuuper special, SECRET book!!”

When had he left? How far had he gone? Had it been cold last night, did he have his coat?

...had… had he been alone? That elf was still out there, somewhere. Caleb had done a lot of things--wiped enemies out with uncomfortable ease. He’d just done it not even twenty-four hours ago, but if… if that elf had gotten the jump on him. He wouldn't be able to see in the dark, and she would.

… she, Yasha and Fjord had wandered away from the group once, and that was three of them. And still, they’d been taken. Jester cast a nervous glance over her shoulder, eyeing the empty road behind her.

“--CALEB?” She called again, louder, increasingly desperate. “Caleb, if you don’t come out soon, I’m gonna draw dicks ALLLLLLL over your stupid book!!”

Nothing.

“I’ll use my magic paint, too! --I’ll even draw a big, THICK dick, right in the middle of one of the pages so when you open your dumb book, it flops out like a pop-up-porn-book, and everyone will think you’re super gross!!”

Nothing.
“I’m doing it!!! LOOK, Caleb--I’m getting out my paints riIIIIIGHT NOOOOWWWW!”

Nothing.

Her blood had gone cold. Not even the good sort of cold, but a strange and uncomfortable, crawling cold. It made everything tight and choking and suffocating. Jester swallowed, breathed, swallowed again as her pace quickened and she clutched the book against her. If something had happened, it had already happened--and it could have happened hours ago--and now they were too late. He could be gone but alive, or gone and … gone. Why was there blood on his book?? Why had he left?? Where had he--

Mmmrrowrr.

Jester stumbled to a stop so abruptly, she nearly tripped. She whirled around to face the treeline at her right. For a moment, she thought she’d just imagined the sound, as she failed to see anything moving in the foliage. But… some of the sun speckles mixed in the tree’s shadows went against the pattern of their sway, and Frumpkin trotted a small distance out of the trees.

“--Frumpkin!!” Jester breathed. She bolted off the road, racing to reach him. If Frumpkin was here, Caleb couldn’t be far. He couldn’t be. --And if Frumpkin was here, that meant Caleb had to be alive. Didn’t it?? It had to.

She dropped to her knees, set the book aside, and scooped the feline into her arms to hug him. “Oh my GOSH, Frumpkin!!! --You’re such a good kitty, such a good boy!”

She pressed a firm kiss to the top of his head before pulling away enough to look him in the eyes. His tail whipped across her lap.

“Where’s Caleb?” She asked. “Do you know? Can--can you take me to him??”

Frumpkin chirped. He sprang from her arms and darted into the trees. Jester groped around on the ground until her hands found Caleb’s book, and she clung to it as she shoved to her feet and ran after Frumpkin.

The familiar moved so smooth and quick through the brush that he could have been flying. Jester kept her eyes locked on him, vaulting over logs and larger rocks, ducking under low branches. They didn’t run for too long.

Frumpkin slowed, bounding from the grass and onto a fallen branch. Jester eased her pace to a walk as he trotted across the moss-speckled bark and perched himself at the peak, looking down at her before casting his eyes ahead. Jester rounded the branch, peering through trees. It took a moment, as his old and battered coat and brown-ginger hair blended into the environment, but she soon spotted the glistening red. The still wet blood oozing down his arms.

“--Caleb!!”

Jester moved toward him.

Caleb flinched at the sound of his name, curling more into a ball. His arms shielded his face and head, which he kept bowed between his shoulders, and his knees pressed firmly into his chest. She stopped as he recoiled, holding her breath. There was so much blood, some dry, some new, smeared and spread over his forearms that she couldn’t tell where the source was. He was shaking… like a dead leaf in autumn waiting for just the right amount of wind to knock it from its tree.

“… Caleb,” she said again, softer this time. “… Caleb, you’re hurt.”
He shrank further away from her. Jester bit her lip, and she shifted her feet. Slowly, she knelt into the grass in front of him. She could hear him muttering in Zemmian or, maybe, a blend of common and Zemmian she couldn’t comprehend. She scooted closer. Cautious. Hesitant in every movement. Something had him scared, and the last thing she wanted to do was frighten him further.

“Caleb?” She said. “Hey. It’s just me. Jester. You know? ...you know me, right?”

A second passed before he exhaled, sniffing and pressing his forehead into his knees. “...of course... I know yo-you.” His voice wetens as it fades, and she hears him swallow, hears him clear his throat and cough. His next words come on a quivering whisper, and he curls his fingers into his palms. “... I’m ... sorry... Iiiii’m so so sorry, I’mso sorry.”

Jester’s heart dropped. She shook her head, lifting her hands and holding her open palms up. “No-- no, no, no, it’s okay!! Caleb, don’t. We were just worried, we thought something had happened to you. And... it... it sort of looks like something did.”

When he remained silent and still, she pressed her palms into the grass and lifted just enough to slide herself a little more forward. She settled herself, so the tops of her knees touched the toes of his boots, and she raised her hands.

“... hey, Caleb?” She said, and she kept her voice so soft that only they could hear it. Like mama did when the night monsters peered out of closets or lurked beneath beds, and she guided her little sapphire around the room, teaching her how to keep the shadows at bay. “I’m going to take your hands... is that okay?”

A choked breath emitted from him, and if there had been words on it, she couldn’t make them out. But she waited anyway. And when protest never came, she stretched her arms out and over him, gingerly wrapping her fingers through and around his as they twitched and shivered above his head. He let her. So she gave them an assuring squeeze but otherwise remained still.

“Okay, I have your hands, now,” she continued. “I’m going to, ahm. I’m going to pull them away from your head, okay?”

Though she only held his hands, she felt the tension spread through his entire body. It curdled the air between them. For a moment, she thought she might choke on it, as his pain grew tangible in her chest and throat. He’s so scared, she thought, biting her lip and blinking her eyes. She swallowed. A vain attempt to ward off any shiver in her own voice. “Okay, I’m doing it now. Here we go. Just super gentle.” As she spoke, she gave his hands a testing tug, and when he didn’t resist, she gingerly pulled his arms down and away from his head and face.

The skin--what she could see of it--on his forearms twitched and shivered involuntarily. The blood lay thicker in specific areas, in others it had been smeared in near-perfect lines, all angled or parallel or adjacent to each other. It took her a few seconds--to look past the surface damage--but her heart soon broke within her ribs. The thicker areas of blood matched the locations of some of his scars. And the patterns of smears... --she looked down at his hands and, sure enough. Blood and white flesh had caked beneath his nails.

“Oh, Caleb,” she breathed. Her eyes began to burn, and her vision blurred. She felt him flinch at the sound of her voice. Somehow, her heart found more ways to crumble.

“I’m so sorry.” His voice is barely more than a whisper. “I... I made ruin... --I ruined... it, I ... all... --you worked. Sohardland... I ... I couldn’t--lii could’t stop. I... felt... them. --I heard. Them, I. ...so. Many times--they would heal only to be... I thought. It had been long enough. I thooouuught I couldbarestagain, lie... You... have worked so hard. A-and for nothing. For nothing.”
Jester shook her head. She gripped his hands. “No, Caleb, it’s—it’s okay! It’s okay. Really. I’m not mad or-or sad or anything! I just… I’m just really happy you’re okay. I can heal this super easy, and it won’t hurt anymore.”

“Don’t,” he murmured, shaking his head. “Please, you just rested… the others may need it later. Do not waste it on me… this… t-this is a mess of my own--my own making, and--”

“It will not. Be. A waste.” While her voice didn’t sharpen or raise, she found herself surprised by just how firm it had become. Jester squeezed his hands again, leaning in to try finding his eyes through his hair. The area around them had begun to purple and swell. Be it due to tears or sheer exhaustion, she couldn’t tell… but… she guessed he hadn’t slept at all the previous night. Something hot and wet rolled down her cheek, and it took her a blink or two to realize she’d begun to cry.

Jester shifted her weight, sliding her legs out from under her and scooting through the grass, so she rounded him, taking to resting against the tree at his left side. She pulled his left arm under hers, laying it in her lap before splaying her fingers and pressing her palm over his skin. Caleb hissed through his teeth, and his fingers tensed. But he didn’t pull away. She kept her other hand in his, absently rubbing circles in his wrist with her thumb as her hand and his skin beneath it began to glow.

“I’m going to cast cure wounds real slow,” she said. She sniffed, blinking a few times to free tears from her eyelashes. “It will sting a little less that way--and--and maybe it won’t be so itchy afterward, you know? …--I should start healing you after every new tattoo thing, too. --I should have been doing that. I’m sorry I didn’t.”

She leaned forward a little, trying to catch his gaze again, but he kept his eyes locked on the space ahead of him. Whatever had scared him in the first place seemed to have faded in his mind. The fear in his eyes had been replaced by an exhausted haze.

“Hey, um. Can… --should I send Nott a message? So she knows you’re safe and stuff?”

This broke through the haze, and Caleb stiffened. He shook his head. “N-no. …no…. lii…. no, I, ah… I can’t… not… not n-now, I…”

Jester rolled her lips together, biting the inside of her cheek. “… could… I send Caduceus a message? He’s awake and looking for you, too.”

A long pause. But this time, Caleb nods his head. “… ja… o-okay…”

Jester nodded, squeezing his hand. She took in a small breath and looked into the forest canopy, scanning the leaves until her eyes caught the bright red chest of a robin high above them. The little bird flicked its wings and hopped from branch to branch, singing to another robin she couldn’t see. It’s the first time she’s aware of the birdsong this morning… in all the worry, she’d forgotten to give them an audience. Jester smiled to herself, exhaling through her nose as she rested her head against the bark behind her.

“Hey, Caduceus!” She said, making sure to keep her voice low and soft. “I found Caleb. He’s okay! Uuuuum--if you go where you told me to go, Frumpkin will bring you to us.”

She repeated what she’d sent in her head, lips moving silently as she counted the words. Twenty-three. Perfect! He should get that with no problem.

Sure enough, a few seconds passed, and Caduceus’s calm voice bloomed in her head. Alright. On my way.
Jester nodded, and she turned to look at Caleb again. “Caduceus is on his way.” Then she looked past him and spotted Frumpkin. The familiar sat right where she’d left him, and she nodded to him once. “Hey, Frumpkin? Do you think you could--”

Frumpkin stood. He arched his back, then stretched himself far across the branch with a yawn. He gave Jester a single glance before he hopped off the bark and onto the forest floor, trotting back the way they’d come. Jester blinked. “--Oh! ...oh. ...--Thank you, Frumpkin!!”

Jester sat back, giving Caleb’s hand another gentle squeeze. She looked into the canopy and found the robin again. The small bird tilted its head down at them, watching a moment to assess if they could be a threat. It must have decided they weren’t so bad because, with a flick of its wings, it began singing once more. Jester smiled, but she wasn’t content to sit in the silence.

Instead, she started to tell Caleb a story. About the time she tried to befriend some sea birds that would perch across from her balcony. How she’d lure them to her balcony with food. How they eventually turned against the patrons and began dive-bombing them when there was no food to be given, and how one had stolen a piece of jewelry right off mama’s horn. How her mother hadn’t been angry but instead, had mused over what the gull might do with such an exquisite golden decoration. Perhaps it would become a nest ornament. A gift to a potential mate. Whatever its fate, mama had decided the bird would make better use of it than she would have.

Frumpkin returned with Caduceus at his heels just as Jester had reached the point in the story where Blude had tried redirecting the sea birds’ attention to another location. The firbolg knelt in front of Caleb and rested a hand on his knee, patting it gently as his other hand adjusted around his staff.

“It’s good to see you, Mr. Caleb,” he said. “What do you say we get you back to the others? Do you think you can walk?”

Caleb nodded.

They got him on his feet, and Jester scooped Frumpkin off his branch and gingerly placed him on Caleb’s shoulder. Frumpkin knew just what to do; he tucked himself into the crook of Caleb’s neck and began to purr. Jester retrieved the old journal from where she’d left it. They made their way through the forest, Caduceus guiding them back to the treeline and onto the road. Once their feet touched the dirt path, Caleb’s pace quickened, and he moved to walk a few feet ahead of them. He kept his head bowed, his hands clenched at his sides. Jester pursed her lips, and she adjusted her arms around the journal.

“Did he tell you what happened?”

She turned her head and looked up at Caduceus, biting her lip as she took in his expression. It was somewhere between concerned and focused. A firm look…but not a hard one.

Jester sighed, looking ahead to Caleb and Frumpkin. “Kind of. He said he felt… ‘them.’ And heard ‘them.’ ...and… since he scratched up his arms, I guess that means he was talking about the… um... you know.” Jester shrugged one shoulder, feeling a bit of anger bubble up in her throat. She didn’t want to say it; the memory didn’t deserve to be spoken.

Caduceus hummed lowly. “…the healing process of the tattoos must have dug up something old. I believe you said the skin gets dry and itchy. Much like a scab.”

Jester’s stomach tightened a little. “Yeah. ...yeah, i-it does.”

“I imagine those experiments occurred more than once. ...it’s likely he has experience with that sort
of healing. Associates it with… other things” Caduceus paused. He sighed, letting his staff drag a moment before returning it to match his pace. “If he wants to continue with the tattoos, we’ll need to develop a trade-off system where you or I can heal his arms on the spot. You should still wait the necessary time before you continue your work--as though he were healing on his own… but perhaps we can relieve him of that connection by removing it entirely.”

“That’s a really good idea, Caduceus,” Jester said. She huffed, hugging the journal firmly to her chest. “…I should have been doing that at the start. Shouldn’t I?”

“Don’t blame yourself, Jester. No one is at fault. What you’re doing clearly means something to him; he wouldn’t have accepted the offer otherwise.”

They walked the remaining distance in silence. Soon, the inn was near, and Caleb moved toward it. Nott darted through the inn doors, yelling his name and barely skidding to a stop before she collided with his legs. Beau jogged out shortly behind her and beelined for Caleb, slowing momentarily as she must have seen his arms before closing the distance between them to walk at his side. Jester smiled weakly. She wanted to run ahead and join them… but maybe it was best not to overwhelm Caleb with attention right now. She could check on him again later.

“We should have camped last night,” Caduceus muttered under his breath. He must have been talking more to himself than to her because he didn’t continue the thought. Jester blinked.

“But… there weren’t any ghosts, Caduceus. It was just the, um. The tattoos or whatever,” Jester said softly. She looked up at him, frowning. “Caleb didn’t say anything about ghosts, and… we didn’t see any. …the inn wasn’t haunted or anything like you thought it would be.”

Caduceus mirrored her frown, though she noted there was something… almost sadder about it. He shook his head. “No. The inn wasn’t haunted. …but, that’s just the thing, Jester. Liminal spaces… they’re a crossroads. A place between, of not knowing, of waiting… what was and what’s to come, all meeting at once.” He paused, adjusting his hold on his staff. “Sometimes, it’s not the places within those spaces that are ‘haunted.’ Sometimes, it’s the people who visit them.”
whew! so, so sorry for the long wait, guys! i moved into an apartment in may, then adopted a parrot in june. tl;dr: it's been a busy couple of months and on top of everything, i've fallen SUPER behind on CR, itself. at the time of publishing this i've finished episode 68, so, **please do not elude to recent/current episodes.** hopefully semi-regular updates will continue from here on out. thank you so much for your patience!!

They left the inn as soon as they were able.

Jester did her best not to coddle Caleb too much; she’d catch herself asking if she could carry something for him or if his arms still hurt or if he needed anything, and she’d turn her head to see Caduceus giving her a gentle--but telltale--frown. She felt a little stupid, but at least she didn't seem to be alone. The others had their own problems giving him breathing room in their own ways.

Fjord didn’t seem to know what to do or how to do it. The best word she could come up to describe his behavior was: awkward. Walking a weird line between interacting too much and avoidance. Added with Caleb’s increased withdrawal, it made that ‘awkward’ amped up to ‘supergoddamn awkward.’

Beau and Nott were on opposite ends. Beau spoke to Caleb when she deemed it necessary. But this applied strictly to vocal interaction. She kept in arm’s reach of him and, rather than reiterating plans and stuff to him, would tap his shoulder to get his attention. Nott talked as often as she breathed. Which was constantly. Jester knew she meant well--that she was probably trying to distract Caleb best she could so he wouldn’t think too deeply. But after a while, it began to grow a little overwhelming even for her.

Caduceus and Yasha handled the atmosphere with the most grace. This, of course, was not surprising. Jester knew she’d never find a way to describe the effect their presence had. Just that it could be *felt*… sort of like a massive, warm blanket on a cold winter night, comforting and all-encompassing. The two navigated Caleb’s space and attention as though they’d lived his experiences themselves, and Jester felt a strange and embarrassing envy bubble up in her stomach as she watched them. She wanted to make Caleb feel safe and not stupid. It was beginning to feel like her own efforts were only making things worse.

Upon reaching the next town, a small and seemingly quiet little village, Fjord set out to find a place to stay. The rest of them gathered by a tree and took a moment to rest their arms and feet. Jester stretched her arms high above her head and yawned loudly, shaking out her hands and hair afterward. She caught a low chuckle from Beau--who must have found the display amusing--and Nott mutter ’right??’ in agreement. From the corner of her eyes, Jester could see Caleb looking in her direction. She ignored him.

“Alright, we lucked out,” Fjord said. He returned to the group, tossing a room key to Beau. “Two rooms. Guess we can split it guys and girls. Might have to get creative about how the beds are shared—”
“--I’ll take the floor,” Yasha cut in. She nodded to Beau and Jester. Fjord snorted.

“--or not shared. But we got a roof, and we got rooms. We can stick around a day or two if needed, figure out the cart situation and go from there.” He paused, then pointed in Caleb’s direction. “Take a load off. If y’haven’t slept in, like, a day, you oughta do it now.”

Caleb ducked his head and looked away, wringing his hands between his knees. The wrappings on his arms were back, though this time out of necessity. Caduceus hadn’t wanted to risk infection in the freshly healed wounds. Jester frowned.

They moved their remaining supplies into the inn, splitting food items between the rooms the best they could. Nott and Jester agreed to share a bed for the evening, and Yasha continued to insist she sleep on the floor. Beau didn’t argue.

Jester didn’t see Caleb for the remainder of the night. Once he’d gone into the room across the hall, he seemed to disappear entirely. She busied herself with her sketchbook and paints, eager to perfect the designs she’d already scrawled for his tattoos. They had to be better. They had to be enough.

Sunlight had only just peeked over the trees outside her window when the knocking began. At first, she thought it may be part of her dream (the knocking was just one of the Traveler’s super cool drums he had brought to the big party), but when the sound persisted, Jester sat up in bed. She peered at the window—noting the sun, the soft pink and orange of the sky—before sliding out of the sheets. Nott mumbled in her sleep and rolled over, but she didn’t wake.

Jester padded across the small room to the door. Yasha, who sat with her arms folded and her head propped against the corner wall, opened one eye long enough for the two to see each other. Jester smiled and lifted a hand in a small wave. The corner of Yasha’s lip twitched upward, and she closed her eye again. Jester stifled a giggle. She reached out and opened the door.

Caleb stood on the other side, his posture tense, and his arms folded. He looked a little less tired than yesterday… but still pretty tired. He lifted his gaze just as the door opened, and Jester felt her smile wither as they made eye contact.

“--Oh!” She gasped. She looked over her shoulder—Nott and Beau were still asleep, and Yasha hadn’t reopened her eye—and then back to him. “Caleb. Good morning, ahm. …did you sleep at all? You still look pretty… bad.”

“Heh… kind of you to imply that, liiiii… that there was a time… ahhh…” His voice trailed off, and his already weak attempt to smile vanished quick as it’d appeared. He cleared his throat. “--Ja. Ja, ah, I slept. --I got sleep. Do not worry so much over me, you have done enough of that.”

Jester pressed her lips together. A teeny-tiny, but very much real, spark of irritation fizzed through her. She immediately kicked herself for it, pushed it down and away. Instead, she smiled and squared her shoulders, nodding her head a few times. “--You got sleep, that’s so wonderful! We should get something really, really great for breakfast to celebrate! Don’t you think??”

“…ah.” Caleb looked down, and she deflated a bit. “I don’t think that is necessary.”

“Well. I think it’s pretty necessary,” Jester said. She lifted her chin, brows poised, so they lifted enough to disappear beneath her bangs. “We’re going to order the most delicious thing on the menu. And if you don’t, I will, and you have to share it with me. Those are the rules.”

Again, he tried to smile. It lasted a little longer this time, but it still faded away. Some color did
spread over his nose and cheeks, though. A small success. “It would seem you’ve outwitted me once again, Ms. Lavorre.”

Jester’s smile widened, and she giggled. Caleb shifted his weight.

“But ah. Breakfast… was not why I came. I… would it be at all possible to continue with the tattoos? If. If you are still willing, after what I…” his voice trailed away, and he quickly looked down. Jester blinked, her smile fading fast.

“I mean…--yeah, Caleb, I’m totally still going to finish the tattoos and stuff, it’s just. Didn’t Caduceus say--he said we should, like, wait the amount of time we would if we weren’t healing your arms ourselves, you know?” She said, fumbling a little on the words. She took her pinky finger in one hand, twisting it. “Maybe we should wait like he said? So your arms don’t get all itchy and stuff again--and you don’t… you don’t, ahm…”

She didn’t want to say ‘freak out.’ Even if that’s sort of what he more or less did, she didn’t want to say it. His discomfort the past forty-eight hours had been more than apparent, and that would only add to it. This concern verified itself when he pursed his lips and shifted his weight between his feet again. Be it embarrassment or shame or whatever else, it remained latched to him. Caleb cleared his throat a second time, and he shook his head.

“Iii… I, ah, think I am okay. --I’m okay. But, ahhhh… I feel.” He paused a moment. She watched one of his hands drift to the opposite wrist, his fingers pluck at the new wrappings Beau had applied the previous morning. “…I feel… that just getting it over and done with would be easier. Grin and bear it, ja?” He tilted his gaze up enough to meet her eyes again. “The longer we draw it out, the… --I worry… ah…”

Jester bit her lip. She fidgeted a second or so longer before huffing and reaching out, taking his hand in hers. “Okay, um. --Just. Please, please, tell me if it hurts too much or itches too much or feels bad too much, okay, Caleb?” She asked, squeezing his hand. “Promise?”

“I promise,” Caleb said, nodding. Jester lifted her other hand, sticking out her pinky.

“Pinky swear.”

Caleb blinked at her. Then, he smiled, and he hooked his pinky around hers with a weak chuckle. “Ja. Pinky swear.”

Jester beamed at him, and his smile remained. If she kept their fingers entwined longer than she’d needed to, he must not have noticed.

They moved downstairs to the small dining area, selecting a table in the corner and sitting across from each other. Jester organized her inks and cleaned the little needle. Caleb removed the temporary wrappings from his arms. Jester tried to keep an eye on his expression as he pulled the bandages away, but he kept his gaze low and calm. Within a few minutes, he had one arm laid out between them, and she pressed the ink into his skin.

There were still thin, white lines where the scratching had been, ghosts less permanent than the patches of damaged flesh she aimed to hide. She worked in silence. Her eyes darted from Caleb’s skin to the pages of her sketchbook, checking her work and still looking for ways she may improve it mid-process. She could make it go from a horrible memory to a soothing comfort, a reminder that he would never be alone again. She had to. She had to do it right.

“Jester?”
Caleb’s voice startled her. She looked up and blinked widely, pausing her work (and luckily not pricking him with the needle). “Yeah, Caleb? What is it?”

“I… never properly thanked you,” he said, careful to keep his voice low. No one else had claimed a table yet; it was just the two of them downstairs, plus one of the innkeepers preparing for the morning. Caleb huffed and continued, “for yesterday. For finding me. And leading me back to the others. So thank you.”

Jester stared at him. She rolled the needle between her thumb and index finger.

It was… weird. She felt happy to be thanked and acknowledged–really proud and special, even–but something that she’d buried after seeing him in the forest began to claw back to the surface. The fear. The way her throat had gone dry. Panic, helplessness, and the unknown.

The natural reflex to smile, to bounce her shoulders and roll her eyes with a throwaway ‘yeah, I am pretty great’ remark didn’t come to her. She felt. …she felt… --

“--You really scared me, you know.” The words escaped her mouth before she could stop them or think about them. “That was really stupid to just–to just run off and disappear and go into the woods without telling us or bringing your coat because it was freezing out there that morning and you could have gotten really cold.”

She surprised herself as much as she seemed to have surprised him. Caleb’s arm tensed under her hands, and she saw some of the color drain from his face. But, as though she’d pulled a rock from obstructing a stream of water, it was too late to stop the words from flooding.

“A lot of things could have happened to you--anything! Anything could have happened to you, and none of us would have been there to help you, and you hadn’t slept so you were tired and--you could have disappeared forever!” Jester’s voice caught on her breath, and she sucked in air to keep it from breaking. “You can’t do that, Caleb! You’re super good at magic and tricks and stuff, but you’re also really squishy and, and, and… --you know??”

Caleb blinked back at her as she inhaled through her nose and held her breath. She could feel the backs of her eyes burning, but she wouldn’t allow herself to cry again. Not now, even as her feelings began to conflict with each other, began bubbling up through her chest and throat like bile. And while those first emotions continued to swarm and stir, she almost began to feel guilty and really bad for snapping at him. He’d gone through things she didn’t want to imagine, and he still bore those scars, and she had just thrown shit at his gratitude for her help.

But he HAD been stupid, and he HAD scared her. She hated it.

Seconds passed as Caleb stared down at his arm. Jester barely breathed. She could feel herself waiting for him to pull away, get up, and disappear outside or up the stairs. But he didn’t move. Instead, he met her eyes again. His gaze, though weakened, didn’t… --he didn’t look embarrassed or upset. He looked. Like he knew something or understood something. And he nodded.

“Ja. You’re right, Jester,” he said quietly, and her back straightened. “I am sorry for having scared you. I’m truly so sorry… I… I never. --I don’t… want… to ever be… that for you. There is no excuse.”

Jester’s eyes widened. She hadn’t expected for him to hear her, let alone to listen. She inhaled, blinking twice. Caleb cleared his throat and looked down at their hands, his fingers briefly brushing against her forearm. They were warm to the touch, the heat lingering for seconds after.
“I can’t promise that I will not have, ah… --that I will not react strongly to my… scars… again,” he continued, “but I swear to you that I will remain with the group if and when it happens again. I won’t go off alone. You, or the others… you won’t need to worry.”

Her mouth opened and closed a time or two. Jester looked down, her eyes trailing over the pale grooves in his forearm, the narrow space between his fingertips and her skin. She wanted to grab his hand and squeeze it. She also still felt that… irritation. Anger? She didn’t like it. It put the same, twisted and cold feeling in her stomach that she’d felt when she’d followed the ink vendor into the back of her shop.

Jester inhaled. She leaned forward and got back to work on the tattoo, coaxing the pale green ink into place. She felt Caleb’s arm tense a little. Neither of them spoke.

Caduceus and Beau eventually joined them at the table. Jester didn’t know how much time had passed before they got there, but she felt grateful they’d arrived. Not only could Beau help by holding one of Caleb’s hands so Jester could maneuver the skin, but Caduceus could heal the patches once she’d finished. Out of the corner of her eyes, she did notice Caduceus pulling a small bottle from his satchel. Jester looked up, blinking.

“What is that, Caduceus?” She asked. Caleb and Beau glanced up as well. Caduceus raised his ears, a small smile forming his features as he held the bottle a little higher, removing the cork.

“This is rosehip oil,” he said. He tilted the bottle, letting a drop or two fall onto his fingertips. “Completely natural. It has healing properties that can lighten scars. I thought it may help. Make things easier. May I, Mr. Caleb?”

He extended a hand to Caleb’s free arm. Caleb nodded, crossing it over the other and watching as Caduceus gently rubbed the droplets into his skin. His fingers twitched momentarily, then relaxed. Jester smiled to herself, ducking her head and returning to her work.

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The day passed slow. That sort of dreadful slow, like you know something terrible is coming, but there’s nothing you can do but wait for it to arrive. Or maybe more like a game of hide-and-seek, when you know the seeker totally knows where you are and is just messing with you by dragging out finding you. The Traveler used to do that to her all the time; it was super annoying.

Jester sat on a large crate just outside the inn, fidgeting with the ends of her sleeves and swinging her legs, so her heels bumped quietly against the wood. She could see Caduceus and Yasha returning, each holding lead ropes and guiding a pair of thick-built horses toward the stables. The enormous black horse lead by Caduceus kept stretching its neck forward and lipping at the ends of his hair, while the blue-roan following Yasha bobbed its head, swiveling its ears at every other sound that carried through the little market. Jester smiled, giggling as Caduceus pushed the black horse’s muzzle away from his ear. She hoped the two weren’t already named. She already had some pretty good ideas.

“Hey, Jessie.”

Beau rounded the inn corner, tilting her chin upward as she approached the crate Jester perched on. Jester’s smile grew.

“Hey, Beau!! Did you see the new horses?? Caduceus and Yasha just got back with them! Look!”

She pointed, and Beau rotated enough to follow her direction. Beau grunted, shrugging. “Nice.
...gray one looks kinda skittish, though. That’s gonna be fun.”

“Actually, it’s a roan, technically,” Jester said. She grinned when Beau slanted her gaze toward her, swinging her legs again. “I had a book that had, like, aaaaallll the different horse colors and types and sizes and stuff. I don’t remember much about the last two things, but I totally remember the colors and stuff. That’s a blue-roan!”

“Uh-huh,” Beau said. She turned back to face Jester, folding her arms. Jester’s grin fell a little as she took in Beau’s features. Her brows were knitted close together, and she had a look of… caution? In her eyes. Jester bit her lip. This seemed to be action enough to get Beau speaking again. “Hey. You doin’ okay?”

Jester blinked twice, sitting up a little straighter. “--Huh? --Yeah! Yeah, totally, of course! Pffft.” She shrugged and flashed Beau another wide grin, flicking her head, so her hair landed behind either shoulder. “Why? --Did I sleep weird again last night or something? --Oh no, did I knick Nott out of bed at all? She looked fine when I woke--”

“No. Nothing like that,” Beau interrupted. Her expression hadn’t changed, hadn’t softened or hardened. “This morning, though. When Caduceus was giving Caleb that weird-smelling oil or whatever.”

“Ahhmmmmm, rosehip?”

“Sure. That. ...maybe I’m misreading things or being socially inept as usual, but. You seemed kind of… not you.”

“Not me?” Jester repeated. “What do you mean, Beau? --oh my gosh, you don’t think a ghost from the last inn possessed me or--”

“Jess.” Beau’s voice came firmer, now. It sounded like Mama’s when she was tired or stressed, too much so to listen to the latest shenanigans her daughter’s imaginary friend had gotten up to. Jester pressed her lips together, silencing herself. Beau sighed; only now did her features grow gentler. “When Duceus and I got to the table, the air was thicker than cold soup. I’m pretty sure half the reason he pulled out the oil then and not afterward was to break some of that up. And it wasn’t just coming from Caleb. It was all over you, too. So. I’m asking you because I care about you: are you okay?”

Jester’s shoulders sank. She huffed, swinging one foot high and letting her heel fall hard against the crate. It sent a sharp jolt through her bone to her knee, but she ignored it. “I mean, yeah. I’m fine, I guess.” She puffed some of her bangs away from her eyes, popping a shoulder up in a half-shrug. “I’m just. …--Caleb, he doesn’t always talk to us, you know? And he ran off all alone, and that… kind of scared me a whole lot. I didn’t like it, and I told him that, and he said he wouldn’t do it again, but, what if… --do you think he’d just say that or do you think he means it, Beau?” She looked up, locking eyes with her friend. “--And I feel bad!! --What if I just made him feel even worse, Beau?? What if--oh, no, no, no, I shouldn’t have said anything, what if he--”

“It’s good you said something,” Beau interrupted. She took a step closer and rotated on her heel. She pressed the small of her back against the crate’s edge, drumming her fingertips across her biceps. “Caleb needs sense knocked into him every now and again and with more things than a fist or an arrow he should have seen coming. For a smart guy, he’s pretty fucking stupid sometimes.” She paused, exhaling slowly from her nose. “So don’t feel shitty about that. You did the right thing, telling him you didn’t like that he ran off alone. …just hope it gets through to him. And if he wants to feel worse about it? Fine. That’s his issue. Something else will pop more sense into him eventually.”
“I dunno,” Jester muttered. She looked down at her hands, continuing to twist at her sleeves.

From the corner of her eye, she could see Beau glance up toward her. Beau stayed quiet for a few more seconds. It was long enough that Jester decided she must be searching for something in her expression, and for a moment she considered trying to put on a mask or something to throw the monk off. But she didn’t because she knew it wouldn’t work anymore. Not on Beau.

Beau grunted. “Look. You should talk to him again, but this time? Don’t hold back on anything, no filter or whatever the shit. You gotta tell him you’re worried because the silence obviously isn’t doing anything, and he can’t read your mind.”

“You’re sure about that?” Jester asked, lowering her voice to a whisper. Beau smirked crookedly.

“Positive. If he could read minds, whatever stupid song that’s always stuck in Duceus’s head would drive him nuts.”

“--what song does Duceus have stuck in his head?? Do I know it? Oh, no, it’s not that bad piano one with the violin, is it?”

“Not important, Jess.” Beau reached out, cuffing the side of Jester’s knee with her knuckles. “Just give it a shot. Worst that can happen is he’ll go back in his shell like some turtle.”

Jester winced. “But. That’s pretty bad, Beau. It took him this long to get here, you know?”

“What I mean is,” Beau sighed, “he’s not gonna drop dead on the spot. ‘Sides. Turtles gotta come out at some point, y’ know? How the fuck else are they gonna get food or water or… go anywhere? Right?”

"Yeah, but if they don't, they might diiiiie."

"... he’ll be fine."

Beau pushed off the crate. Her arms dropped to her sides, and she let them swing as she turned to face Jester and walk backward toward the market. She flashed a quicksilver grin, pointing. “If not, leave it to me. I'll crack him outta it.”

Jester huffed loudly. She deflated, hugging her arms against her as she watched Beau turn and stroll into the small crowd that filtered through the stands and booths. She knew Beau wouldn’t really ‘crack’ Caleb ‘out of it’. ...well. She was pretty sure she wouldn’t. But either way, much as she hated to say it: Beau was probably super right. She didn’t think mind reading WAS a spell–not that she could remember ever reading about the Traveler telling her about--and Caleb did seem pretty spacey sometimes. Especially now.

She pushed off the crate, bouncing once on the balls of her feet as she hit the ground. Maybe it would be best that she wait a day… or two… or three. To at least put a little bit of distance between now and those woods. To give Caleb enough time to breathe that maybe, just maybe, he’d be more willing to… listen. Maybe? She nodded to herself and inhaled, slow, through her nose. Then, with a flick of her hair and a skip, she pranced toward the stables.

Those horses were about to get some pretty cool names.

Chapter End Notes
apologies if this chapter was pretty lack-luster for a return after a hiatus, i’ll be making up for it with the next one. e-e thank you, again, for sticking with me and being patient!! hope you all are well!
i would like to extend a massive 'thank you' to JM (greenesweaters) for allowing me to use some of her writing in this chapter. most, if not all, of caleb's dialogue during the first part of the forest walk is hers--from an RP we did in February--and while it was initially in a very different setting, i wanted to include it in this story not just because it was so, so good, but it just fit with the direction this fic is taking.

so thank you, JM, for always blessing me with your wonderful writing and allowing me to share it. 'e-e/ i love u, beech. and thank YOU, random citizen, for continuing to read, you are: wonderous.

It took another day and a half to find someone in the small village market willing to sell a small cart at a realistic price. Fjord managed to haggle with an older human, and it was neat to watch. The human man went from guarded and wary, to enjoying Fjord’s company. Their deal ended on a firm handshake and well-wishes from one to the other.

Beau had been correct to call the roan skittish. Caduceus took the better part of an hour coaxing the mare into place in front of the cart. Jester stood nearby as Caduceus spoke softly to the mare, scratching around her ears and cheek as he guided her into place bit by bit. The black horse stood still and patient, offering the occasional nicker to signal they were safe. Jester liked to think the two must have been friends or grown up around the same pasture.

“Do you have names for them, yet?” Caduceus asked. Jester pursed her lips, shrugging and clasping her hands at her waist.

“I thought I did! But after what happened last time, maybe food sort of names won’t be so good.”

Caduceus chuckled, and Jester smiled. She continued, “what about, like. --Ooh!! We could name them after flowers! Or times of the day! What do you think, Caduceus?”

“I think that sounds lovely,” he said. “Mmm. Calla and Lily. How about that?”

“Ohhh, those are wonderful!!” Jester exclaimed. Her lips curled into a playful simper as she tilted her head. "Were you already gonna give them those names if no one else got dibs?"

Caduceus only smirked, tipping a shoulder in a half-shrug.

Jester clapped her hands and bounced a little, giggling. She took a few steps forward and planted her hands atop her knees. The mare twitched an ear in her direction, and Jester’s smile softened. "Welcome to the Mighty Nein, Calla and Lily! Don’t worry, we totally won’t let you guys get roasted by lightning or anything. Not that that’s happened before."

She peeked upward, catching Caduceus’s eye. He scoffed a small chuckle and shook his head, scratching Lily’s ears again. “Ahhh, don’t listen to her. We’ll figure things out.”

“OhhhHHHHH my GAWWD!!!”
Caleb winced one eye shut, but the smile remained light on his features.

Nott hunched over his arm after having pulled it away from his lap. Her bright yellow eyes darted over the inks and shapes that painted his skin. The tattoo on his left arm was nearly complete. Jester insisted that some spots of it needed fine-tuning or a little something extra, but she had yet to commit to something.

The design started at his wrist, a curling interlace of wildflowers and peacock feathers that wrapped around his forearm, some passing his elbow. A few seahorses and scattered shells decorated their stems, and wedges of fungus framed the scene. The fungi and the ‘eyes’ of the peacock feathers were filled with the glowing ink. Already, he’d seen it work. After a full day back on the road, the sun on his sleeveless arms, the gentle green luminescence did not fade with the evening light. He’d sat in silence during his watch, fingertips pressed gingerly to the glow. Yasha said it was beautiful. He agreed.

“Jester, you did an AMAZING job!!” Nott praised. She grinned hugely, tracing one of the flower stems with her nail. Caleb grunted softly—fingers twitching—but kept still. He looked to Jester, who sat on the other end of the cart. She beamed as she bounced her shoulders and rolled her eyes.

“Awh!! Thank yewwwww!!” Her gaze shifted to meet Caleb’s. The coloring around her cheeks darkened, and she ducked her head with a soft giggle. Her legs swung idly over the edge of the cart. “I hope your arms do feel a little better, Caleb. You, ahm, seem to be doing okay!”

“Ja. They ah. They’re much better, thank you,” he said. From the corner of his eye, he caught Beau peering at him from over the book she had propped on her knees. Caleb cleared his throat, rubbing the backs of his knuckles under his chin. “I-I think, ahhh, the healing and the rosehip have helped. That was good thinking on your part—and Mr. Clay’s.”

“Good to know it’s helping,” Caduceus said from the front of the cart. Caleb started, his face warming as he ducked his head. The heat spread from his nose to his cheeks. He closed his eyes and inhaled, holding the breath for a long moment, then exhaled in a slow, controlled gust. It didn’t help much. The jitters remained.

Nott released his arm, and he tucked it back against his chest.

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Another two days of travel found them cutting through a thick forest. Wariness passed through the group as Caduceus lead the horses on foot, and the cart’s old wood creaked as it fumbled its way over the roots and rock. One by one, they’d each gotten out of the cart to walk. No sense in riding along when the constant bouncing would splinter your stomach and rattle your skull.

By noon, they reached a large clearing that stretched several yards in a smooth, oval-like shape. Caduceus pulled the cart offroad, relieving the horses of their bridles so they could graze. Beau and Fjord perched themselves on the end of the cart. Fjord produced their tattered map from one of the bags, and the two began comparing landmarks to get an idea of exactly where they were. Caleb had just moved to join them in sitting, as his legs were aching from walking on such uneven terrain, when Jester all but apparated by his side. He jumped, and she flashed him a broad, toothy grin.

“--Hey, Caleb!” She chirped. “Dooooo you wanna go exploring with me??”

The question took a moment to register. When it did, Caleb’s brows wrinkled, and he frowned. “Ah… exploring? You mean in the woods?”
“No, Caleb, I mean in the clouds and stuff,” Jester said, rolling her eyes and shaking her head. Caleb swallowed, his gaze darting away from her, then back. The playful slant of her lips… that glint in her eyes. It knotted his stomach in the worst, best of ways. And the damned jitters were back. He kept quiet, and she continued. “Yeah, of COURSE, I mean in the woods!! I really, REALLY want to find something cool to draw for the Traveler! He’s got to be bored of seeing the same old trees and roads and valleys and stuff.”

“I…” Caleb’s mouth moved wordlessly. It took a few tries to find his voice again. “You’re. Not worried about going alone in the woods?”

“We won’t be alone! We’ll have each other! Alone-but-totally-not. In the woods,” Jester said. She smiled brightly and, again, a deep violet tinted her cheeks. It made his throat tighten, and his face warms all over again. He wondered who in their group might be listening in, raising a brow, seeing the heat evident on his face. The times Nott would tease Jester about Fjord or vise-versa, the time she insisted Caleb was ‘very handsome’ and could have any girl he…

He almost wanted Beau to walk up and punch him in the kidney. It’d be excuse enough to lie down for several minutes and not speak to anyone. At all. This was probably overthinking things, but. All the same.

His silence must have gone on longer than he realized, and Jester began to fidget with her dress. “--And, and if anything weird was to happen, you know, I could send a message! Or so could you--to Nott! Or Beau! Or whoever you want, you know, it'snotabigdealorwhatever.”

Caleb sighed. He sent a glance toward the treeline, eyeing the shadows and where light snaked through the canopy leaves. The trees were well spread apart, allowing for easy maneuvering and visual ability, both in distance and daylight. The most significant danger--that he could immediately see, anyway--was the rough terrain. A misstep could lead to a twisted ankle. His legs still ached from the walk here.

He drew his gaze back to Jester and, instantly, knew there would be no way to get out of her grasp. The way her shoulders rose with the corners of her lips, the hope bright and shining in her eyes… who was he to smother that?

“Alright,” he said, voice quiet enough that maybe the others wouldn't hear. “Let’s not go too far. I’m sure we will find something that will, ah. Keep him entertained enough.”

Jester inhaled, her voice squeaking at the end of the breath. She nodded and clapped her hands. “Okay--yes--of course!! Let’s go, let’s go!! ” She bounced backward twice then twirled on her heel, racing toward the treeline in a wide-strided skip. Caleb rolled his jaw as he watched her go, barely glancing toward the cart. Beau and Fjord still appeared distracted by the map, and Nott had moved over to Caduceus and the horses. Yasha, however, stared in his direction. He blinked at her, and she raised one eyebrow. Jester’s voice rang out from the trees-- “CALEB, YOU’RE SO SLOW!!”--and Yasha’s lips slanted into a gentle smirk. She tilted her head and gaze toward the treeline, then back to him; a ‘well, go on’ gesture if he’d ever seen one.

Caleb ducked his head, shoved his hands into his coat pockets, and walked after Jester as quickly as he could without jogging.

Several steps later, he lifted his head again. Jester continued to skip a yard or two ahead of him, her arms swinging by her sides and her tail swishing out from beneath the ends of her skirts every couple strides. They walked for a full minute, possibly two, when something caught his eye. It was only
now that he realized… she didn’t have her bag with her. Which meant no sketchbook. Which meant…

“… Jester,” he said. Her pace didn’t slow, but she peeked over her shoulder.

“Yeah, Caleb?”

“…where… is your bag?”

“My what?”

“Your--your bag --didn’t you bring your sketchbook with you? For the Traveler, so you could draw him things?”

“Oh! Ahhhhhmmmmmm…” Her pace slowed to a walk. She spun on her heel, so she faced him but continued walking backward, folding her arms behind her waist. The mischievous little smile on her face shrank. She looked guilty, like a child who’d just snuck a cookie from the jar. “I kindaaaa sortaaa… might have lied. Just a little.”

Caleb’s pace faltered. He almost stopped walking, and his eyes narrowed. “…you… --why would you…”

“Because… I really wanted to talk to you. And I didn’t want to, like, make you feel super awkward around the others, you know?” Jester said, trying to widen her smile. “And I also knew that if you knew that it was going to be talking and stuff that you would find a way to not do it. Sooo I fibbed. Just a little!!”

Caleb dropped his head, sighing heavily and slowing to a halt. He rubbed his hand down his face and shook his head, digging his thumb and finger into the bridge of his nose. “Jester…”

“I know, I know, I’m super sorry,” she said quickly. “It’s kind of a dick move, I know, but--”

“--what. What… is it?” Caleb asked. He dropped his hand back to his side, sending a tired look toward her. The moment their eyes met, her expression began to fade. “What did you need to talk to me about that you brought us out into the wood, then?”

She toyed with her fingers, twisting the ends, plucking at loose skin near her nails. She opened and closed her mouth a few times, each ending with a roll of her lips or a frustrated huff. Until, finally, she gave her foot a little stomp and thrust her arms downward, keeping her hands clasped in front of her. “I want to talk about the last inn and--and when you ran away into the other forest alone.”

Oh.

This. Still this.

Caleb inhaled and held the breath. He nodded. “Oh… okay, then.” He cleared his throat and wiped the space under his nose with his knuckles. “I… --then. There… is more than what you said before?”

“Yeah,” Jester said. The tone of her voice was familiar. It’s the type of tone you use when you’re debating backing out of something but forcing yourself not to. Caleb stared at her for another silent moment, then he nodded.

“Okay.”
Jester nodded once. Twice. Then several times, continuing to pluck and twist at her fingers and hands. Her eyes darted around the ground under her boots. She nodded again and raised her eyes to him. “It’s just... Caleb, I. --You. You told me--at my room--that I had worried enough about you--and that it wasn’t important to celebrate that you’d gotten some good sleep after everything. --And before all of that, you didn’t tell us--ANY of us--that your arms and the tattoos had been... had been bothering you and bringing up terrible, awful memories! And--and back in the fight?? You--you walled yourself off with that dickhead--in the woods?--And Beau said he was using some spell that drained the water out of things?? Caleb--what if she hadn’t---- a lot of things could have happened to you and we’re super lucky that Yasha was able to throw Beau over the fire and she could help you!”

Caleb swallowed, his eyes quick to dart away from her gaze. To look at anything but her. The trees, the grass, strange-looking stones on the path around them.

“You do these things, and then you tell us not to worry about you, and. And I don’t LIKE that, Caleb!!” Jester continued. “And you told me not to waste a spell on you to help you--but--but that’s not wasting--it’s helping, you know!! It. ... I dunno, Caleb, it’s like. It’s like you DO want help, but you also don’t want help--or--or like you only sometimes want help--or like we shouldn’t give you help. It. --It’s like you can’t decide if you want to be... safe or not. Or that you think being in pain is... a good thing... you know?”

“Jester,” Caleb said, his voice low and careful. His mouth was dry. It was as though every other word urged an invisible hand around his throat to tighten. “There’s... a lot of baggage. When it comes to someone like me.”

A long stretch of silence.

“Okay. ...I may not know whoever you were before we met, Caleb,” Jester said quietly, “but I know you now.”

He continued to stare out into the trees, but he didn’t need to see her to know that this wasn’t something she wanted to hear.

“Yeah, okay, but... that... --that doesn’t mean you have to be so hard on yourself and just let yourself feel bad and let everything around you totally suck.”

“Before we met...” His voice trailed a moment, and he sighed. “Before we met, I was not the person you know now. I was so... so, very. Different.”

A long stretch of silence.

“Okay. ...I may not know whoever you were before we met, Caleb,” Jester said quietly, “but I know you now.”

Caleb clenched his jaw. The words were meant to be a comfort, but they bore into his chest, much like a dagger might. He felt them twist, felt them tear into his lungs. A part of his mind told him that she’d trapped him here. Another part told him that she deserved answers and had a right to them. And another part, still, told him how horrible it would be if she knew.

“No.” The word found its way off his lips, somehow. He shook his head, rolling his jaw as he started forward again, head bowed and eyes on the path directly ahead. “You only think you do.”

Jester made a small sound of protest as he began to pass her. He could see her boots start to back up to keep parallel to him, and he saw when the heel of one caught on a raised root. Jester gasped as she began to fall backward, windmilling her arms, and before he could think twice, Caleb reached out and caught one of her wrists. Her weight almost tipped him, but he took a step forward and braced himself. Jester squeaked as her fall stopped. She scrambled to get better purchase with her feet, gripping his hand as one of her boots slid on loose pebbles. After a second or so--waiting to see if the threat of a fall had passed--Jester looked up at him and smiled sheepishly.
“... thanks, Caleb.”

He stared at her, swallowing, feeling frozen in place. His hand gripped hers, then he released it and continued on. Again, Jester huffed, and he saw her jog back up to walk beside him in the corners of his eyes.

“--Hey,” she said. She ducked her head and, for a moment, their eyes almost met. He shifted his gaze in the opposite direction. “Caleb--stop. Listen to me?”

Caleb sighed lowly, and he pressed his lips together. He quickened his pace. She quickened hers.

“I know you just said that I only think I know you,” Jester said, “and… and that you have baggage and whatever and you were so different before, but. That was before and stuff, you know? It doesn’t. It doesn’t mean we gotta let your arms hurt and you run off alone and get in danger and stuff! --and where we can’t help you!”

Caleb closed his eyes for a few steps, opening them on an inhale and shaking his head. “Jester, I know it must be a pain in the ass, the way I am and how I respond in certain situations. I know that it has taken a great effort to become the group that we are today. But… the reason is…” His voice broke, and he cleared his throat. “I could…--I could continue doing what we are, now. I could travel the entirety of Wildemount and do nothing but good for the rest of my life with all of you. But it will. Never. Make up for what I have done in the past.” His skin grew cold. He needed to be occupied somehow--distracted. His hands searched for something, starting to find their way to his forearms but shifting to pull on the rolled sleeves of his coat. “I have done… horrible. Horrible things, Jester. I have hurt people, killed people. And I did it because I was so sure that I was in the right to do so. Because I was better. Smarter. I was evil.” His voice started to quake, and he sucked a breath through his teeth. What was he doing? He turned his head further away from her, swallowing hard. “If you knew--if you knew the person I was then, you would be--.... I-I don’t like thinking about it, and that’s cowardly. The way… --the way you, and Nott--everyone--are slowly… o-oh so slowly… making me think that… that maybe I am redeemable in any way is… it’s unacceptable. It’s disrespectful to all of the lives that I’ve tainted, that I’ve taken away.”

His mouth moved mutely for a few more silent words before he locked his jaw. That sick, cold feeling began tightening in his stomach again. Nausea and fear. Why the hell had he said all that? Why had he given her more things to question? Why had he let go of her hand?

He kept walking. He could hear Jester's footfalls still by his side, if not a little behind, now. A small part of him hoped she’d stop and maybe return to the others. A large part of him prayed to any god who would listen that she would continue with him, be it in silence or not. He kept walking, and so did she.

“I don’t know what you did,” Jester spoke up after a while. Caleb winced at the gentle tone she used. “And. If I never do and you never want me to, that’s okay. ....So. I cannot say that you could ‘make up’ for it. Whatever that means to you, you know? But… you are different, now. And. And you’re doing good things--a lot of good things.”

Caleb exhaled in a short gust, pressing one hand over his face.

“--You ARE, Caleb!” Jester urged. “None of us are keeping you here--you could leave whenever! We’d miss you and be sad and worried and stuff, but none of us are making you stay here and do things, you know? And that would be okay because you can go whenever but you haven’t! Even--.... even after Fjord and Yasha and I were captured by those--.... people. And even after they… --they killed… Molly…” Her voice broke, and he felt it in his chest. He squeezed his eyes shut beneath his hand, pressing his fingertips into the areas around his temple and cheekbones. “You STILL came for
us. You didn’t have to, but you DID and--and you got into that horrible place--and you didn’t just save us, but you saved so many people, Caleb. …--and you almost died then, too, and you could have left again, but you’re still here and… and maybe none of that will make up for what you did, or fix what you’ve hurt or taken, but now you--you’re giving, Caleb. You…” Her voice trailed for a shaken moment. “...--there was a child in there. There were children. There were children--and now they have a future. They have a future, and that’s wonderful and--and you helped give that to them.”

His steps slowed until he stood still. Caleb inhaled through his nose, his hand sinking away from his face. He opened his eyes, and, though his mind protested, he turned to face her. Jester had stopped by his side and turned to face him. Her hands were clenched into tight, shivering fists at her sides. Large tears made trails down her cheeks, and her lips quivered as she tried to steady her breaths. He felt every inch of his being and spirit wither as he took her in. He couldn’t move.

“It… i-it’s good that you. That you feel bad for doing bad things, Caleb,” Jester said, sniffing. “Because it… it means that you know they were bad and you don’t like it. …but you shouldn’t tell yourself that all the good isn’t worth anything, either. It’s worth so much, Caleb. So much. … and I wish you’d let yourself see. …--shit. I-I’m sorry, I. Mmn shit.”

She ducked her head and swallowed, scrubbing the heels of her palms into her eyes. Caleb pursed his lips, rolling them together and shifting his jaw. He stepped up to face her and gingerly took each of her wrists, guiding her hands away from her face. She blinked and sniffed, hesitating before peering up at him through her bangs.

“No,” Caleb said softly. “I’m sorry. …I’ve made you cry, and…” He chewed on the inside of his cheek, breathing out through his nose. “I just… a few days ago told you that I never wanted to be this for you, and I’ve caused it again. ... heh … what a foolish man I am…”

Jester bit her lip and ducked her head. A low, shivering giggle reached Caleb’s ears, and he frowned.

“... you… are laughing, now?” He asked, hands loosening around her wrists. The words were barely out of his mouth when she looked up at him, her eyes suddenly large. Some of the color had left her face.

“C… that. That wasn’t me,” she said.

They stared at each other. Caleb inhaled as a cold, uneasy shiver ran through his skin. He released her wrists as she turned in the direction they’d come from, and he looked further into the woods ahead.

A breeze rustled the tree canopy, sending speckles of sunlight dancing across the forest floor. The spots of yellow shifted and blurred, muddying shapes, the shadows of the trees, and forms in the distance. Caleb held his breath and focused, searching through the scattered trunks. Another breeze passed through, and the yellow speckles danced again. All but two.

… all but…

Caleb stopped breathing.

The tiny, golden glints just yards ahead of them weren’t spots of sunlight. They were part of an angular head with a sunken brow and a narrow snout. With its matted tan coat and black spots dotting their way down its arched neck, it was no wonder he hadn’t seen it before… the creature blended into the forest’s lighting perfectly.

“Jester…” he whispered. He heard the scrape of her boots as she must have turned around. He didn’t
take his eyes off the creature. It stared back at him, the tufts of thick hair running up its neck to the
crest of its back twitching. The sunlight shifted across its face after another rush of air, and he saw
the corners of its maw curl upward and its jaws fall open. A low, stuttering giggling began to rise,
rumbling from deep in the creature’s chest. Caleb slid one foot backward. “...run.”

“What?” She hissed, her breath shaky. “Caleb, what is--”

“--Run.”

No sooner was the word out of his mouth did it move. A blur of a shadow snaking through the trees,
heading straight for them. Caleb’s heart locked. He whirled on his heels. “--RUN.”

They took off, side by side, both almost stumbling over the roots and their own two feet. Caleb’s
boots landed unevenly between two stones, and he grunted as the misstep almost sent him tumbling.
A loud rustling rose behind them, and Jester let out a shriek as the shadow darted from the brush and
sped across the path on their right.

“--What the FUCK?!” Jester screamed. She changed direction--sprinting left. Caleb tried to call out
to her, but the words were lost on his breath. He heaved more oxygen into his lungs as he launched
after her, blocking low branches with his arms and narrowly over-stepping a looped root. Jester’s
voice rose again. “What the FUCK is THAT?!”

“Hyena!” Caleb managed to gasp. “A-a--a very--large!--Hyena!”

“Oh, FUCK!”

“Just keep going!!”

The rumble rose, going from a low, shivering chuckle to a laugh. Caleb could hear a massive body
scrape through the trees--fallen branches and leaves crush and snap. His head spun.

Jester had changed direction--okay--oooooookay, think. Think, you idiot--you just have to make a
right, and you should be able to find your way back. We should get to the others--we have to alert
them--

“CALEB!!”

Jester pointed to their right, and his gaze snapped after her. The massive hyena had rounded back,
grin wide, tongue dangling from the space between its jagged teeth. Its piercing yellow eyes were
locked on them.

The hyena charged. Caleb forced his legs to pump faster, coughing on his next breath as he fought to
remain at Jester’s side. She darted off the path--another left--and now they were going in the opposite
direction of the group once more.

It’s herding us. It’s--

“--Jester!” He called out. “Jester, we can’t--”

She’d looked over her shoulder. Just for a second. But that second had been long enough for her foot
to fall on loose earth at the edge of the path.

Caleb’s breath stopped in his lungs as she suddenly dropped right, arms thrown up and hands
clawing the air for anything to stop her. He didn’t think. He reached out--grabbed one of her hands.
But her weight--his momentum--it was too much, and he couldn’t catch his footing. She pulled him
The pain came from every direction. First her shoulder, then her hip. Then the side of her head, her ribs, her back, her shoulder, her knees. She’d drag a breath into her lungs, and the next collision with roots and dirt would knock it right back out. Her vision was a blur of greens, golds, blacks, browns.

Then it stopped.

Jester's skin burned. Her heart swelled in her ribs, throbbing, aching. She gasped, digging her nails into anything she could--trying to figure out what was up and what was down. She peeled her face out of the dirt, panting, her arms shaking as she pushed back onto her haunches. Caleb scrambled to sit up beside her, leaves and twigs sticking out of his hair. Jester looked back up the slope they’d just fallen down, and her stomach dropped.

The hyena barreled down the slope. It made no effort to slow its momentum, dirt and leaves kicking up in every direction. A high-pitched, hysterical and sputtering laughter filled her ears, and Jester could hear herself screaming as the beast sprang off the slope, jaws open and teeth flashing in the light.

Caleb slammed a hand into her arm, thrusting her aside. She hit the ground and slid just as he threw up his other hand.

A low, but earsplitting, bell-like ring cut through the air as the hyena collided with an invisible force between it and Caleb. Caleb grunted loudly as he fell back into the ground. The hyena shrieked, its body tumbling to the side and shaking the earth as it landed. Immediately, its legs began to flail and scramble.

Jester kicked her legs, shoving them out from under her--grabbing for nearby roots and branches to help her stand. She hauled herself up just as Caleb grabbed one of her wrists, then twisted his hand to hold hers. His fingers pushed into the spaces between hers, and his grip was like iron.

“All you do,” he said. He was out of breath already, and the panic made every word shake. “Whatever you do, don’t fucking let go.”

All she could do was nod. Again and again. She wouldn’t let go. She understood.

He nodded once.

Caleb lunged into a full sprint, and she raced alongside him. They were maybe five steps into the dash when she felt a tremendous pull on her arm. She nearly lost her footing as the trees blurred into one dark color--for a split second, they moved fast enough to fly. Quick as it came, the spell slowed, and they were running on their own again. It would be another six seconds until they got another burst of speed. She could already hear the hyena crashing through the brush behind them.

One.

Two.

Three.

“Shit, shit, shit!!” Jester hissed. She squeezed his hand. “What do we do?!”

Four.
Expeditious retreat kicked in and, again, the world became a mud of color around them. Jester gasped as they came out of it. She gripped Caleb’s hand so tightly her own bones ached.

Only now did she realize that she had no idea where they were in comparison to the cart and their friends. The ground down here was muddier—thicker. This had to be where rainwater would pool after storms. What sunlight got through the canopy wasn’t warm enough to dry it quickly.

Even with Caleb’s spell, they wouldn’t be able to outrun this thing for long on terrain like this. The six seconds between the spell’s bursts were enough time for the hyena to close the distance between them. They needed a plan. They needed help. She didn’t know if this was a beast that would be wise to fight without the others.

The hyena’s laugh squealed behind them, and she cringed at the pitch.

The trees smeared into one. Jester puffed, stumbling but forcing herself to remain on her feet. She blinked her eyes back open in time to see a small ledge in front of them, and she braced herself as they dropped down. Jester shoved up and back into the run, but her arm caught. She inhaled as Caleb suddenly yanked her back, beneath the ledge and against the mud wall. Her back hit the cold, wet earth, and her nose filled with the scents of moss and root rot. Jester blinked widely, opening her mouth but immediately closing it as Caleb swept an arm behind him and snatched some of the loose mud dripping from the ledge out of the air. He smeared it across her face and clamped his hand hard over her mouth, pressing them both into the wall. She reached up with both hands and dug her fingers between his palm and her face. The pressure over her mouth increased.

“--SHH--” he hissed through his teeth.

A wet THUD shook the ground above them. More mud slopped off the ledge, spilling and splatting into the ground inches behind Caleb’s back. His breath caught, and he went utterly still. Jester tilted her gaze up. She stopped breathing.

Four long, curved claws rolled over the ledge. One tapped into the mud, loosening bits of earth that had managed to dry and dropping them onto Caleb’s shoulders. Jester breathed, slow and shaking, through her nose as a second set of claws appeared. She became aware of things one by one. Her legs were shaking. Her knees felt like jelly. Her head spun as though she’d been dancing for hours without rest. She could hear the hushed giggle reverberate through the air above them working its way down her spine. Caleb’s hand, still pressed flat over her mouth, was vibrating. His face had lost so much color, his skin appeared white as bone.
More mud slopped off the ledge above them. Jester shrank further into the wall, eyes wide as the hyena stepped down and into the glade. She watched one of its massive paws spread the mud beneath its weight. Drool trickled in thin strings from its jaws, and its tongue hung from one side as it panted and giggled. Caleb pressed closer to her, and she realized all at once why he'd shoved mud all over her face. She was blue. Bright, *fucking* blue. Among the earthy tones and the rot, she'd stick out like a beacon. She shrank back a bit more to let him cover her, and she was sure she could feel his heart pounding in her chest, too.

The hyena stepped the rest of the way off the ledge. Its ears swiveled, and it raised its head high above its shoulders. Jester had seen hyenas before… in picture books. She knew they had a distinct curve from their back through their neck, but it was only now, as she saw one before her, that she realized how eerie their posture truly was. Slowly, it lowered its head, almost touching its muzzle to the ground. A deep, rumbling groan emitted from its jowls, and Jester felt it prickle through her skin like ice crawling across a lake. She closed her eyes and shook it off, holding her breath for three full beats of her heart before opening them again.

Caleb… his eyes were going hollow. His lips were trembling. What breath was getting through his lips shook uncontrollably. A jolt went through Jester’s spine as she realized what was happening, and she pried her hands away from his, cupping them around his face. He jumped, blinking as he met her eyes. He exhaled through his nose, and she felt the shudder and fear run from his hands into her. Jester swallowed and kept her eyes locked on his, forcing her gaze to firm. She inhaled and nodded her head once, trying to communicate through the hyena’s terrible groan. Caleb nodded back. He squeezed his eyes shut and bowed his head, and his other hand—curled against the dirt wall above her head—dug its fingers into the earth.

Jester peered past his shoulders again. The hyena had moved forward, nose still to the ground. It hadn't kept running. That meant that it must know they were closeby and that they'd stopped to hide. They couldn’t stay here. If they did, the hyena would eventually sniff them out. They had to start moving.

She pulled one hand away from Caleb’s face, sliding it down and beneath one of his arms, so it reached past his back. Jester inhaled and extended her will to one of the rotting, hollowed logs several yards ahead. A duplicate of herself appeared. *Okay. Okayokayokay.* This is a good start. Now if she could just…

She had the duplicate dart across the glade. It got across the rotting log and leaped to one of the jagged rocks, barely beginning to sprint along it when the hyena’s head rose and its eyes and ears locked onto the duplicate. For an agonizing moment, it didn’t move. The muscles in its shoulders twitched.

It launched forward. The horrible, screeching laughter cut through the air and the hyena lunged just as the duplicate dove for the opening of a hollowed stump. Its jaws snapped closed over the duplicate’s lower half, passing through the air. The hyena’s laugh shuddered, its pitch confused, and it froze to stare down at the stump. Jester swallowed, her hand beginning to shake. Maybe she could keep it distracted. Maybe she could--

--the hyena tore into the stump. Its oversized claws ripped and shredded the rain-rotted wood, and it gorged its teeth into the sides, the top, splintering through and tearing it to pieces as though gutting a deer. Jester stared, all at once sick to her stomach. In place of the wood, she saw skin. In place of the hyena’s thick saliva, she saw strings of blood.

One of Caleb’s fingers tapped her cheek, and she pried her eyes off the hyena to look at him. He rolled his lips together and inhaled, his voice just barely audible. “*We need to go,*” he said. Jester
reached up and gingerly took his hand away from her mouth, her next breath little more than a shiver. She nodded.

She raised her hands, gliding her fingers through the air, and murmuring the incantation for pass without a trace. The air around herself and Caleb grew darker, and sound became gently muted. Caleb took one of her hands in his again, and she squeezed it firmly. He looked at her, his eyes stern.

“I won’t leave you,” he muttered. Jester inhaled slowly through her nose, gripping his hand again as she nodded.

“I know,” she whispered back.

Caleb returned the nod. He rotated cautiously, and they both peered out into the glade. The hyena loomed over where the stump had been, but it seemed to be back on the hunt. Slowly, it began to stalk toward the other rocks and twisted roots. As it turned its head, Jester could see the golden glint in its eyes. Which was weird because… what sunlight did get through the thicker canopy wouldn’t be enough to reflect like that. Something was off. It was super, super off.

Caleb squeezed her hand, and she looked back to him. He held one finger to his lips. Slowly, they crept out from beneath the ledge. They kept low and to the opposite end of the glade that the hyena prowled. Jester tried to keep her eyes ahead of her—to watch for stray leaves or a tricky root that might catch her foot—but kept glancing in the direction of the beast’s towering withers. She adjusted her fingers around Caleb’s hand, exhaling a shaken breath. The hyena’s giggle rose and fell. It crept through the air like an invisible mist, prickling her skin. Her muscles tightened, and something in the back of her mind begged her to run.

A sharp pull to her arm brought her out of the thought, and she squeaked as Caleb yanked her behind a curved rock. They turned and sank, sitting at its base with their backs pressed against it. No sooner had her skull hit the stone did a scraping thud sound from above them. Pebbles and bits of dirt sprinkled the ground around her boots. Jester pulled her knees to her chest, and she craned her head back.

The claws were back. Curled mere centimeters above them. Jester held her breath, forcing herself to swallow the sound rising in her throat. She looked ahead, watching the hyena’s shadow pass over the broken branches and old logs before them. There was another, low, chuckling growl, and she swore she felt an icy finger drag up her spine.

“Ruh-huh-huh-huhnnnnnn.”

She couldn’t be imagining it. The hyena echoed what Caleb had said before. The word rasped and twisted in the sound of its laugh, and she barely noticed it as it stepped off the rock and further into the glade’s center. Jester turned to look at Caleb. He stared back at her, his chest visibly rising and falling with every breath. He swallowed, and she nodded.

Caleb shifted, fixing his grip in hers, and began to move. She let herself be pulled after him, keeping as crouched as she could manage while tip-toeing quickly through the mud. She shot a look into the center of the glade. The hyena’s back was to them, and its shoulders shifted up and down as it crept over the roots.

“Ruh-huh-huh-huhnnnnnnnchnhnhnnnnn.”

She bit down, hard, on her lip and directed her eyes ahead. Caleb guided them forward, pausing every few steps to take cover behind a lopsided boulder or the remains of a tree that had tried to grow despite the earth’s conditions. It took her a moment and several breaths, but she managed to calm
herself and focus enough to spot where he was trying to go.

A curl of roots and brush formed what appeared to be some sort of… almost a tunnel, that curved and looped up the dirt slope and into the lighter woods above. If they could reach it, they could get back to higher grounds while maintaining cover. Hope fluttered in her chest, and she couldn’t help but move just a little faster.

They were almost there. Just one more barrier--one more thing to hide behind and pass. Caleb looked back at her, and she nodded. They both took in a sharp breath, and they darted forward. The large slab of tree trunk ahead of them was big enough to hide them both. Just a few more steps--

--Caleb’s foot slid out from under him. He gasped as he hit the mud and skidded, and Jester stumbled after him. Caleb scrambled to guide his slide to the trunk. Jester threw out one hand, knowing that she would slam into the wood if she didn’t brace herself first. But as her palm hit it, the rotting bark rasped in protest. It cracked, brittle under the force of their collision, and collapsed. Jester watched it drop into the mud, frozen and unable to breathe. Directly across the glade, hunched, its mouth curled upward into a twisted, wrong grin, was the hyena, staring straight through her with its yellow eyes. Jester’s knees began shaking.

And all at once it was moving. Laughter flooded her ears and head. Her body screamed at her to run, but she couldn’t move. She was stunned. Paralyzed. Completely. Utterly. Paralyzed.

A force threw her to the side, and she hit the ground elbows first. Caleb pushed himself up as he tore his hands out of his coat pockets. For a split second, she thought his hands were covered in mud as he pointed a finger at the charging hyena. Then she smelled the guano.

Jester rolled onto her hands and knees. She scrambled to stand and dug her fingers into anything she could touch—mud, roots, stone, anything—and ripped herself across the ground. She’d just hauled herself upright when she saw the flames bloom from his fingertip.

The fire roared as it stripped through the mud and rocks. Its heat hit Jester like a stone wall, and she threw her arms up to guard her face. She tried to open her eyes, but the efforts dried them to the point tears seared down her face. Somewhere in the fire, the hyena screeched. Jester forced her eyes open. The massive shadow was still moving, and it would reach Caleb in seconds.

“--CALEB!!” Jester screamed. The flames began to dissipate. She threw her arms out, fingers splayed in the air. “GET DOWN!!”

He didn’t waste a second. Caleb threw himself forward into the mud, arms covering his head. The hyena surged through the smoke as the air filled with the smell of scorched hair and flesh. Jester inhaled and hissed the blindness incantation.

It’d probably been a mistake, throwing himself into mud he’d just boiled. The unstable earth around him shook like gelatin, sloshing the broiled clay onto the back of his neck as giant paws narrowly avoided crushing him. Despite the burn seeping through his collar, his body felt like ice. Every muscle, frozen in place, and any attempt to shift or move would hurt like fucking hell.

The thunderous footfalls stopped. The world went uncomfortably still. Caleb pulled his arms away from his head, and he opened his eyes.

Smoke rose off the ground in thin tendrils, and what roots and bark had been in the fireball’s path glowed orange and red, the still-burning embers eating them from the inside. Caleb lowered his arms to rest on either side of his head. He rolled his eyes around the area, searching--desperately--for that
familiar deep blue. And he spotted her.

Jester stood nearly twenty-five feet from him. She started toward him, but he thrust out a hand to signal her to stop. She skidded a little, and it was only then that he took in her face.

Her skin had gone from a violet-blue to a pale robin’s egg. Jester raised her hands and pressed them over her mouth, her eyes wide and filled with terror, and she started shaking her head. Dread began to build in his stomach as he watched her take a slow step back. Then, he felt it.

Pressure. Slow, at first, then fast increasing.

Claws lowered into his vision. The weight on his skull became immense. The mud he was lying in bubbled as his face began to sink under the weight of the hyena’s paw. Caleb sucked a breath through his teeth and pressed his lips shut as the mud started to leak into the space around his mouth and nose. He could feel his heartbeat throbbing through his head. It felt as though his skull could split at any moment. One of his eyes winced shut just as the mud began to slop over it. It burned to the touch, and it was all he could do to keep from crying out.

As his vision began to blur, he noticed something catch the light in the corners of his sight. Saliva. Glistening in the sun that found its way to the ground. Stringy threads oozed down as the hyena’s head lowered to hover mere inches from his own, and Caleb shakily dragged one hand back to him as its snout passed through the space it’d been in. Its eyes still gave off an eerie yellow glow, but… this close, he could see that they were milked over. It was blind. --Jester had blinded it.

The spell wouldn’t last much longer.

--Caleb’s teeth gritted together as his face sunk further into the mud. Things were starting to go white. His ears filled with the sound of hammers and a piercing hum. Be it the mud or the panic, he was beginning to suffocate. But he couldn’t move, else the hyena would realize he’d fallen right into its paws. Caleb forced his eyes open, body shaking, as the hyena's rumbling chuckle leaked through the hammers and humming.

Then he saw her.

Jester had moved a few inches from where she’d stood before. She knelt and plucked something from the mud, and even from where he was, face half-buried, he could see her trembling. She straightened into a stand and drew one arm back and over her head. She inhaled, froze for a beat, then threw a stone through the air. It clattered against a distant rock.

Caleb cringed as the hyena raised its head, and its weight bore into his skull. He nearly yelped when the pressure intensified, then all at once disappeared as the hyena lunged in the direction the stone had flown. Arms weak and his entire body limp as a noodle, Caleb managed to push onto his hands and knees, crawl backward, panting, groping one hand through the air behind him as he crumbled back--and catch hold of something. It was Jester’s hand, and she all but wrenched his arm out of his socket as she dragged him into the tunnel of brush and roots.

She pulled him against her and locked her arms around his shoulders, holding him in place. For several seconds, all he could do was listen to the rapid beating of her heart, the strain of her breath--grip one of her forearms as he drank in all the air he could.

“Oh fuck,” Jester whispered. “Oh shit, oh fuck.”

A whistle cut through the grove.

Caleb sat up enough to see a flash of bright, bubbling blue light. Crackling filled the air. A second--a
third flash. Something fizzed with energy.

The hyena screamed, and laughter flooded the air. Both Caleb and Jester jumped as a large shadow charged past them, and they recoiled closer to each other as it rushed up the slope and sent a rain of dirt and rubble spilling over them. And for what seemed like an eternity, everything went still. Completely silent.

"Caleb??? Jess???"

They looked up.

It was Fjord’s voice. Jester let out a tiny, joyful noise, and she shoved one arm up through the brush, ignoring the thin branches that cut her skin. "Fjord!!"

He could hear footsteps. Several of them.

Caleb turned his head to look up through the undergrowth. The first face he saw was Yasha’s. Her eyes widened as she spotted them, and in a blink she had grabbed a handful of roots and branches in each hand, tearing them open. Beau was suddenly there, wedged half-way into the tunnel and reaching both arms toward them. Caleb took one of her offered hands without a second thought, and Jester grabbed the other. They were pulled out of hiding. Nott’s voice—half panicked half concerned—reached his ears. He saw Fjord run up to them, the falchion in one hand and his other sparking with an unused eldritch blast. He and Beau were speaking, but nothing they said registered. The walk back to the cart was mostly quiet.

He hadn't let go of Jester's hand.

“--How did you get it to run away!?”

Caleb turned his head, looking in Jester’s direction. She sat beside him on the back of the cart, arms held out so Beau could examine the thin lacerations brought on by their fall. Her eyes kept darting between Yasha and Fjord, waiting for an answer. Caleb started to open his mouth, but Caduceus’s gentle hand cupped the side of his face, guiding him to look forward again. There was a warmth, much like morning sunlight, that spread across the burned side of his face, and Caleb sighed as his posture melted. Nott, who sat in the narrow space between Caleb and Jester, gave his upper arm a gentle pat.

“It had been charmed,” Caduceus said, voice low and soft. “Fjord must have hit it just enough times to wake it up. Once it realized it was packless, it took off. Hyenas of that species aren’t usually solitary. Despite their size, they don’t much like being alone.”

“We heard Jester scream,” Beau added. “And not long after that, we saw a fucking fireball go off. That’s what lead us right to you. Don’t think it’ll be a problem anymore, though. Caleb fried the shit out of it; doubt it’ll make it far without getting one hell of an infection. Or worse.”

“Ohh…” The sound of Jester’s voice was pitiful. Caleb heard Beau scoff.

“It was going to kill you two, Jess.”

“--I know, but--!” Jester protested. “But it was charmed, you know? It didn’t want to kill us. Someone was making it do that. Now it’s probably going to die and… that’s really sad.”

Caleb looked down at his hands.
“I’m more concerned about who charmed it,” Fjord said. He stepped over to lean against the cart on Caleb’s other side, folding his arms as his eyes narrowed. He paused a moment “...what’re the odds it was one of you, uh. ...pals...?”

Caleb’s mouth went dry, and he cleared his throat. “Iiii… I ah… --no. This would not be them.” He swallowed, pressing his lips together. “They would have made themselves, mnn… known. Not hide behind a beast.”

Nott patted his arm again. She looked between Caduceus and Fjord, the worry evident on her features. “What… what about that elf lady from before?” She asked. “The one from a few days ago--when we fought that group of assholes? She’s the one who got away, and… she was a magic user, too.”

Caduceus and Fjord exchanged a glance.

“Think she could be tailing us?” Fjord asked. Caduceus sighed, shrugging as his hand slid away from Caleb’s face. Caleb reached up and carefully pressed his fingers to the once burned skin. It felt healthy again. Painless and clean. He lowered his hand back to his lap, giving Caduceus a grateful nod. The firbolg smiled, then turned to face Fjord again.

Caleb inhaled, held the breath, then exhaled slowly. He looked down at his hands, flexing them open, then closed, then open again. Nott gave his forearm a gentle squeeze, and he tilted his gaze to her.

“Are you alright, Caleb?” She asked, studying his face. Caleb smiled.

“Ja. Ja, I’m fine. Jester made sure of that. Just as she has been doing for a very long time.” He looked to his side. Jester looked back at him, the small smile on her features a perfect blend of proud and, somehow, bashful. When their eyes met, her smile grew, and she quickly ducked her head, scrunching her shoulders to her ears with a breathy giggle. The sight and sound warmed his face.

He could feel Nott watching the two of them. Even as Jester hesitantly looked back up at him, he allowed his expression to soften. He offered a single nod. “Going forward… I’ll do better.”

Jester blinked at him.

"Do better?" Nott repeated. "Do... better at what? What's going on?"

Jester sat up a little straighter. She beamed at him and, had Nott been anywhere but between them in that very moment, she looked as though she may have flung herself forward and thrown her arms around him.

He quietly hoped that she still would. At some time or another.
happy first day of autumn!!

once again, gentle shout-out to JM (greenesweaters) for a snippet of caleb's dialogue in this chapter toward the end, after he repeats what he said at the end of the previous chapter. i paraphrased it quite a bit, but the basic idea is still the same and she gets that credit. bae.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

She’s out of breath.

Been running.

For how long?

She can’t remember.

She’s just been running.

The dragon’s behind her, and she’s alone.

The shadows of her friends are visible in the distance, and she cries for them to wait. She can’t hear her own voice.

The dragon suddenly cuts her off, and it’s looming over her. She tries to scream as the claws rear and plummet toward her.

Thrust into darkness. She hits the ground, and her arms are bound behind her. She can’t move her legs.

Faint sobs find their way to her ears through the gloom. The ground beneath her is wet and cold, in a way she can’t find comfort.

Shadows glide across the stone wall, and one is getting bigger. Harsh voices. The sharp clash of a lock. A firm hand grabs her shoulder--

--Jester gasps, sitting up.

Her sleeping bag tightens around her legs; she must have twisted it up in her slumber. Beau stooped beside her, the firelight creating a golden outline around her silhouette. She frowned, pulling her hand away and draping her forearms over her knees. “Whoa. You okay, there, Jess?”

“Y...--yeah!” Jester said, smiling despite the breathlessness on her voice. “Yeah, ahm. Just having a fun dream, you know? Are, uh. --Are you and Fjord done with your watch?”

Beau nodded. “We’re packin’ it in. You okay to take the next round, or?”

“Yeah! I can totally do that.” She really didn’t want to go back to sleep right now, anyway. Jester
leaned forward and peered past Beau, spotting where Fjord had knelt next to one of the sleeping bags. Caleb sat up, giving Fjord’s arm a couple lackluster shoves as he came to. She heard Fjord chuckle before he slid toward his own blankets. Jester looked back to Beau and nodded. “You sleep well, okay, Beau?”

Beau gave her a slanted smile. She nodded, and she stood to move away from the small fire.

Jester pulled herself from her sleeping bag and crawled the short ways to her belongings. She tilted her bag, so some of the golden firelight reached inside. Within a few seconds, she located her sketchbook and a couple of her pencils and paints. She stacked them on her lap and set the bag aside, taking a moment to straighten and take in their surroundings.

Things always looked so different in the dark. They’d pulled the horses to a stop almost at the edge of a vast, beautiful lake. What wind swept over it chilled, and she couldn’t help but smile as some of it smoothed over her face. There was relief in its cool touch and the scent of wet earth and wild grass it carried. Some nearby reeds hissed, swaying as it passed. It reminded her of the coast, in some ways. She felt her stomach knot a little when she realized how saltless the air smelled.

The fire behind her crackled, and Jester turned her head. Caleb had just added a fresh log to the stack. He looked up just as she turned toward him, smiling almost apologetically. She smiled back and made sure to keep her voice low. “Are you cool, Caleb?” And, immediately after asking, she realized he wasn’t wearing his coat. “Oh! Oh, you probably are. --It is a little chilly because of the extra wind, huh?”

“Ahh.” Caleb waved one hand dismissively, lowering to cross his legs. He rested his forearms on his knees, turning his eyes to the lake. “Maybe. But I don’t mind, so much.”

Jester’s smile softened. She opened her mouth, but the words froze on her breath.

Somewhere, across the lake, she heard a shrill sound. It almost sounded like someone wailing… long and mournful.

Jester gasped, clutching her sketchbook and paints so quick and tightly to her chest that the jars and pencils jabbed into her armpits and collar. She looked out to the lake, searching—desperately—for any sign of a towering figure with a slanted neck. “--Caleb. Caleb, did you--”

“--Jester,” he interrupted, his voice surprisingly calm and soft. She kept her eyes locked ahead, straining to see through the silhouettes of trees and brush. Caleb spoke up again. “Jester--it… it’s alright.”

“But-- didn’t you hear that?!” She hissed, whipping around to look at him again. Caleb’s expression had weakened, but… he didn’t look pale or. Even scared. “What if--what if that--do you think it tracked us, or--”

“It’s not the hyena, Jester,” Caleb said. He held up one hand and had the fire not been between them she wondered if he would have taken her shoulder. Caleb’s expression softened further. “That is something different. Nothing we need to be frightened of.”

Jester stared at him for a long, cautious moment. She pressed her lips together and swallowed. “What… is it? You’re sure it’s not a hyena?”

“Ja,” Caleb said, nodding once. His hand lowered a little. “It is ahh. It’s a bird. --A loon. They are nocturnal and are known for their, ahh… un… --unusual song. Many often compare it to the sound of a woman crying. When there is a pair, one will cry out as though to say ‘I’m here, where are
you?’. Then the other member of the pair will respond. They’re telling each other they’re not alone. It’s... a strange sound, but. That is all that it is.”

The sound rose from the lake again. Low and distant at first, then shrill and shaken. Jester blinked. Her fear dissolved into empathy as she looked out across the water. “Oh,” she said. Her muscles relaxed, and the pencils and jars slid away from her dress and skin. “That’s... that’s so beautiful...”

“Heh. I, ah. Suppose.” Caleb smiled, shrugging, and glancing toward the lake. “I could sometimes hear them from my window at night when I was small… there was a time when, ah. As a child, I believed them to be something more sinister, as well, but… ah.” He ducked and shook his head, chuckling as his voice trailed off. Jester bit her lip, feeling something in the air shift. That small smile on his lips started fading. She didn’t want it to go.

“--What do they look like?” She blurted. Caleb looked up as she pressed on. “What do they look like? Are they big birds? --like, scary big? --Or are they more like little sparrows who shout a lot--like those chickadees that are all tiny but if you make them super mad they hop around and squeak really, REALLY loudly??”

Caleb’s smile grew. He opened his mouth and paused, his gaze lowering. He gestured toward the sketchbook in her arms. “Um… may I?”

“Oh!! Yeah!!”

She may have sounded a little too eager.

Jester huffed as she scooted back, though she stopped as Caleb pushed to his feet and quietly rounded the fire. She watched him lower to sit beside her, crossing his legs again and grunting as he flicked a small stone away from his ankle. Jester grinned, and she offered him her open sketchbook. He accepted it.

She held her breath and leaned forward as he pressed the pencil to the paper.

It stayed still.

A couple seconds passed… and it still remained still.

A few more seconds, aaaaaand, again, pretty still. Not moving at all.

Jester blinked, slanting her gaze to glimpse Caleb’s face. “... ahm…?”

“--Sorry,” he said, ducking his head. He chuckled, his cheeks tinted a soft pink. “I, ah. It’s a funny thing. You think you know what something looks like and then, ah. You have to put it to paper, and it just… escapes you entirely.”

Jester blinked. Then, she let her lips curve upward into a warm, but playful, smile. “Oooooh. --Oh yeah! Yeah. --That’s okay, though, Caleb. I know you don’t forget things so, like, even if it looks a little… bad, it will still be, you know! What it looks like!”

He glanced at her, and she scrunched her shoulders up to her ears with a grin. Caleb sighed (though she swore she glimpsed a smile as the firelight danced across his face) and returned his gaze to the paper. Slowly, the pencil began to move. Hesitant, nervous lines at first, which grew to brisk scratchings. Jester leaned a little closer. She could feel excitement bubbling up in her chest and how it transformed into energy--made her want to leap to her feet and bounce. She settled for plucking at her gloves and fidgeting with her dress instead.
According to Caleb’s drawing, the loon is a stiff, duck-like bird. —With a lot of spots, speckles all over its back and wings! And a black, stick-y beak and head, and a black band around their neck, kind of like a choker. Nubby legs, floppy feet. Jester’s lips twitched a bit. She must have snickered because Caleb glanced at her. “—What?”

“—Nothing! Nothing!” She said quickly, though a giggle escaped between the words. “It’s just super cute!” She paused, then plucked one of the other pencils from the dirt. “Juuuuuust mayyyyybeeee… since it sounds all evil and stuff…?” She reached across the page and scribbled thick, angry eyebrows over the loon’s eyes. “There!”

She sat back and grinned. Caleb stared at the page, then looked up at her. He held her gaze for a long moment, and Jester’s breath stopped. A sensation she didn’t have a name for began to flutter in her stomach. Excitement, but also fear? —No, not fear. Worry? —She didn’t know. She just hoped she hadn’t upset him by altering his drawing. But the intensity of his stare was also… kind of super… —the fire suddenly got really, really hot.

“They are so generous as to fill the night air with their humble voices, and you call them evil. Is nothing sacred to you, Ms. Lavorre?” Caleb asked. Her ears lifted, and her breath caught. There was a lightness to his voice and a glimmer in his eyes. Jester bit her lip to suppress a giggle.

“I meeeaaan… not reaaaaallllyyyyy.” She grinned, winked, and leaned forward again, her pencil moving in a flash to arm the loon with a knife. She sat back and beamed, waggling both her brows in a silent challenge. Caleb eyed the new addition and pursed his lips, nodding once.

“So. Now you’ve just drawn Kiri.”

“—Caleb!” The gasp was meant to sound offended but came out laced with a laugh. Jesteruffed his shoulder, and he quickly brought a finger to his lips. The faint smile did not go unnoticed. She flattened one hand over her mouth to stifle herself, but a snort or giggle or two made their way out anyway. Across from them, Nott huffed in her sleep and kicked one leg, her heel clipping Caduceus’s shoulder.

Caleb elbowed her arm gently, pointing to a log a few feet from the camping grounds. Jester blinked at it, then looked to him again. He nodded once and stood, her sketchbook underarm, heading toward the log. Jester stiffened as she watched him. Something in her chest tightened, and she nearly called out for him to return to the fire. But when he stopped and turned to look back, and she saw the brief flicker of question in his eyes, she gave him a wide grin and shoved to her feet to follow.

Jester hopped over the log, landing in the grass as Caleb rounded the other end and sat down. She flopped down beside him and clasped her hands in her lap, taking a moment to look out across the lake. Another cry of the loon rose over the water, but she couldn’t spot the shape of a bird beneath the moon’s silver glow. Wherever it was, it was pretty good at hiding. …hopefully, its partner would find it.

“Ah,” Caleb huffed, opening the sketchbook again. Jester turned to him. She watched as he drummed his fingers along the page, the smile slowly returning to his features as he looked over the once-loon-now-Kiri drawing. His fingers adjusted around the pencil, and he lowered it to the paper just beside the sketch. “If this is Kiri, then. We can’t have her alone, can we?”

Jester leaned forward. She watched as Caleb sketched a tiny, scratchy little tiefling in a dress to the right of the ‘Kiri.’ On one of the horns, he added a ribbon tied in a bow. Jester inhaled, her chest swelling and full of a warm bubbling sensation. Caleb tapped the pencil on the paper and looked up at her. “There you are.”
She clapped her hands with a faint squeak, touching her fingertips to the space just below her bottom lip. “Awhhhh!!! We’re so cute!! Caleb!”

Caleb ducked his head, chuckling. His hair hid his face as he scratched and rubbed the spaces around his neck. Jester bit the corner of her lip. She reached across, plucking at the journal pages to turn them. “--look, look! I’ve drawn you, too!”

“--Jester,” he said quickly. He pulled his hands away from the pages as though not to block their movement. “--this journal, it is very, ah, personal to you, isn’t it? I don’t wish to--”

“No, no, it’s okay!!” She said. Her arm bumped one of his as she moved the journal, and he quickly tucked both his arms closer to his chest. She scrambled to find the right (the best) page. “Hang on hang on hang on hang on hang on--oh, here!!” She stopped, rapping one finger on the page.

In a swirl of deep oranges, golds and reds, as well as dark greens and blues, was one of her loose paintings of Caleb reading by the campfire. Most of the image fell into shadow, but Caleb’s book, hair, and face were aglow from the flames, Frumpkin curled in the space between the back of his neck and the rock he sat against. The painting was not as refined as she may have liked, but she did enjoy how the short, quick brush strokes created a grainy sort of texture. It felt fitting for Caleb, somehow. His image clear enough to recognize but not enough to fully grasp, much like a vision in a dream.

Beside her, Caleb inhaled. The sound sent an immediate mix of thoughts and feelings buzzing through her head and chest. She felt nervous—embarrassed—excited—proud—hopeful—self-conscious—all feverishly competing to take up the most space in her heart. It was almost nauseating. Almost. She held her breath just in case.

“Jester,” he said, his voice much softer than before. Something about it sounded almost fragile, like when you press your thumb to a dry leaf and it begins to crinkle a bit. “This… --I… mn….” He went silent for an agonizingly long moment. “…I… did not know you drew… us. While we rested.”

“Only sometimes! Usually, I tell the Traveler about our day and stuff, but sometimes I like to show him what you guys are doing, too! So he can, you know, get to know you and stuff?” Her voice trailed, and she felt her whole body grow hot. “…--is that bad or, ahm, creepy or something? -- Should I stop?”

“No, no,” Caleb said quickly. “I just. …this is, ah…” He pressed his lips together, chuckling after. “It would be… mn… insulting… to brush away all the time you’ve spent learning how to use your paints by calling you talented. But, ah. Perhaps the word I am looking for is… ‘gifted.’ You… have an eye beyond just the fundamentals of your craft.” He looked up at her and smiled. “You capture the person. Not just their, ah… appearance. They are felt, not just seen.”

Heat swelled in her chest and spread through her. She might have worried she was sweating if she wasn’t so distracted by the shortness of her breath and the overwhelming sense of affection wrapping around her. Her mouth moved mutely until she found her voice again. “Thank you, Caleb.”

His smile softened, and he quickly looked down at the sketchbook again. A few seconds passed before he cleared his throat and scratched at his jaw. “--do, ah. Do you have paintings like this of all of us?”

“Oh yeah!” Jester said, beaming. She nodded and made a loose gesture at the sketchbook. “You can look! Go ahead!”

“… you’re sure?” Caleb asked. He glanced at her, his gaze hesitant. Jester nodded again. “I don’t
wish to intrude."

“Yeah, yeah, yeah!” She flashes him a grin, wagging a brow. “Don’t worry, anything super smutty or super-secret is written in Infernal. So unless you can read thaaaaat…?”

Caleb blinked. “You write your own smut?” He asked, a ghost of a chuckle on his breath.

“I dunno… mayyyybbeee…”

Some color rose across his cheeks, but he smiled. He chuckled again, and he looked back to the sketchbook. Jester chewed on the inside of her cheek as she watched him gingerly take the corner of one page and turn it. Again, that whirlwind of emotions swirled through her—everything from nerves to excitement—and she looked out to the lake in hopes it would better hide any signs of the warmth blooming in her cheeks.

The lake ahead glowed a faint silver. It’s funny how, even though the ocean is also a lot of water, that it looked so much different than it did on the coast. With no waves, no consistent sea breeze, the lake took on the appearance akin to a mirror. A near-perfect reflection of the treeline, the moons… clouds of stars small and large. She breathed in the crisp air and let her eyes close. Slowly, her heart fell into a relaxed pace. The loon’s voice rose over the water once more, and she opened her eyes, searching the horizon. She saw it. The silhouette of a bird glided through the water without so much as disturbing its surface. Jester gasped, straightening and reaching around to grab at Caleb’s arms.

“--Caleb, Caleb, look! Look--there!”

She turned her head, grinning. Caleb had gone stiff—probably surprised by her sudden grip—and he flattened his hands on the sketchbook. The sketchbook, she realized, had been closed. She looked up to meet his eyes and blinked, her brows furrowing. “--Sorry. Did I scare you? -- I’m sorry.”

“N-no,” he said. The smile on his lips looked weaker than before. “No, ah. I just slipped into, ah… -- you know how I sometimes do. Drifting through thought. Spacing out, ja?”

“Oh! ...what were you thinking about?”

“I… suppose I was just wondering how Kiri is doing. It’s been a while since we spoke of her, hasn’t it?” Caleb asked, and he shrugged. Jester nodded.

“Oh, okay. Yeah, it’s been a pretty long time.” She set her hands in her lap and twisted at her pinky finger. “I hope she’s doing okay and is super happy.”

“You could send her a message sometime if you like…?”

“Yeah, yeah… Just not tonight. --Today. Don’t want to use up my spells and stuff, you know.”

“Ja, of course.”

Caleb passed the sketchbook back to her, and she set it against the log on the opposite side.

They fell silent for a long while. The loons on the lake wailed, crickets hummed from every direction, and the grass whispered at the cool touch of the occasional breeze. It took a few minutes… but Jester began to become aware of the quiet between them and how it wasn’t awkward or tense or… anything bad, really. It was pretty nice. Even comforting. Which was… different. She didn’t feel pressured to bring up conversation or the urge to ask questions.

It was nice. ...it was pretty nice.
She also grew acutely aware of Caleb sat beside her. The slow, even pace of his breath and small movements she spotted out of the corners of her eyes. His hands, clasped in the space between his knees, barely moved, but his thumbs tapped against each other, rubbing their sides and the inner slopes of his palms. She dared to turn her head just a hair more so she could glimpse what of his face remained visible in the moonlight. Whether or not he’d found something on the lake to look at, she couldn’t tell. But he stared ahead of them, eyes focused, brow wrinkled in the tale-tell way that meant he was thinking. And not, like, pointless thinking. Deep thinking. His hair kept drifting around his eyes with the breeze, and she really, really wanted to reach up and tuck it into the curve of his ear.

They were sitting there together. Kind of alone and kind of near the fire, in front of a lake under the moonlight. That’s pretty romantic… right? She’d read books about a heroic fighter, a maiden—on opposite sides of a feud—meeting in the woods in the dead of night and embracing with only the moon as their witness. She wasn’t a maiden, Caleb wasn’t a fighter. And they definitely weren’t on opposite sides of some fight or something, but… they were here. Together. With just the moon and the loons. But they wouldn’t tell anybody.

Jester bit the corner of her lip. She slid her hands from her lap and planted them on the log, one to each side. Her weight lifted enough to push her—just a bit—closer to Caleb’s side. The movement was quick and subtle enough that he hadn’t been drawn out of his trance. She waited a few seconds. Then she scooted closer again. No movement.

Slowly, and ever so gently, she let herself lean.

Their arms touched. Jester felt the light pressure push back against her, the warmth of his body. She let her head begin to tilt—

Caleb’s body went stiff. Jester heard him pull a breath through his teeth, and she leaned away as quick as she could, turning and finding that they were now both facing each other. His eyes were wide. Her face had become unbearably hot.

“--S-sorry!!” She stuttered, shrinking away and raising her hands. Caleb’s lips moved soundlessly. *Oh--she was stupid, she was so, so stupid.* “I just—I, ahm. I--. I don’t. --Oh, shit, I’m-- I’m really sorry, Caleb, I don’t know--I just--”

He raised a hand, and she sucked in a breath, clamping her mouth shut. Caleb opened his mouth. He closed it, his fingers curling into his palm as he rolled his lips together. He ducked his head and inhaled through his nose. One finger pulled away from his palm, and he shook his hand a little.

“You… --are you tired?”

Jester lowered her hands into her lap, pressing her fists into her thighs. It almost sounded like he was giving her that out—extending an excuse she could use. She could lie. The thing was, she didn’t want to lie. She really, really didn’t want to lie. She fumbled for words.

“Ahm. …I, um,” Jester murmured. “No. --I mean. I am because it’s night and stuff, but… that. I wasn’t trying to sleep on you or whatever.” She paused, waiting and hoping that he might look up at her. He didn’t, and she stammered on. “I just. I guess I thought… --I dunno, I just--I thought it would be okay because we’re out here, you know, and it’s all nice and pretty and we’re having a good time—I thought we were having a good time—and it got all quiet and stuff and in, like, I dunno—my books? I guess that’s kind of all romantic and stuff and even though we’re not making out I … just… I guess I …”

Jester’s voice trailed away as she realized Caleb had started looking at her. Even in the contrasting shades of the flickering firelight and the shadowed lake, she could see the scarlet spreading from his
nose to his ears. It made his blue eyes all the bluer. Despite everything—the nervous coiling of her stomach, the vaguely nauseated tightening around her throat—the way his eyes took in the silvery moonlight… she couldn’t breathe. But that definitely could also be because of the nauseated throat tightening.

Caleb blinked slowly. She couldn’t get a read on his thoughts through his facial expression alone, and that was almost infuriating. At best, he was confused. At worst, he was repulsed or offended. Shit. It was probably too late to laugh it all off as a weak prank, wasn’t it?

“But,” Caleb started, his hand rotating, so his finger pointed toward their sleeping friends behind him. “I… I thought… --you… on the boat--the island--you had said…”

Jester bit her lip and nodded. “Yeah, but. That was, you know. A while ago.”

Silence.

“Oh,” was all he said. Again: infuriating. Jester fidgeted, letting out a huff.

“--And, and I think, you know, Nott might have been a little drunk when I talked to her about it--because I talked to both of you, just at different times and stuff--and she said that when Fjord kissed me to keep me from drowning that it definitely counted as a real first kiss, but I’ve thought about it a lot, and I don’t think it really did, you know? Because it was to save me and stuff, not because he wants to do it again and all--so I don’t think that counts and--and, remember, I said to you I didn’t…I was confused and… um…”

The part of her mind that knew she was just rambling now had gotten loud enough to silence her. She watched as Caleb’s finger curled back into his palm, and he pressed the back of his knuckles to his lips. Then he turned back to the lake and ducked his head, running his hand to the back of his neck, then upward through his hair and back again. His hand found its way back to his mouth, thumb digging into one cheek as his fingers curled against his jaw. Jester swallowed and rolled her lips together.

Again, there was silence. And, again, it was totally agonizing and awful and confusing. This wasn’t anything like her books. At all.

She opened her mouth to speak, but he beat her to it.

“--Jester,” Caleb near whispered. He pulled his hand away from his mouth, clasping his palms together and scratching at the backs of them. “I… promised you that… that going forward, I would be better…”

He paused, pressing his lips together. “As I told you… before. …I… mmhh… Am not deserving. Of so many things. For a moment, back beneath the tree, I had considered turning down your offer. I did not think it… would be fair or right to allow you--or anyone--to purge me of one of my ghosts.” One of his hands swept up his forearm, pausing to gently grip it. The movement smothered some of the ink’s faint glow. Jester chewed the corner of her lip, but she stayed quiet as he continued. “I… am not brave, Jester. The thought of being hurt scares me… the thought… of hurting you scares me. And I could not bear to bring treacherous attention to you because that is what will come with me. I have grown used to being… a face in the crowd. A shadow on the wall. A nobody and a nothing, for so long. But these people… you… I have begun to wonder, perhaps wrongly, that I might deserve to be… someone… again.” His mouth moved mutely for a moment. “It… is hard. Speaking so bluntly like this. I… do not know. How to… how to allow myself to… want. Without the guilt. Without. The fear.” He looked up at her, hesitantly. “...do you understand?”
Jester stared at him. It took a second for her to realize that she was staring at him, and her mouth opened wordlessly. It made sense. --She hoped it made sense. She hoped she was understanding him and not just hearing what she had hoped or wanted to hear.

He’s telling her that he wanted her to lean into him and rest her head on his shoulder. That, despite how different this all ways, they were still on the same page of a very confusing and complicated chapter.

She smiles weakly, shoulders scrunching toward her ears. “...I guess it’s a little different than in my books...huh?”

The attempt at a joke may not have been timed well, but his lips twitch upward. “Ja.”

Jester twiddled her thumbs. She tried to think of what her mama might say. The Ruby had spoken to so many people from different walks of life, and she always seemed to know the right words to bring comfort and warmth and healing. Jester called herself a cleric, but… if anyone could truly heal, it was her mama.

“Well,” she said. “Ahm. If… if you want. We could start super small. You know? Um.” She held out one hand, softening her smile. “And. If you start to feel scared, you can stop, you know? Just let me know. I don’t, ahm. Want to scare you. Ever. I want you to be happy. It’s okay for you to want that, too… you know?”

Caleb’s expression melted. She thought, for a moment, that his eyes looked glassy, but he reached for her hand before she could ask. His fingers brushed over hers, then gingerly laced through them, so their hands linked. Jester inhaled, pressing her lips together in an attempt to chase away the joy filling her chest. She gently squeezed his hand, and he squeezed back, meeting her eyes for a brief moment before he looked ahead again.

Another loon’s call echoed over the lake. A second soon followed.

Jester exhaled through her nose, smiling to herself as a small breeze tossed her bangs, and she looked past the silver moon to the minute, red orb in its shadow. Despite the warmth and energy now brimming in her chest, she remained content to sit beside him and drink in the night air. Her thoughts were a million places at once, but she couldn’t focus on any of them. All she could really do was smile and focus on the feeling of his hand in hers.

In her books, there was often the observation that a pair’s hands fit perfectly together… like they were ‘made’ for each other, and two pieces of a puzzle finally brought together. Theirs didn’t. Caleb’s hands, though worn and uneven in texture from burns and paper cuts and other materials, were long and scrawny and a little clumsy. They shifted every few seconds, as though seeking out a perfect nook in her palm that didn’t exist. She didn’t quite know how to hold his hand, either. Maybe the puzzle piece thing was something learned and, in time, they’d find that fit.

“Jester?”

His voice almost startled her. Jester turned her head. “--Yeah? Caleb?”

“You… would tell me. --Tell us, too. If you were not happy?” He asked, turning to meet her eyes. “If something were troubling you?”

Jester blinked. She smiled brightly, nodding her head. “Of course!” She said, popping one shoulder in a shrug. “Yeah, of course, I would! I mean, nothing is, I’m totally fine and stuff. I was a little scared when the loons started, you know, screaming and all, but now that I know they’re just silly
birds, I’m okay!”

Caleb eyed her. He had that… calculated look in his eyes. Just for a moment. And, just as quickly as
it had appeared, it vanished, and he nodded as he turned toward the lake again. “Ja… okay. Good.
...good.”

“Mhm!” Jester smiled, giggling faintly as she, too, looked ahead. Her eyes trailed from the moon to
the treeline, to the sketchbook propped against the log beside her. The smile on her lips grew, and
she pressed them firmly together. The Traveler was going to hear all about this. But later.

For now, she didn’t want their evening watch to end.

Chapter End Notes

just as a heads up, the next chapter is gonna be a *long* one. it'll probably take me some
time to write, revise and all that jazz, but it's on the way! we're almost done and i'm so
grateful for all of you who've stuck with me on this story!! \e-e/ aaaAAAA. thank you!!

Please [drop by the archive and comment](#) to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!