We don't have to be alone

by cianethedevil

Summary

While these and other questions crossed his mind, capturing its attention more and more, Jack realized that he had focused only and entirely the satellite, excluding from his view the starry sky and the ground, and when he tried to turn his eyes away he didn't manage to. Sure that the cause of this was the excessive time spent in contemplation he didn't get worry and tried to close his irises, but, feeling that the muscles weren't reacting, he slightly panicked: he tried with all his strength to move, but the more he struggled, the more he perceived his irises widening and the pupils dilating, absorbing the light which had become so intense to make him cry and so being blinded by it.

Notes

SEQUEL OF "WHAT GOES TOGETHER BETTER THAN COLD AND DARK?"
NOTE: Since you've surely noticed the warnings/tags of this story I want to reassure you: I will not write about any topic in a careless or superficial way, nor do I will ever dare to trivialize anything. I will analyse every issue in depth, without simplifying or make look natural what, in reality, is not normal, and I'll made sure to describe every thought and physical sensation in the best way possible.
Perched on the branch of a tree Jack glanced over the surrounding landscape, covered by a thin layer of snow which he himself had dropped to usher in the cold season, and smiled: he had spent the most beautiful spring and summer of his life, winter was coming, the magic staff was in full of its powers and he couldn't be happier.

Months had passed since the day when Pitch, prey of a blind rage, had evoked Behemuth and then sacrificed himself to save him, risking his own life in order to preserve his partner's one and spending a period of convalescence at North's Palace, tenderly attended by the Guardians, and no striking incidents had happened.

As soon as Frost and the Boogeyman had put an end to the forced holiday they had headed to the latter's liar, to check it and make it safe: first of all the man had climbed down into the tunnel which led to the old demon's prison, and, once made sure that it was locked by spells powerful enough, he had personally taken care to close the hatch, using the heavy circular stone which he should have never moved; then, flying from one end to the other of the huge cave, he had briefly looked at every corner, not amazed to find cracks and collapsed walls, given the fury which Behemuth had showed to be able to trigger; finally, after he had retrieved and placed the iron Globe, which had miraculously survived the destruction, he had stared the boy in the eyes and nodded, definitely closing that terrible chapter in their lives.

None of them had taken care to remedy the damages, but, indeed, it was not necessary to do it: Pitch's cave perfectly reflected the state of his powers, showing itself at its utmost gloomy splendour when he was strong and going into decline when he was weakened; therefore, it had been enough less than a week of big game among the children's dreams to bring everything back to normal.

Days had passed, then months, but the Boogeyman had given no sign of change: he had been loving and caring with Jack, he had never exaggerated in carrying out his work, but he had never even opened up, nor talked or asked about the other Guardians any more. The boy had decided to keep quiet and not force him, hiding his pain behind polite smiles and trying to appear cheerful and carefree, but, just when he had lost all his hope, his love had left him stunned. On Easter Sunday, at an early hour, he had gone into North's Palace, landing in the central hall riding Voluptas and making it dissolve with a soft hand gesture; haughty and arrogant as always he had not announced himself, nor expressed a greeting more appropriate than a groan, but he had hastily sat on the carved chair which Santa had made for him, explaining he had showed up just to meet his partner. Despite the initially distant attitude, the man had never shoed the master of the house and Toothiana, the only present Guardians, nor had attempted to avoid striking up a conversation with them; as the conversation had become fluid and relaxed he had let himself go, keeping a controlled tone, but showing to appreciate the company which surrounded him; finally, when Frost had arrived, he had
hugged him without embarrassment and he had lingered to drink a tea, savouring it slowly, as though he was in no rush to leave that place.

In hindsight and with the help of the infallible women's intuition of the Tooth Fairy the boy had understood the reason of the long wait: Pitch, in fact, had not only taken some time to clear his mind, but he had also made sure to show up in an occasion on which he knew he couldn't meet Bunnymund, in order to spare himself, at least the first time, the effort to refrain himself from arguing.

To the delight of Jack after that visit there had been others, not frequent, often short, but he couldn't have wished for better: the Boogeyman, finally, was coming out of his shell and learning to interact with the ones he had always considered enemies, and there was no need for him to make all the necessary steps to put an end to his hatred in a single day. The boy was happy to see him take things slow, gradually getting accustomed to a completely new way of life, and to help him when he understood he was in trouble, and when he saw him smile he felt rewarded for all his efforts.

Of course, in addition to those moments spent in company, there had been countless others which they two had reserved for themselves, sharing every experience: from the reading lessons to the rides in the spring meadows full of scented flowers, from the jokes to the horror stories eavesdropped by the hikers gathered around the fire in the summer evenings, from the dissertations about any topic to the walks through the trees dyed of thousands colours by autumn, from the creation of Nightmares to the activation of the staff, from the hugs to the cuddles, from the kisses to the hot caresses they exchanged, moaning against each other's neck, marking each other with their teeth and nails as they reached the complete satisfaction.

Sighing at the memory of those magical moments that he would never forgotten, Frost smiled and stroked the last detail of that picture so perfect: his blue hoodie. He had almost destroyed it in his breathless attempts to save the man, wetting it with his blood and tearing it apart, but when he had heard North saying it was no longer fixable, he had insisted to make him repair it: it had been his outfit for years and years, it had followed him on every adventure and he didn't want to part with it. After days of vigorous washing and meticulous work with needle and thread, the Yeti had returned him a shirt so beautiful it seemed new, clean and perfumed, which Pitch had promptly decorated with fine grains of his black sand, and the boy had considered that final touch the cherry on top of that year so special.

Moving the hand in a soft gesture Jack interrupted the brief snowfall he had caused, making sure to leave a blanket on the ground thin enough not to alarm the inhabitants of the region, but thick enough to allow children to play their first snowball fight of the season, then he settled down on the branch again, resting his back against the log to relax and enjoy his own reflections. The more he mulled, the more he become convinced that his life could not get any better than this: the man he loved loved him back and considered him his most precious treasure, the Guardians were sympathetic and caring friends and collaborative and willing colleagues, the icy power which pervaded the staff was so intense to make it vibrate and almost all the world's children were waiting impatiently for the arrival of winter to receive his visit, what else could he ask for?

Laughing he looked up, staring at the full moon which stood at the centre of the horizon and directing his thoughts to it, or, rather, towards the one who lived in it: for centuries he's been silent spectator of what was happening in the world and, with the exception of Frost's designation, he had never intervened, so it was hard to guess what he thought about the situation. No doubt he was aware of the relationship he had with Pitch, but what was his opinion? He had neither favoured nor hindered it in any occasion, so did he think it was right to let them do what they wanted? Maybe had he changed his mind about the Boogeyman's evil nature? Would he have ever talked to him?
While these and other questions crossed his mind, capturing its attention more and more, Jack realized that he had focused only and entirely the satellite, excluding from his view the starry sky and the ground, and when he tried to turn his eyes away he didn't manage to. Sure that the cause of this was the excessive time spent in contemplation he didn't get worry and tried to close his irises, but, feeling that the muscles weren't reacting, he slightly panicked: he tried with all his strength to move, but the more he struggled, the more he perceived his irises widening and the pupils dilating, absorbing the light which had become so intense to make him cry and so being blinded by it.

When the fear which had gripped him filled him to the point it reached his neck and took his breath away, the spell was broken and the boy got master of his body again, though he was too tired to try to stand up. Gasping he closed his eyes, trying desperately to regain the control of himself and eliminate the annoying bright spots from his retinas, and when he felt ready he opened them to look around.

The landscape which loomed in front of him was definitely different from what he expected: instead of the snowy tundra, where he had been until few minutes before, he saw a flat, monotonous landscape, occasionally interrupted by craters and small rocks and completely covered by a sparkling white powder.

Completely disoriented Frost stood up, shaking the sand off his clothes and trying to figure out what had happened, but, as he struggled to find an explanation for the sudden and unjustified change, he noticed a figure approaching from his right side.

Peering he noticed that it was a man with a physical structure similar to Sandy's: short and chubby, he was dressed with white puffball pants and a shirt, fastened on the waist with a crimson belt, and he wore a funny pair of shoes point upwards and an elaborate jacket, both mustard coloured. His head was completely bald, except for a long, thin tuft of blond hair which grew just above the forehead, defying gravity and standing upright, but falling in its last part in a soft wave; the most noticeable detail, however, was definitely his face: perfectly round, characterized by small and dark eyes and two soft cheeks, was animated by a smile so cheerful and serene to make you feel happy just by looking at him.

Still too confused to do something the boy stood motionless, staring at the stranger who was getting closer and closer, and when he found him few steps far from himself he heard him speak.

«Welcome, Jack».

After a quick reasoning Jack asked: «Are... are you the Man in the Moon?».

«Yes, Jack. I was waiting for you» quietly replied the other.

Unable to hold himself back the boy exclaimed: «You, you're the Man in the Moon! You are my creator! I wanted to meet you since a really long time! Why haven't you ever spoken to me before? I had so many things to ask... Wait, did you say you were waiting for me? Why were you?».

The Man in the Moon laughed softly to that enthusiastic interrogation and commented: «Oh, Jack, you're exactly how you look like: full of energy and unable to hold yourself back. I bet that, if I let you talk, you would go on for hours and hours, am I wrong? So many questions... and so little time: we can't afford to waste time in silly chatter. Come on, I want to show you something».

Slightly dumbfounded at being cut off in that way, Frost fell silent and came after his interlocutor, following him along a meandering path which circumvented the small craters on the surface of what, by now, he had guessed was the moon, and then down a winding stair which dived into the ground.
In few minutes the two reached a large rectangular hall, blinding bright thanks to the glittering dust which covered every surface and to the glass vaulted ceiling, and it took a while to the boy to figure out that the structures which supported it were not trees, but columns: thin and elongated, they dug in the ground with tentacles very similar to roots and, at the top, they split into dozens of appendages resembling branches, which were intertwined one into one the others to form small slices from which the light penetrated.

Intrigued Jack was about to get close and touch them, eager to find out what material they were made of, but the Man in the Moon called him back.

«Come on, Jack: here is what I wanted to show you».

Guiding him down the central aisle he brought him to a higher platform on which stood a perfect reproduction of the Earth: identical every inch to Pitch’ Globe it was, instead, milky white and it shined with lights of many colours.

«As you can see, Jack, I own a Globe, too» explained the man; «However, compared to the Guardians’ one, it's much more sophisticated. You will have undoubtedly spotted that, instead of the classic single-colour lights, here they are of various types. Each of them is a child who believes in one of you: red symbolizes North, pink Toothiana, green Bunnymund, gold Sandman and blue, of course, you. As you've surely noticed the blue, at this moment, is the predominant colour, and no wonder it is: you are the great novelty and of course, since I appointed Guardian just few months ago, I took care to make the children of the world know you, inducing Sandman to send them dreams about your jokes and evoking snow where the infants wanted it but you couldn't come. Now, however, look at your friends' lights: they are not numerous and not very intense, and, above all, they're not stable. They remain switched on for few hours, then they turn off, sometimes even for days, then they come back on, but only for a little: children who believe in them are increasingly standoffish, and this, in the long run, will weaken them».

Jack stared aghast those little, pulsating lights, feeling a pang in knowing that, for each he saw switch off, a Guardian was losing power and risking to disappear, and he demanded: «Why is this happening? Why have children become so standoffish? In the past they weren't like this, I'm sure: I perfectly remember they spent whole days talking about the gifts they would have found under the Christmas tree or eggs they would have sought on Easter Sunday. What does distract them so much? And why didn't you intervene?».

The interlocutor laughed softly and said: «Jack, do you think that I'm here just for you, and that my purpose is promoting you? It’s your responsibility to make sure that children believe in you, not mine: if you don't manage to it simply means that you are not suited to the role that I assigned you, or, alternatively, that the world no longer needs you. However, you must consider that the four Guardians have been existing for centuries and that they've been selected by me with great care, so it's not possible that, all of a sudden, they lost all their abilities: the explanation for what is happening is different. This generation of children is victim of a world in which everything has a scientific explanation, in which growing as quickly as possible is the primary goal, in which making dubious experiences is more important than dreaming: it's a generation disenchanted, bored, devoid of any curiosity and of parents' help. More and more frequently, in fact, adults are too absorbed in their commitments and concerns to notice their children: in order to ease their lives they leave them abandoned to themselves and take no interest in them, occasionally asking them the results they achieved in school or in sports and being absent for the rest of the time, no realizing the beautiful moments they keep losing, nor the childhood they deny their babies. Children like these have no hope for themselves, they don't feel any wonder for what surrounds them, they have no memories worthy to be remembered, nor dreams which encourage them to try to realize themselves: they live hand to mouth, chasing ephemeral desires and withdrawing into themselves». 
The boy, who initially had been appalled by the other's arrogant and aloof attitude, was shocked by the revelation and interjected him: «But that's terrible! What can we do to prevent all children become like this? If our powers don't work we have no way to help them!».

«You can't» simply said the Man in the Moon; «There's nothing you can do to save yourself. It's for this reason that I decided to appoint a new Guardian, whose task will be tearing the humans off from their catatonic state, mending the relationships which have been broken or which didn't even ever exist and make the kids happy again and open to experiences more suitable to them».

Frost's eyes lit up when he heard that proposal and he exclaimed, overexcited: «Oh, a new Guardian, seriously? It's a great idea! What will they symbolize? When will you appoint them? But, above all, who will be? The groundhog, by any chance? Because if you choose him I'm afraid you'll have to help Bunnymund recover from the news!».

The man chuckled and commented: «Always ready to joke, is it not so, Jack? No, it won't be the groundhog, nor anyone of the immortal spirits who already inhabit the Earth: none of them is suitable for this task».

Confused the boy asked: «How are you going to appoint a new Guardian without picking them up among the spirits which already exist? Will you choose a human being and transform them as you did with me?».

«Don't be silly, Jack» contested the Man in the Moon; «I didn't choose to make you die, nor to transform you into an immortal being before you saved your sister. Anyway, this is no the time to ramble: no, I will not act as you said, but in a different way. It's for this reason that I called you. Now, hurry up and take off your hoodie».

Taken aback by the absurd request Jack startled and, chuckling nervously, he demanded: «Why should I take it off?».

The man, who all the while had kept his eyes on the Globe, sighed wearily and answered: «I knew you'd give me problems: you're a guy too rebellious and independent to understand that, in certain situations, you should obey without questioning. I don't have time for your whims: you asked for it, Jack».

Without leaving the guy the time even to react he raised his left arm and snapped his fingers, stubbornly his back at him: at that sound hundreds of thin strands of light sprang out of the floor and the surrounding columns, swiftly rushing towards Frost and twisting around his limbs. In the attempt to break free the boy stepped back, writhing to escape the grip, but, faster than lightning, the ropes tightened, definitely immobilizing him and forcing him to his knees, with his back bent and his legs spread.

Raising the head the boy shouted: «Why did you tie me!? What are you gonna do to me?».

The Man in the Moon, finally, turned around, showing a compassionate and touched look, and he murmured: «Oh, Jack, do not worry: it's just for children' sake. Now I will help you to relax».

Advancing with little steps he approached him, a wide smile on his chubby face to calm him, then he put a hand on his head and began to fondle him, ruffling his hair and then going down along the cheek and the jugular. All those thoughtful gestures, however, didn't turn out to be reassuring for Jack at all: the mere proximity of that being whose real intentions he didn't know upset him, his fat and sticky fingers made him be a cold sweat, his slimy touch made him shiver with terror, his hot breath nauseated him and, in general, the whole situation disgusted him in the depths. He couldn't even bear the idea to be next to him, and the fact that the man was cuddling him did nothing but
make the experience even more unsettling and disturbing: those short and stubby phalanges were too different from Pitch's tapered ones, the ability with which they managed to stroke his neck's most sensitive spots worrisome and source of growing anxiety, and the fact that, at any moment, they could decide to go even further down cause of disgust and fear.

With the strength born of desperation the boy regained a minimum of audacity and tried to bite the other, then he cried: «Don't you dare to touch me!».

The man, who had deftly dodged the attack, slapped him hard enough to cut his lip, then he grabbed his chin and, fixing his terrible black eyes in his victim's ones, he mocked him: «You like biting, Jack, don't you? I know what you do with Pitch... but I, unfortunately for you, I'm not Pitch. Do you want to complicate things? So be it».

After giving him a backhander, even stronger than the first, to stun him, he placed his palm over his bleeding mouth and evoked a tight gag, enjoying with a smile the silence he obtained; further stretching the ropes which trapped his arms he brought him back with his spine straight, while continuing to force him to his knees, then he bent down and hastily lifted his hoodie and vest.

At that gesture Frost started to panic: what was happening was so absurd to seem unreal. He didn't know why he was there, why the Man in the Moon had chosen him, for what he had chosen him, why he was acting in this way and, above all, what he was going to do. When he felt his sweaty fingertips touching his stomach he screamed against the unknown fabric which prevented him from speaking, but when he perceived them descending decidedly he almost fainted: terrified he tried to wriggle free, without succeeding to, but, just when he was sure he would have felt them going down to violate him, they stopped, dangerously close to the groin, but not in contact with it.

Frozen on the spot, as if, in that way, he could also prevent the other to move, the boy waited, trembling with fear; the man, however, didn't take a long time: in few seconds he firmly pressed his right hand on his lower belly, slightly digging into his flesh, then he draw him towards himself with his left arm, hiding his face against his neck.

«You will be the one who'll give birth to the new Guardian, Jack: only in this way they will be able to acquire all the powers they will need» he murmured directly into his ear.

Jack immediately felt a strong heat in the lower part of his abdomen that soon pervaded him, taking away all his strength and stealing him a soft whine; when the other stepped back, leaving him without support, he couldn't stand by himself and bent down, letting his head hanging down and trying to focus on what was in front of him: with great difficulty he finally managed to, but, as soon as he succeeded, he wished to be blind.

His body, which had all along been skinny and thin, was deformed by a bulge which should have never belonged to it: a bump, small and compact, but equally wrong, softened the lines of his hips, so sweet, and yet so terrible.

Opening wide his irises full of tears the boy began to tremble, looking up at the Man in the Moon as to ask for an explanation of that horror, but in reply he received only a satisfied and derisive grin. Now out of his mind he screamed, writhing to break the ropes which imprisoned him and to flee away him who seemed to be nothing but a deviant abductor: he pulled and pulled, harder and harder, putting even more effort in it when he saw the man approaching to touch him, and, when he was only an inch away from his skin, he managed to break free.

Shouting he fell for several meters, landing on a cold and sandy surface, but when he opened his eyes he had closed in the rush to escape, he realized he was again in the tundra he had personally taken care to cover with snow. Bewildered and confused he postponed to a later time the scanning of
the landscape, and instead he hastened to lift up his hoodie and vest, to check the status of his belly; with great surprise he saw that it hadn't changed at all: it was flat, as it had always been, and the hint of abs was not covered by any grotesque bump. As he rubbed his palms on it, as if to make sure it was really okay, he noticed that his lips were no longer cut and the taste of blood wasn't permeating his mouth, and he gasped, dumbfounded: how could those wounds have healed so quickly, since he hadn't taken any medicine?

More and more perplexed he turned his head, to look at the satellite where the disfigurement had been fulfilled, but, to his astonishment, he didn't find it: the sky was perfectly clear and the stars were the only things which lit it up.

Holding his head in his hands Frost laid on the ground and tried to reason: how could he have been able to visit the moon if this was on the other side of the Earth? Maybe had the man who lived there troubled himself to retrieve him and take him back there again, once they had concluded the meeting? It was impossible: the boy was sure he had seen the satellite just before he had found himself on it. Maybe had the other moved it at a later stage, using a spell? No, not even that was possible: he would have needed an immense power to accomplish such a task. Therefore, had it all been just a dream, or, rather, a nightmare?

Covering his face with his hands, as if to hide himself, the boy agreed that it was the only possible answer: he had never visited the moon, he had never met the man who lived there, nor, least of all, he had been tortured by him. Reflecting better, however, a new doubt occurred to him: who could have sent him visions so shocking? Sandman, as the creator of sweet dreams, was regardless ruled out; Pitch, moreover, was an equally improbable candidate: no doubt he was perfectly capable to cause nightmares to anyone, but why should he have attacked the very person he loved? Maybe those gruesome scenes had been sent to someone else, and Frost had simply been in the wrong place at the wrong time? Yet even that explanation didn't make sense: the Boogeyman would have never been so cruel to send such a nightmare to an infant.

Curling up on himself Jack tried not to think, loosening the tension which had gripped him for several minutes and relaxing every muscle, and finally he managed to conceive the only possible solution to the enigma: Sandy's golden sand and Pitch's black one should have met and mixed together, struggling to prevail one over the other, but failing, thus giving life to a dream one of a kind, tender and reassuring at times, but creepy and disturbing at others.

Having finally dispelled the panic the boy stood up, retrieving with difficulty his staff, which was still hanging from the branch on which he had perched, then he got ready to leave: he was no longer worried about what he had seen, but he preferred to ask for confirmation to the two spirits concerned.

Recalling the cold northern winds he took off, heading to the west to look for Sandman and smiling at the thought of Pitch: with no doubt the man, hearing the terrible story which he had experienced, would have come to his rescue, comforting him with sweet sentences, hugging him and gently petting him. As always, Frost would have been free to ask him what he wanted most and the Boogeyman would have acquiesced to all his requests: he would have combed his perpetually ruffled hair with his fingers, he would have scratched the back of his head, he would have kissed his face, mouth and neck, he would have massaged his legs and, finally, he would have gently caressed his abdomen, personally checking that nothing was disfiguring it.

Sighing the boy focused on the memories which had pervaded him and the sensations which, shortly thereafter, he would have felt: he desperately needed to lie down beside the man he loved, accept his demonstrations of affection and fall asleep in his arms, dispelling the last shreds of that horrendous experience with golden dreams.
With these thoughts firmly fixed into his mind he freed more power from his staff, increasing the speed of the wind he was travelling on, and without any fear of falling he quickly flew over the ocean, chasing the sun to finally sleep.

Chapter End Notes

I hope you liked this first chapter, see you on Saturday!
Chapter 2

We don’t have to be alone – Chapter 2

Deftly riding the rapid winds he had evoked Jack took less than half an hour to get to the one he was looking for, locating him over the North-East America. Enchanted he stopped and allowed himself few seconds to admire the magnificent view: the fading sun was going down and down beyond the horizon, disappearing under it, and, against the backdrop of that sky of thousand warm colours which was turning darker, it stood Sandman’s cloud of magic sand, so bright, so fluffy, so reassuring in the midst of the shadows which became thicker and thicker. Thin ribbons branched off from it, more and more numerous, each heading towards a child who would have soon been entertained by sweet dreams; the boy was badly tempted to approach them and dove his hands in them, revealing the wonderful visions they were bringing in themselves, but he restrained himself: he was still slightly upset by the horrible nightmare he had experienced, to the point he was afraid he could corrupt the sparkling sand, and he preferred to hurry and finally dispel any doubt.

Frost flew, covering the short distance which separated him from his friend Frost landed on that hovering platform, not amazed to feel it perfectly solid under his feet, and he announced: «Good evening, Sandy! Always busy, huh?».

The little Bringer of Dreams, in response, waved his arms, creating a small otter of gold dust and sending it to him. Laughing the boy stroked it, letting it scraping itself against his neck and sweatshirt and snoop in his hood and in his pocket, and he played a little with it, patiently waiting for its creator to accomplish his task; after few minutes Sandy rubbed his hands together, evidently pleased with the work he had carried out, then he turned, approaching the other with a large smile.

«You’re always diligent, Sandy: you’re the delight of all the children» praised him Jack.

Hearing this compliment Sandman blushed slightly, deflecting it with a quick gesture, then he made appear on his head the silhouette of the boy in the air, dropping from his staff fine snowflakes.

«Oh, sure, I’m working hard, too: we are almost in the middle of October and it’s time for me to bring winter in the northern countries! Speaking of which, I wanted to ask you a question: a while ago I was in Europe to evoke a small storm and, since I was a little tired, I fell asleep and I had a very strange dream. To your knowledge, could your sand and Pitch’s one have got mixed together before coming to me?».

The little Bringer of Dreams immediately turned angry and punched his palm, clearly miming the
preparation for a boxing match, but Frost laughed and stopped him: «No, no, do not overdo it! Mine was only a simple question: I'm not sure if it really happened. I just wanted to know if it's possible for your sands to mix together without any contaminating the other, and, in this case, if you can become aware of what is happening».

Sandy frowned and began to reflect, clearly troubled by the question, and perhaps also by the inability to colour his sand to create useful images to respond him in an understandable way, but in the end he opted for a simple but effective solution: he shrugged, assuming on his face an expression lost and doubtful, and he opened his arms to emphasize the message.

Guessing what the other wanted to communicate the boy said: «Oh, so you don't know, too, right? I expected it... Actually, as you're definitely thinking, too, I don't believe your sand and Pitch's one can stay in contact without fighting each other, but, who knows?, maybe I'm wrong. Maybe they can withstand in contact for long, maybe they mixed together only few seconds before they reached me, or maybe that dream was just a figment of my imagination, I know that can happen: Pitch explained it to me. In any case, you never know what happens to your sand, am I wrong? Once you send it to children you can't feel it if it gets corrupted or not».

Sandman nodded, then he shaped a big question mark on his head.

Puzzled Jack asked: «Are you wondering what I dreamed by any chance? Oh, no, don't worry: it was a dream without rhyme or reason. Surely the fatigue played me a bad joke, or I would have never imagined such a thing. However, as I said, you don't have to worry: it was nothing important».

Pursing his lips for the concern the little Bringer of Dreams approached him, stroking his forearm to reassure him, but he didn't insist, and instead he shaped a small ball of bright sand in his hand and he offered it to him.

Amazed the boy blushed and said: «Oh, thank you, Sandy, but, as I said, there is no need to worry: I'm fine. I'd love to get some rest, and surely the dream that you just created for me would help me to recover, but I want to get some sleep with Pitch, and I cannot do it if you make me doze off here. Some other time perhaps, okay? Thanks anyway for your trouble».

Hearing what he was about to do Sandy cheered up and, after dissolving the dream he had evoked, he created a small trampoline of golden sand which stuck out from the cloud to facilitate Frost's departure.

«You're always so kind, Sandy: thank you, thank you very much, and see you soon!» concluded the boy.

Willing to thank him properly he freed the otter and knelt in front of him, hugging him tightly, then he stood up and, taking a run-up, he threw himself into the sky, calling the same winds he had used to get there and starting to seek his lover.

After an hour of exhausting and fruitless searches Jack gave up and went to Pitch's lair, praying in his heart that he had concluded his night of work and was already there: he would have much rather preferred to know for sure where was, but, unfortunately for him, he didn't manage to concentrate enough to perceive him and he hadn't had the luck to meet one of his Nightmares. Puffing he climbed down the tunnel he usually used to get in, then, after a short walk, he came out in the central cave, finding it more gloomy and frightening than ever: the Boogeyman had evidently worked hard in that period, taking advantage of the waiting for Halloween to fortify himself, as he had revealed to him in advance few months ago.
Postponing the supervision of that place to another time the boy immediately entered a hallway, apparently identical to all the others, but unmistakable for him, and went into his partner's bedroom, finding it, unfortunately, empty.

Snorting he railed against his bad luck: he really felt the need to stay next to his love, tell him what he had experienced to vent, be pampered and reassured, and finally fall asleep, resting quietly in his arms, but, of course, he would have to wait.

In an attempt to distract himself he went back in the main cave and explored it from top to bottom: he checked one by one all the new cages and chains that adorned it and he rattled them with slight breeze on which he flew, laughing at the scaring squeaksthey emitted, then he decided to have some fun. First he tied together the iron rings, creating a sort of garland which encircled almost the entire room, then he climbed on it, trying to move from a cage to the other without using his powers. After he had touched all of them twice he changed game and, causing a storm in miniature, he began to create various snowmen; disappointed by his anonymous army, he had a small inspiration and worked to shape each of its components to give them the Guardians' appearance: first he created the North, impressive in his long coat and thick beard; then he created Sandy, making sure to style his hair exactly as he used to; then he created Toothiana and Bunnymund, using the ice to manage to model the former's transparent wings and the latter's long ears; finally, he created himself and Pitch, in each other's arms, tenderly united in a pose which forewarned sleep.

As if on purpose Jack yawned, realizing only in that moment all the tiredness he had accumulated in the previous days, unduly aggravated by the disturbing visions he had had, so he gave up and decided to go to sleep without waiting for the partner: it was not the first time he had been found asleep in his bed, and the Boogeyman had never complained about that, taking the opportunity, indeed, to lie down beside him and cuddle him.

Staggering a little the boy reached the room and undressed, nonchalantly throwing the garments on a small higher platform the man had created specifically for that purpose: since he had got involved with Pitch he had never slept in his clothes, because they bothered and hindered him, but, more importantly, they prevented him from feeling the other's skin pressed against his own. Now naked he crouched on the mattress, wrapping himself in the black and soft blanket the Boogeyman had given him months before and rejoicing when he smelled his perfume on it: it was not exactly like having him there with him, but it quite effectively reproduced his touch and his presence, so it reassured him enough.

Calming down he closed his eyes, hoping to be able to regain his strength in time to see his love coming, then he sighed and, without even noticing, he quickly fell into a deep sleep.

During that brief nap which he had allowed to himself Jack didn't dream anything: he just slip into a darkness featureless and compact, which enveloped him like the blanket Pitch had given him and made him lose consciousness, denying him happy visions, but sparing him upsetting nightmares.

After an indeterminate time, but probably not very long, something intervened to disturb him: something soft, warm and incredibly insistent. In fact, despite the boy had at first turned and then curled up on himself in order to escape the annoyance, that unknown entity had followed him, rubbing itself against his neck and his chest and bothering him in every way; huddling up even more Frost tried one last time to dodge it, but in the end, defeated, he had to give up and wake up.

Instinctively he raised his arms to move them to his face and rub his eyes, but he bumped into something; too tired to do anything else he renounced and stood there, waiting a minute for his mind to become clearenough, then he opened his eyes and, as he expected, given the musky scent which
permeated the air, he found himself in front of his partner, bent over him and intent on torturing him with sweet kisses.

Chuckling he said: «Welcome back, Pitch».

The Boogeyman, in response, merely emitted a stifled groan, without even interrupting what he was doing.

Not bothered at all by the morning courting the boy let him do what he wanted and enjoyed the view of the man's male chest: in fact his partner had not, as usual, laid down next to him, but he had approached him by the head, crawling to him until Jack had found his collarbone just above the tip of his nose. It didn't take much time to him to explain the reason of that strange position: as soon as he tried to stretch his legs he felt immediately his feet bumping against the wall and he realized he had slipped to the bottom of the bed, leaving no room beside himself for the other.

While he reflected Pitch stuck out his tongue and drew a small, wet trail around his nipple, then he licked the areola, and, shook by a hot chill, the boy moaned weakly and provoked him: «Mh, Pitch, already?».

Chuckling the man brought his irises up to his and replied: «You make me find you completely naked in my bed and then you want me to hold myself back? Not even in your wildest dreams. And then, today you have such an irresistible scent...».

Almost without finish to speak he closed his eyes, going down to inhale his hair and neck's scent, and Jack followed him, turning his head to leave him more space. As soon as he sensed him coming back along his cheek, however, he hastened to meet him, and he opened his mouth, waiting impatiently: he almost melted when he perceived him placing his lips on his, lighter than a feather, and he groaned when he felt him slip his tongue between them, looking for his to deepen the contact. Tilting a little his head the boy let himself being captivated and he answered, trying to get used to that new kiss: at first, in fact, he didn't dare to move, fearing he could annoy his love by inadvertently bumping his pointed chin or his pronounced nose; after a while he managed to relax, chancing few little bites and realizing that that position was perhaps even more comfortable than the normal one; in the end, though, Pitch stepped back, breaking that tender union and heading towards his stomach.

Frost let out a faint whimper as he felt him moving away, but he soon turned it into a warm sigh when he realized what his goal was: he helped him throwing aside the blanket, which had become a useless barrier, he opened his legs to offer himself to him better and stroked his sternum with his fingertips, as to entice him to take what he wanted. The Boogeyman, of course, didn't need to be asked twice: after few caresses on the inner thigh, specifically with the purpose of making him shiver with anticipation, he kissed his already hard cock, then took it into his mouth.

The boy arched at that gesture, trying not to move his pelvis in order not to choke his love, and to follow thrill which had crossed him he stretched his arms, scratching the mattress and moaning.

Unable to stroke the Boogeyman's hair easily he preferred to caress his thin hips and knees, which lightly sank in the bed right next to his ears, and he got an idea: going up with the phalanges to the other's groin he touched it, not amazed to find it already turgid, then he tore the fabric that covered it, leaning on an elbow to reach it. Just as his partner had done shortly before he opened his lips, capturing his cock between them, and he rejoiced when he realized that that position was nothing short of perfect for what he wanted to do: slightly tilting his head, in fact, he was able to take his member down his throat, while still maintaining sufficient freedom of movement to manage to properly stimulate it with the tongue and feeling a sense of suffocation much smaller than usual.

Smiling impishly at that useful and exciting discovery Jack immediately began to suck and, in short, he was completely lost in the pleasant sensations which he was giving and, at the same time,
receiving: for each lick he gave, in fact, he felt one in return, whenever he pressed his erection against the palate he perceived his love do the same, when he bared his teeth to tease him he sensed him imitating him, and so on, in a series of gestures new and repeated which boded to bring him faster and faster to the satisfying epilogue. It was incredibly exciting being able at the same time to dominate and be dominated, to moan and make mean, to lead and follow, and soon, for the boy, it was too much to bear: shivering he realized that he couldn't support himself on his elbows for any longer, so he threw his left arm around the man's waist; thanks to this trick he managed to resist for about ten seconds, but, after this time, he had to give up and let himself go on the mattress, arching his back to follow the chills which crossed his body.

Just when few other movements would have been enough to bring him to the limit, Pitch broke away from him, panting for a moment to catch his breath, then he grabbed him behind the left knee and pulled, dragging him with himself and making him turn until Jack was exactly under him; staring into his eyes with his misted ones he kissed him passionately one last time, taking his breath away and letting his trousers, the only garment he had ever worn that morning, dissolving; finally, he opened his legs even more, settling on his own, and he got ready to penetrate him.

At first Frost shivered with anticipation, eager to welcome him inside himself, but, as soon as he felt him pushing against his entrance, he was gripped by a wave of panic and, pressing his palms on his shoulders to block him, he screamed: «No!».

The Boogeyman groaned frustrated at the refusal, but he did his best to hold himself back, arching the spine to stop its movement and then collapsing on him, clearly amazed at what had happened; the boy, after all, was in his same situation: why on earth had he stopped him? He was flattered by his attentions, as always, he was excited, he longed with all his might to join him and feel him leading the intercourse, with the mixture of sweetness and violence which connoted him, so why, at the last, had he denied him satisfaction? Why, for the first time since he had met him, had he been afraid he could hurt him?

The man, raising himself, interrupted the train of his thoughts and stammered: «J-Jack, you should have told me immediately you didn't feel like doing it».

Jack felt terribly guilty about that sentences and he tergiversated: «No, it's not as you think, it's just...».

Seeing him hesitate Pitch took his face in his hands, gently petting him and sending him a tender look, then he reassured him: «Jack, my baby, you don't need to justify yourself: if you don't feel like doing it, you don't feel like doing it, and there's nothing more to add. I don't want you to feel guilty: you don't need not go all the way, especially if you're not comfortable with it. I told you to warn me simply because I don't want to risk to force you doing something you don't like. Now, what about some cuddles?».

Slightly reassured by his partner's positive reaction the boy calmed down, but, eager to give him at least an explanation for his sudden and abrupt refusal, he began to think aloud.

«Pitch, I was not lying before: it's not what you think. I wanted you, badly, I do want you even now, though, I don't know, at that moment I got scared. Do not feel guilty, please: I love your behaviour, I like how you treat me and I do not want you to change. This time, though, perhaps, I just would like you to be softer».

The Boogeyman, who, concentrated, had stared at him all the time, sighed and asked in a thoughtful tone: «Are you absolutely sure you want to continue? Wouldn't you rather stop here, being pampered a little and then continue another time? I won't get angry or offended if you tell me that you do not want to go on today». 
Frost looked back at him and, with a resolute expression, he replied: «Yes, I'm sure».

The man smiled at him, caressing his hair gently, then he leaned over and whispered in his ear: «All right, Jack: if you tell me that you really want to do it I'll believe you. I'll go on, but do not worry: I'll be extremely soft».

Pitch had explicitly promised he would have been soft, but Jack would have never expected from him such a care and patience, not after he had denied him an intercourse. First, the Boogeyman had taken him in his arms, hugging him and scratching his nape; when he had felt him relax he had made lay down and he had literally covered him with kisses, from the temples to the palms, from the palms to the collarbones, from the collarbones to the toes and then back again, from the heels along the inner part of the leg up to his groin; once there, he had opened his mouth, taking his cock never softened to give him the satisfaction previously denied, and he had settled down on the mattress to get comfortable.

In hindsight, the boy understood the reason for that position: the man, in fact, had courted him for long, taking up the erection in his throat and then letting it escape from his lips to stimulate it with the tip of his tongue, rubbing it against the palate and slightly scratching it with his teeth, bobbing his head slowly so as to almost drive him mad, and, in the meantime, he had tormented him with his hands, caressing his thighs to excite him and then moving to his chest to appease the chills which crossed him.

Frost had resisted for more than ten minutes, remaining motionless to leave complete freedom to the other, but in the end, he couldn't hold himself back and grabbed his right hand, hoping the tug would have induced him to increase the pace; seeing that that spring of initiative had had no effect he sighed, frustrated, and he decided to express himself in a more explicit way: after gently kissing his fingers he took them in his mouth, sucking three at once and trying to show all the passion he could to make him understand the desire he felt.

After few minutes Pitch pulled back his hand, lightly brushing his lips as a sign of gratitude, then he brought it between his legs and started to massage his entrance: proceeding very slowly he penetrated him with a single finger, gently sliding it in him to let him get used to the intrusion, making every effort to spare him the pain, and only when he felt him perfectly relaxed he dared to insert a second phalanx.

At that gesture the boy could no longer restrain himself, brought close to the limit too many times to be able not to pass it, and he came, letting out a high-pitched and liberating moan which echoed in the room; the Boogeyman, who had continued to stimulate him even during the orgasm, raised his head a moment, impishly licking his own lips to show him how much he appreciated his gift, then lowered it again, picking up with his work from where he had left off.

Jack shuddered when he felt the heat wrapping again his erection still hard, but he didn't complain: he opened his legs to leave him more room, he barely noticed the third finger which penetrated him and unconsciously began to move toward the hand which was giving him satisfaction and which, however, was the creator of a union that could only be a pale imitation of what he wanted.

As if reading his mind the man raised himself up, reaching his eye level, and the boy replied promptly to the unspoken question: throwing his arms around his neck he pulled him close, he half closed his eyelids to tempt him with his opacified gaze and he whispered: «Take me».

Closing his eyes to handle a request so provocative and follow the thrill of excitement which had crossed him in hearing it, Pitch pulled himself together and got ready: he pulled back his fingers,
settled between his open legs and, stroking his neck to reassure him, he penetrated him. He proceeded with a slow movement, in order not to hurt him, but also fluid, in order not to take things too far and, perhaps, because of the excessive impatience accumulated; whatever was the reason which induced him to do so, however, Frost didn't complain: not only he had not experienced the slightest pain, but also no burning friction. He marvelled at this: he had now got used to that sensation, more pleasant than unpleasant for his nerves, and he had accepted the idea to feel it always during the first minutes of an intercourse, and then sense it disappear shortly after, thanks to his partner's skills and experience; in this case, oddly, it hadn't arisen at all, and he had been able to understand that he had joined the other just for the sweet sense of wholeness which had caught him.

Brushing his back only with his fingertips, to thank him for all the gentleness he had used, the boy looked for his lips, drawing him into a passionate kiss, and the Boogeyman immediately took charge, rubbing his open palms on the side in order not leave any part of his body unclaimed. After a while he ventured a timid thrust, to which Jack replied with a satisfied moan, so he decided and began to move, dictating a slow and steady pace, but no less exciting.

Unable to follow him the boy kissed him one last time, then he turned his head, offering him the jugular; the man, for his part, didn't need to be asked twice and pounced on him, refraining himself from biting it and simply limiting himself to suck it and redraw it with his tongue.

Bewitched by his partner Frost hugged him, responding to his gentle pampering with soft caresses, and Pitch did the same, sliding his hands under his back and holding him, lifting him from the mattress just enough to make the sheets tickle his skin, sighing softly against his neck to let him know how much he appreciated that embrace.

Opening his mouth more, in the attempt to breathe easily and not to groan, the boy emptied his mind and tried to immerse himself in that act of kindness and passion: it was nothing short of sublime feeling the other above himself, intent to court him, sensing his every slightest movement, conceived to give him the most intense pleasure, hearing his voice, though muffled, perceiving his boundless love in every gesture, from the tender way he held him in his arms to the caring one with which he slid his pelvis to prevent him from slipping.

Jack closed his eyes, to better enjoy those wonderful feelings which filled him, but soon he realized that the other was close to the orgasm, so, groping in the darkness, he moved to his ear and whispered: «C-come inside me!».

He couldn't explain himself the reason of that request: except for very rare occasions, happened more because of bad luck than of real intention, the Boogeyman had always reached the limit inside him, without asking for a permission or receiving any explicit desire, so there was no reason to fear that this time he would have refrained himself from doing so. The man, however, perhaps thanks to his understanding attitude, perhaps, more likely, because he was too lost to think through, said nothing and pleased him: sliding his right hand on his cock, to stimulate it one last time, he hold him tightly, then, after two hard thrust, he came inside him.

A heat much more intense than usual took Jack's lower belly, dripping on his loins like warm honey, warming him to the depths: with a smile he let himself be pervaded by that feeling, as new as pleasant, curling his feet and barely noticing he had had an orgasm, too, then he relaxed.

Little hot chills were still crossing his body, but the boy couldn't even manage to shiver: he was used to temporarily lose strength after an intercourse, but at that moment he felt completely and definitely exhausted. Groaning with the effort he turned his face, glad to see Pitch doing the same, and he stared at him, unable to do anything else.

Probably realizing what his conditions were the Boogeyman kissed him and whispered on his lips: «I
love you, sweetie».

Moved Frost smiled and a tear rolled down his left eye, but, before he could even think to answer, he capitulated, closing his eyes and slipping into a deep sleep.

After his declaration Pitch had, as usual, hidden his face against Jack's neck: even though they'd been together for months now he always felt embarrassed during this kind of moments, so much that, customarily, he confessed his love only rarely and always when the other was sleeping; on this occasion, however, he hadn't been able to hold back himself: the way in which the boy had given himself had been so sweet, the embrace in which he had welcomed him so full of tenderness, his expression serene so moving that the Boogeyman had almost not noticed that “I love you” escaped from his own lips.

To dispel the shame he felt because he had let himself go to that point he immediately started to court his jugular, remaining inside him to enjoy as long as possible the burning heat of his abdomen, and he smiled when he felt the other turning his head and opening his legs, to leave him space and make him feel comfortable while he was pampered. Taking advantage of that silent but explicit consent he passed his tongue on every inch of skin, not daring to suck it when he saw how much it had reddened and been softened; then he moved up to the ear, and finally to his chin, ready to steal him another kiss, but once there he froze, too shocked to do anything.

Frost had not just relaxed, indulging beneath him to try to recover, but he had directly fallen into a deep sleep, his expression calm, albeit exhausted, and the look of being perfectly at ease. The man had to make a great effort not to burst out laughing: he was now accustomed to that breakdowns, which the boy continued to have despite the experience gained in the past months, but he had never seen him capitulate before the end of the intercourse.

Disentangling with difficulty his arms he broke the embrace, straightened his back and got ready to clean up the other's chest, but, to his astonishment, he found it perfectly dry: evidently, despite he had came just for the second time, Jack had not poured his own semen. Thinking the reasons of this could be the fact he had courted him for long and the fatigue which his partner, given the season, had certainly accumulated for his hard work, Pitch tried not to give too much importance to it and focused, rather, on how to end the union without waking him up or hurting him: first he brought his thighs on his own, settling them so that they could not fall or get in his way; then, softly pressing on his belly, he moved, slowly slipping out of him and letting out a sigh when he escaped his hot tightness; finally, after cleaning him with a shred of dark cloth, readily evoked, to leave him completely dry, he laid down beside him.

He allowed himself few seconds of rest to recover from that intercourse which, albeit sweet and calm, had worn him out as much as a passionate one, for the willpower he had had to employ to restrain himself: it had been terribly difficult keeping a controlled pace when he wished with all his might to grab him from the hips, forcing him under himself and thrusting deep inside him, until he could hear his scream of pleasure, but he had imposed himself not to do that for Frost's sake. It didn't matter if his perfume had been so intense to stun him, it didn't matter if the heat in his abdomen had grown to the point it had become almost unbearable, it didn't matter if the penetration had been even easier than usual, it didn't matter if his muscles had tightened even more around his cock, nothing of this did matter: if the boy had asked to be treated softly it had been because he felt the need of it, and the Boogeyman preferred to do violence to himself rather than to him.

Realizing he was too tired to resist for a long time he decided to get ready for bed: he had worked hard all night, and also during the nights before, and he had the big game on Halloween ahead, so it
was better for him not to wear himself out.

After making Jack lay down on his side he retrieved his robe, which he had taken off before he had started to court him, then he rolled it up into a ball under his head, so that his neck would have not been tensed in unnatural positions, causing him cramps; draping the soft blanket on them both he crouched behind him, holding him in a gentle hug and bending his legs, to completely surround his curled figure; finally, after placing a slight kiss on his temple, he settled his head in the crook of his neck and closed his eyes, slowly slipping into a deep sleep.

Here's a fanart made for me by Vampira86:


Chapter End Notes

Remember when I stated I would have published every Saturday? I was joking. I wanted to say every Friday. So, see you next Friday night (Italian time zone)! Don't be afraid to leave me a comment, if you want to: I love talking with my readers. Have a nice day
For the second time in that day Jack slept without having any dream: he simply slipped into a darkness without shape or volume, so deeply immersed in it not to even realize the time passing. At one point it seemed to him that something was trying to disturb his sleep, shaking him just enough to remind him that he was still alive and he still had a body, but, whatever it was, it disappeared almost immediately, preventing him from identifying it and letting him rest in peace.

When, in the end, he woke up, he was completely sure that he had fallen asleep only few minutes before, because he felt so tired he almost didn't have the strength to lift his eyelids; determined to fall asleep again he bowed his head, but the curiosity had its way, so, focusing to open his eyes, he sought his lover.

He found him immediately, and he immediately marvelled: he expected to surprise him in his sleep, tenderly nestled on the mattress while trying to recover from the intercourse and, at the same time, to steal him a hug, but instead he saw him fully awake, tensed and with the irises full of concern.

Leaning on an elbow Pitch rose and, bending over him, he asked him in an anxious tone: «Jack, are you fine?».

The boy mumbled weakly, feeling his mouth completely dried out, but in the end he managed to answer: «Mh, well, I feel a little tired, but it's normal: I haven't slept for long».

The Boogeyman stared at him intently and replied: «You slept for sixteen hours straight».

Wincing at that revelation Frost addressed him a questioning look, and the other said: «You fell asleep before we parted, you never spoke or let out a lament, nor tried to move, unlike the usual. You continued to sleep deeply even when I tried to wake you up, four hours ago, and now you tell me this: you're not fine, Jack».

The boy rubbed his eyelids, in order to wipe away the sleepy expression that he certainly had on his face, then he replied: «No, Pitch, do not exaggerate: I only slept more than usual. You shouldn't worry, it's a thing which could happen sometimes: who knows, maybe I didn't rest well, or maybe I was just really tired».

The man frowned, leaning over him almost to touch him with the tip of his nose, carefully checking his irises and skin, and eventually he conceded: «Indeed you have nothing wrong: your eyes are clear, but not bright with tears or fever, your skin is light and cool as usual, your pulse and breath are regular and, apart from this sudden sleep, I don't see anything abnormal. It must be just a little tiredness: there is no other explanation. Now, however, you should get up, even if you don't feel well-rested: sleeping too much is not good, neither for the body, nor for the mind. Do you feel like doing it? I can show you how I changed the main cave, or we could go out and catch some fresh air:
I'm sure it would help you to recover. You don't need to push yourself too much: it is sufficient for you to stay active for few hours, then, if you want, you can sleep again».

Jack took a moment to reflect, torn between laziness and diligence, too tired to get up and too bored to sleep, and eventually he gave way to the second impulse: since he had opened his eyes he felt his limbs so heavy to seem made of lead and his mouth so dried up he could barely speak, and he couldn't wait to drive out those two annoying sensations with a healthy walk.

«Of course, willingly: I just need a bit of fresh air to wake me up! Can you pass me my clothes?» he emphatically suggested.

Reaching out his right hand over the mattress Pitch grabbed his clothes, which he had evidently folded and carefully settled to pass the time, and he handed them to him, patiently waiting for him to wear them and taking care to personally arrange every wrinkle or tie out of place. When he was satisfied with the result he opened his arms, evoking thin tentacles of magic sand and weaving them together, and in few seconds he recreated the trousers and the robe he used to dress with; he looked at himself for a while, probably to make sure that the cloth was compact and tight as ever, then he got off the bed and offered a hand to his love, in order to invite him to do the same.

No needing to be asked twice the boy accepted his help, grabbing his thoughtful forearm while he uncertainly stood on his feet and not leaving it even as he retrieved the staff, then he let himself be led down the corridor, soon getting into the central hall; after a short panoramic tour, during which he listened to his partner describing the improvements made to the cages and he showed him the snowmen he had shaped, he expressed the desire to visit a place more light and airy to finally dispel the fatigue and the man nodded, accompanying him to an opening they had never used.

Proceeding confident behind him, along a tunnel which grew more and more narrow and tortuous, Frost never allowed himself to panic, even when he had to rotate the torso and walk sideways in order to advance, and eventually, as he expected, he reached the end of that passage and came out in the open. Initially hampered by the Boogeyman's figure which was blocking the view and by the shrubs which covered the ground, he didn't pay much attention to the landscape and rather made sure to shake the dust off his hoodie and not to stumble, but when he decided to look up he stood literally speechless.

In front of him, in fact, there was a small basin, a paradise in miniature which the water had carved over the centuries in the stone, eroding it, softening it, reshaping it to dig a sinuous canal in which flow quietly, gently stroking what it had destroyed and adapted to its will. The walls of stratified rock were perfectly smooth, albeit uneven, and they closed the pond in high walls in every direction, except for the west side, where, with difficulty, they opened up, revealing a glimpse of heaven, a tiny portion of the horizon reddened by the sunset.

Enchanted by the sight of the dying sun the boy stared at the star, following it with his eyes until he saw it disappear over the mountains, and only at that point he managed to shake himself and turn around to gaze at what he had left behind; he immediately regretted not having done it before: now the light was almost gone and the shadows, already dense by nature in a place so sunken, darkened visibly, devouring every detail and making everything flat and grey. Fortunately, the relationship with Pitch had made him get quickly used to the gloom: although he wasn't really sensitive to the light rays his partner often preferred to remain in the darkness, where he felt much more at ease, and Jack had soon imitated him, indulging both his nature and his own; therefore he simply had to wait less than a minute to see emerging from the darkness every single detail of this magnificent eden.

Unlike what he had imagined the water didn't gush from the ground, but it leaked straight from the top of that small cave, splitting up in thin rivulets and wetting it for a long stretch, creating a trick of
reflections in constant motion; flowing between a stalagmite and the other made its way down, collecting into a perfectly circular pool, crystal clear, but so deep to seem bottomless, lingering in it until it altogether stop and become more polished than a mirror; just when it was almost impossible distinguish it from the starry sky which recreated in itself, however, it resumed its way, slipping quietly into the channel it had dug out and disappearing with a slight murmur in the undergrowth. Everything in the basin, with the exception of the riverbed and some portions of the wall so sloping to be incumbent, was completely covered with moss, to which, in the flat parts, were added fine blades of grass, and the central area was adored with minute white flowers of which the boy didn't know the name, but whose beauty he was still able to appreciate.

Bending down he caught one of them, bringing it close to his face to see it better and rejoicing to see that its petals, at external appearance completely snowy, were actually flecked with purple, black and dark blue in their inner part, as if the Boogeyman himself had taken care to embellish them with his own essence, then he commented: «I don't really know what to say, Pitch: this place is beautiful».

«That's incredible, I managed to silence Jack Frost himself!» mocked him the man.

«Well, what's so strange about it?» asked Frost; «Between the two you are the chatterer: you're so in love with your own voice that you spend hours and hours talking just in order to hear it».

«As if you were disappointed by this fact» retorted Pitch, piqued.

The two remained tensed for few seconds, stealing a glance at each other, the brows frowned, then, in unison, they burst into a laughter: they loved teasing each other in that way, everyone trying to provoke the partner, and now they did it so often they were on the same wavelength, understanding immediately when the joke started and never risking to misinterpret any apparent criticism.

Soothing the hilarity the Boogeyman explained: «I'm glad to know you like it. Actually, as you can see, it's rather uncomfortable using it to get into my lair, but sometimes I prefer to labour in order to be able to gaze at it. It's been a long time since I decided to show it to you, but I preferred to wait: those little flowers bloom only in this season and I really wanted you to see them».

Touched the boy replied: «They are beautiful, Pitch: they have an intense perfume, even though they are so small, and wonderful colours. Watching them closely, I noticed that they are not just white, but they are mottled with purple, blue and even black in the inner part: it seems that my essence and yours have been merged together in a single flower».

The man winced at that description, clearly taken aback by such an intuition that, in two simple sentences, had revealed what he had treasured in his mind for months, then he muttered: «Do not exaggerate, poet! They are flowers and nothing else. Instead, why don't you get a move on? Until five minutes ago you yearned for stretching your legs, now don't you tell me you've changed your mind!».

Looking up at the sky, amused by the umpteenth demonstration of his lover's shyness, Jack threw him the staff and concluded: «Okay, okay, wallflower, I'm coming! Keep me the staff for a moment: I want to drink a little».

Jumping from a clump of moss to the other he reached the other side of the basin, where a small low-level platform allow an easy access to the pond, then he knelt down and plunged his hands into the water; shivering a little in feeling it so cold to be almost close to freezing he didn't lose his heart and, taking a deep breath, he squirted it on his face, then he took a small amount in his cupped palms and he slowly sipped it.

Perceiving the icy liquid flowing on his skin and along its throat was a sensation perhaps a bit
upsetting, but definitely stimulating: in a blink of an eye all the tiredness and the apathy he had felt until then disappeared, slipping away from his limbs together with those minute drops, and when he stood up he felt invigorated and perfectly ready to face the imminent winter.

«I'm ready» he exclaimed, running to reach his partner.

Shaking his head Pitch stopped him, tore off a piece of his robe and dried him, rubbing the cloth several times on his cheeks and among his fingers to make sure not to leave any trace of moisture, then he repaired his garment and said: «Sometimes you do act like a child, Jack. Come on, let's go».

Having sensed at what latitude they were Jack decided to make a gift to Pitch, in order to thank him for that beautiful piece of paradise he had showed him: with an agile movement he jumped on a rock, then on a branch, quickly climbing the tree and leaping into the sky; laughing he lifted himself higher and higher, flying zigzag, doing somersaults and pirouettes of any kind, and when, finally, the power of the staff was fully activated, he landed, soon followed by tiny snowflakes.

Walking in the quiet forest the two enjoyed a few hours of tranquillity, talking of this and that, following the nocturnal animals in their wanderings to discover their habits, admiring the show of the white blanket which was slowly covering everything, exchanging knowing looks and rejoicing for each other's presence. For all the time they behaved naturally, speaking fluently and not feeling the slightest embarrassment: they knew each other too well to be caught by silly concerns, and they were now well accustomed to that kind of intimacy, much less sensual than their intercourses' one, but no less enjoyable.

The boy would have liked to extend the encounter until dawn and beyond, talking with his love, listening to his vibrating voice, playing with him in the snow and, why not?, even devising some jokes, but it was now time for both to return to work. It was for this reason that, with a sigh, he said: «It's been hours since I woke up and I don't feel tired at all: apparently I had just overslept. I don't need to rest more, so it's better for me to go back to work: the time has come to bring snow in the world. I'll start from Canada this year, okay? And you? What will you do?».

The Boogeyman petted his head and replied: «Very well, Jack. I'm getting ready for Halloween, so I thought I'll visit the United States: this celebration is much more popular there than elsewhere, the shop windows have already been set up with spider webs, ghosts and similar trifles and the children are starting to tell to each other horror stories horror before going to sleep. It's the ideal atmosphere to warm up before the great night».

«So we're parting, aren't we?» asked Frost, with a hint of regret in his voice.

The man, who had stared at him all the time, struggled to hold back a laugh, probably amused by the already nostalgic boy's attitude, then he knelt in front of him and demanded: «So, what's wrong? Are you going to leave me forever, Jack? Come on, this is not the first time we part: in the last winter we spent most of the time separated, meeting only one or two times a week, and you have never acted like this. Maybe are you melting down, ice puck?».

Not knowing how to answer the boy pursed his lips, looking away to hide the upheaval which had caught him: indeed, he didn't only feel sad for the impending separation and embarrassed for the provocation, but also, and above all, confused, unable to explain his behaviour that, in hindsight, seemed to him awfully capricious and childish. Why on heart had he turned so sad at the idea of spending few days far away from his lover? It was not the first time it happened, as the partner had reminded him, he'd known it would have happened for months now and, anyway, he was certain that Pitch would have taken every opportunity to make him a pleasant surprise, sending one of his
Nightmares to escort him or showing himself up for a short and sweet greeting: there were, so, many good reasons not to worry. He was perfectly aware of this, the more he reflected with a cool head and the more he got convinced of this fact, and yet he couldn't cast the sadness out of his heart: the more he thought about it and the more the feeling intensified, becoming a burden heavier than a boulder, dragging him to the ground, overwhelming him almost to the point to make him cry.

Just when the myriad of conflicting thoughts which crowded his mind became so thick and heavy to block his breath and stiffen his muscles, bringing him to the brink of panic, the Boogeyman promptly came to his rescue: without asking for any explanation he hugged him, pulling him towards himself and pushing his chest against his back, then he moved his face next to his ear and consoled him.

«Jack, my baby, do not get sad: we're not parting forever. It was you who explained you'll take just a few weeks to bring the winter in the world, so you only need to have a little patience and work well: believe me, when you'll be done, you will not even remember this waiting. The fact that we are both busy, however, doesn't prevent us from seeing each other: I'm sure we'll be able to carve out some free time to spend together. Rather, you know what? When Halloween will end I'll come to look for you and take you, so you will be able to accomplish your task without feeling alone and then immediately spend some time with me, in the place and in the way you'll feel most in that moment».

Infinitely grateful to the other for his speech Jack turned and nestled against his chest, feeling incredibly lucky to have found a partner so understanding and caring: despite the gruff and evil appearance, in fact, the man loved him from the bottom of his heart, and he would have done everything to make him happy, even openly show his affection.

Quietly moaning he perceived Pitch begin to cuddle him, scratching his nape and caressing his back with his palms, and Jack reciprocated, redrawing his jugular with a long trail of tender kisses: one for his try to defuse him, one for the time he had left him to reflect, one because he had rushed at the appropriate moment, one for the delicacy he had used, one because he had not asked him to explain his attitude, one for the sweet promises he had made to him, and so on, in a series and a list which he could potentially increase forever.

After a minute of moving cuddles Frost pulled himself together and, breathing for the last time the intense Boogeyman's scent, he broke away from him and simply said: «Thank you».

The man looked away and made a quick gesture with his hand, as if to set aside the question and avoid the embarrassment of answering, then he replayed: «Good luck, Jack, and be careful: do not push yourself too much».

The boy smiled and concluded: «Good luck to you, too, Pitch».

Leaning over his face he rested his lips on his, so gently he could still feel his warm breath tickling his skin, then he took a step back, following the line of his jaw with his fingertips; he allowed himself a moment of suspension, to gaze at the clear irises of the other in all their splendour, then he turned around and took off, flying away fast into the sky and sending him a gust of wind and snow to mess up his hair in a final farewell.

It had been three days now since that leave and Jack felt in fine form: he had visited every corner of Canada and Alaska, calling icy winds and storms and entirely covering them with snow, creating a blanket compact and about a meter thick, enjoying the children's excited screams that had rejoiced at the happy surprise, making sure that they could play for days and days before the ice melted, and he was on cloud nine. Thousands of infants believed in him and hundreds of them had seen him, pointing at him, amazed, while he flew in the sky, tiredness had not caught him even though he had
worked long and without taking a break and the initial nostalgia was soon disappeared, becoming a memory as incomprehensible as far: nothing better could have worked better than all this.

Satisfied with the result he decided to change the area and take the opportunity to indulge a whim he had been thinking for months now: visiting Jamie. He ought everything to that child whose will power was unassailable, who had not only encouraged his friends to fight Pitch, but also persuaded them to believe in the Spirit of Fun, and Jack intended to give him a special treatment, at least as long as he could: plenty of snow throughout the winter and a yearly visit. Probably, to an external spectator, this would have seemed very little gratitude for all he had received from him, but the boy didn't want to overdo: Jamie had to have his own space to grow, slowly learning everything he needed to mature well, and Frost didn't want to interfere, creating a relationship that would have been as incredible as detrimental for his formation.

Evoking the faster winds he knew he headed towards his native pond, quickly reaching it, and from there he drifted to the Bennetts' home, spotting it just few minutes before its last light was turned off; silently approaching it he landed on the windowsill of the first and last room he had ever visited more than once and he softly knocked on the glass, hoping that the noise was enough loud to attract the attention of the kid he was looking for.

He had to insist a little before he received an answer, but, luckily for him, less than a minute after a tousled head appeared from the darkness, turning here and there to find the source of that annoyance; waving his right hand the boy greeted him, already excited at the thought he was going to spend some time with him, but soon he realized he was not the most enthusiastic of the two.

«Jack, Jack, it's you! You're finally back! It's been a year since I saw you the last time, where have you been?! Will I fly with you? Will you bring the snow? Huh, Jack?» exclaimed Jamie.

Pressing his finger on his own mouth Jack urged him to keep quiet, in order to prevent his cries of joy to beckon his parents, then he waited for him to open the window and whispered: «Shhh, Jamie, do not scream like that! You don't want your parents to rush here, right? They just went to bed. It's still too early to talk quietly: we have to wait for them to fall asleep, or they'll surely hear you. Listen to me: for now I'll return to the city to bring a little snow, while you'll wait for me here, leaving the window ajar, so, within half an hour, we will spend some time together. Do you like it?».

The child nodded vigorously in response, half closing the shutters and leaping on the bed, slipping under the blankets and visibly quivering with anticipation.

Satisfied with the reaction the boy jumped away and flew over the city, landing on the tallest building to be able to fully embrace it with his eyes: focusing he evoked clouds and icy winds, letting his power flow from the staff in a light beam, and in few seconds minute snowflakes began to fall from the sky. Using his best abilities Frost worked hard to make these increase in size and number, soon becoming so thick they reduced the visibility to few meters, and he made sure to cover the soil with a thin layer of ice, to let them settle immediately; as he had planned in half an hour the blanket had already achieved a considerable thickness, which would have certainly forced the town to close schools and offices, so he decided to let the snowfall continue and end by itself and walked back to Bennett family's house.

Nimbly climbing the gutter he reached the windowsill and crept through the shutters, closing them quietly behind himself in order not to be discovered, but a voice well known to him exclaimed: «Jack!?».

«Pitch, is that you!?» asked the boy, astonished.

Turning he had the confirmation of his suspicions: a gangling and dark figure silhouetted against the
entrance of the room, impossible not to notice, with features absolutely unmistakable; squinting his eyes Jack managed to focus it better, identifying his lover's neckline and then his face, which had assumed an expression of pure surprise, certainly very similar to his own, but before he could even think about how to react to that unexpected visit a pillow hit Pitch right in his chest.

«Do not worry, Jack, I will defend you from the Boogeyman!» intervened Jamie, brandishing another pillow with a fighting spirit.

«No, no, wait!» stopped him the boy, trying to put together a believable excuse; «It's too dangerous: leave him to me!».

Firmly grasping the staff he moved forward, trying to look menacing and aggressive, but unfortunately he saw the Boogeyman wasn't playing along with him: instead of running away, in fact, he stood still, the irises full of wonder and confusion, ruining the concocted plan and even risking to get them caught; worried that the kid could decide to come to his rescue again Frost tried to nod at his partner, but he didn't see any change in him, so he had to get tougher: evoking his powers he lit the staff of a cold fire, then the unleashed it, aiming at his fake opponent's foot and freezing the cabinet which was behind him.

Finally the man seemed to shake himself and, with a startled cry, he backed away, dissolving himself into a steam of black sand and disappearing into the corridor; happy the boy relaxed and, turning to Jamie, he ordered him: «Please, stay in your room, do not even get out of the bed: I'll go and drive out to the Boogeyman. Wait here, I'll be back soon!».

Without even waiting for an answer he rushed out of the room, along the corridor and down the stairs, then he immediately started to look for his love: following the house's perimetry he first entered the dining room, then the kitchen, then a small anteroom, scanning every shadow to try to spot him, but he found nothing; sad he went to the living room, but before he could realize it something grabbed him by the neck and slammed him violently against the wall.

In a panic he tried to wriggle free, but the unknown being anticipated him, pinning his wrists beside his face and smashing him with his own body; in a strenuous attempt to defend himself Jack tried to bite it, but they cleverly dodged him, emitting a vibrant laugh and then pressing their lips on his.

Overwhelmed by a reassuring musky scent and by the unexpected gesture the boy immediately realized that the assailant was nobody but Pitch and he let out a sigh of relief, opening his mouth and inadvertently giving the other the opportunity to take advantage of this: pressed by his courtship he couldn't resist and moaned in that exciting stolen kiss which was becoming less and less chaste, but in the end, well aware of where he was, he decided to interrupt him and talk to him.

Turning his face with difficulty he managed to escape his curious tongue and, panting, he stammered: «Mh, Pitch, s-stop, Jamie is still awake, think about what would happen if he came here and saw us...».

«In that case he would learn some very interesting things» promptly replied the Boogeyman, licking him along the jugular.

«Pitch!» snapped Frost, without even trouble himself to specify the reasons of that reproach.

Snorting the man let him go and whispered in his ear: «You're the Guardian of Fun, but you can be really boring».

Piqued and worried the boy countered: «Pitch, are you crazy?! He's just a child, it would be a shock for him! And then, try to think how confused he would feel if he saw the Boogeyman and...». 
«Jack, calm down: I was just kidding» interrupted him Pitch, winking.

Reassured by that affirmation Jack relaxed, but soon he returned to the charge and ordered him: «Pitch, you must promise me you'll never let Jamie, nor other children, see you with me».

The Boogeyman rolled his eyes, letting out an annoyed grunt and evading the question, but when he saw the other open his mouth to insist he gave up and exclaimed: «Okay, okay, I promise! Happy? Now are you going to greet me properly or not?».

Chuckling the boy replied: «What's wrong? I thought you liked to be greeted with a kiss! If you prefer to hear me speak, however, I'll do it. As I told you few days ago I've been in Canada and Alaska and I have completely covered them with snow, so I won't have to visit them at least for three weeks. I made this little detour to come and visit Jamie: I wanted to see him and give him a snowfall in advance. After that, though, I'm going to Europe: I have a lot of work to do there. I intended to stay there for five or six days and then visit you: what do you say?».

«It's a great idea, Jack: however, I just wanted another kiss» replied the man with an amused grin.

Passing his arms around his waist he pulled him close, forcing him to open a little his legs to adhere to him, then he moved his face towards his and waited patiently for him to participate when he felt like doing it; Frost, on however, didn't make him wait for long: without any hesitation he hugged him, touching his nose with his own to drown in those iridescent irises he adored, then he slid a little further down and pressed his lips on his. He stood still for a moment, enjoying that moment of suspension, then he parted his mouth to deepen the contact: sticking out his tongue he searched his one, slowly stroking it, drawing it in the sensual dance he now knew to perfection, leaving it to caress his palate and then returning immediately to it, tilting his head to reach it more easily and moaning in feeling it so warm and silky.

Not used at all to tower over his partner he sat on his lap, clinging at his shoulders to make him bend down and not to break the kiss and stroking the bare skin of his chest with his fingertips, blushing more and more: his mouth was so soft and luring, his curious hands so expert, his touch so sensual, his body so...

«Pssst, Jack! Did you drive out the Boogeyman?» whispered Jamie from the stairwell.

Frightened by that intrusion the boy startled and muffled an amazement exclamation in the kiss: he had completely forgotten about the child who was waiting for him upstairs. Oblivious to the reproach he had addressed to Pitch for his aggression he had completely let himself go, quivering at his every touch, sensing shivers of excitement crossing him for his mere proximity, feeling the desire growing rapidly in him until it had become almost an irrepressible impulse, and he was sure that, if only that fifth wheel hadn't come, it would have taken very little to him to undress and ask him satisfaction: he could already imagine himself naked, his forearms and clavicles pressed against the wall and his buttocks exposed, intent to moan loudly while the other penetrated him, shaken by his thrusts, deafened by his groans, overwhelmed by his passion just before reaching the limit.

Shaking his head he dispelled, with difficulty and reluctantly, those languid visions, trying to quell his own desires in view of the conversation he had to participate to, then he asked in a low voice: «Pitch, will we meet in Europe? Will you look for me?».

The Boogeyman chuckled when he saw him so upset, but he didn't take things too far and answered: «Yes, don't worry: I'll send a Nightmare to look for you soon. Now go to Jamie before he comes here, and compose yourself: you don't want to traumatize him by showing yourself so, how can I say?, burning, right, ardent colt?». 
«You dork!» silenced him Frost.

Piqued by the provocation he walked away, arranging his hoodie and his ruffled hair; shortly after, however, he came back, stealing from his lover one last kiss as a compensation for the denied intercourse and definitely heading towards Jamie's room with a laugh.

Without hesitating even for a second Pitch dissolved himself into a stream of magic sand and followed the lover up the stairs, hiding himself in his shadow, sprining from a dark corner to another and finally creeping under Jamie's bed: he had promised he wouldn't have showed up with Jack in that room, but he didn't imply he wouldn't get into it.

Wedged among forgotten toys and odds and ends he tried to settle down as best as he could, bending his legs to fit himself to the bed so short and keep his ears open to eavesdrop on the conversation: he wasn't really interested in it, but he had nothing better to do in order to kill time and, indeed, he was curious to understand why his partner seemed so interested in that child and considered him so special.

After few minutes, however, that hint of jealousy he had felt definitely disappeared: Jamie was pathetic and annoying just like any other child. He had completely monopolized the conversation, throwing himself into confused reports about his boring adventures and jumping from one topic to another, narrating with such an emphasis to shake the bed and repeating himself very often, and those occasional encouragements that Frost gave him seemed to give him an endless energy and chatter.

Fortunately, after a half an hour which had seemed a century long, the boy spoke up, thanking him for the company and the enthusiasm and telling him that was time, for them, to part.

«But Jack, there's no school tomorrow!» protested the boy.

Jack laughed in response and declared: «Even more so: certainly you don't want to stay at home and sleep while your friends are playing snowballs, do you? Come on, Jamie: it's time to rest».

Grumbling the other settled down, still trying to strike up a weak defence, but giving up almost immediately; just when the Boogeyman was certain that the boy was about to leave, however, Jamie asked in a faint voice: «Jack, can you give me a hug?».

The man didn't hear any verbal answer, but the rustled which reached his ears was eloquent enough: raising his eyes to the sky he tried to tolerate that inappropriate display of affection, refraining himself from intervening to end it, but soon he had something else to think about.

«Jack, have you changed your perfume?» suddenly asked the child.

«But what are you talking about, do I look like a person who puts on perfume!?» exclaimed Frost.

«Well, your scent is different than usual: before you smelled like snow and fresh, now you also smell like flowers, and you're warmer. You smell a bit like before and a bit like my aunt, but my Mum's sister, the youngest one, not aunt Agatha: aunt Agatha stinks».

After bursting out into a loud laughter for that final statement the boy pulled himself together and replied: «If you're so sure that I have a different scent I believe you, but I assure you it can't be mine: there is nothing different than usual in me. It would have probably permeated my clothes while I was travelling. Come on, do not brood about it too much: it's time to sleep! Try to rest: a long day of games is waiting for you. Sweet dreams, Jamie: see you on the next year». 
Walking with a light step the boy walked away, saying goodbye to the kid one last time, then he left the room, going downstairs and using the back door to leave the house undisturbed.

Forced to wait until the child dozed off Pitch took advantage of that imposed break to reflect: why had the scent of Jack changed? Of course, as the attentive and possessive lover he was, he had noticed it immediately, not just that night, but even the one of three days earlier, during which Frost had slept for almost sixteen hours, and in no case he had managed to find a plausible explanation. Actually the smell was emanated directly by the boy's skin, not by his clothes, as he had supposed, and in any case the late autumn excluded the possibility he might have found an abundance of flowering meadows: except for the ones in that small basin which had shown him, in fact, the Boogeyman had not seen any coloured corolla peep through the blades of grass. Maybe the boy had found a perfume bottle and had opened it out of curiosity, accidentally wetting himself with few drops of the essence? This, however, didn't explain how it was possible that such a feminine scent had appeared only after they had made love, and not before. Maybe it was related to the fact that his powers had grown as the months had passed? If that were the case, however, why should he ever have assumed a scent so springy if he was the Spirit of Frost?

Frustrated by the fact he hadn't reached any sensible conclusion the man gave up: he had no ideas left, except for a couple even more absurd than those which he had already analysed, so it was useless to continue to mull over. Moreover, even if he had never understood the reason for this sudden change, no problem would have occurred: discovering the cause was more a whim than a real need; the important thing, as always, was that his little snowflake was happy and healthy and, with the exception of that anomalous long sleep, he had always found him full of energy: there was nothing to really worry about.

Reassured he decided to cock an ear to check if his annoying victim had dozed off, and it was with a great pleasure which he heard with he heard him letting out slow and steady breaths, clear sign that he had now fallen into a deep sleep.

Crawling out from his hiding place Pitch drew himself up to his full height, looming on the unaware child's figure and leaning on him to observe him closely; as he expected a thin ribbon of golden sand penetrated through the window's grass, aiming directly at his head and exploding into a sparkling shower, reshaping itself immediately to create the silhouettes of Jack and Jamie flying in the sky, ready to bring the winter all over the world, and only at that moment the Boogeyman decided to intervene.

«Oh, Jamie, what a moving dream: an adventure with Jack, a night spent flying with him, maybe even a lifetime spent at his side, devoted only to help him and play with him. You would like this to happen even in the reality, wouldn't you? Well, you arrived late: Jack is mine, mine and mine only, and I will never share him with anyone, not even in a dream» whispered the man with a soft voice.

Touching with his fingers the golden sand he corrupted it, making it blacker than a moonless night, then he reshaped it, transforming Frost into a magnificent Dark Prince, and putting a copy of himself beside him, adding several Pureblood and making sure that the atmosphere of the vision became increasingly grimmer, unleashing all his powers in order to crush that pathetic infant who, with an unheard of audacity, had defeated him more than a year before.

The desperate moan that Jamie emitted was music to his ears, and the temptation to torment him up to see him squirm was strong in him, but at last Pitch managed to hold himself back: if he had overdone his victim would have waken up, nullifying all his efforts, so it was better not to exploit the full potential of the magic sand, rationing it to prolong the suffering, protracting the nightmare until the morning and beyond, in order to completely disrupt the child and leave him powerless.
Satisfied with the thought he allowed himself a wicked grin, shivering at the discharge of fear which already climbed along his arms, then he turned, leaving the room without looking back to return to his work.

Focusing to gather all his powers Jack flew high in the sky, unleashing a shower of icy beams, still uncertain whether to use them to provoke a violent storm or a quiet snowfall, but in the end he opted for the latter: opening his arms he relaxed, letting the little bluish lightnings subside, then he sighed and fine snowflakes began to fall around him.

Satisfied with the result he descended, flying quietly and checking the ground: he had worked hard in those five days passed since his visit to Jamie, covering the whole Northern Europe with a compact white blanket, and the area he was studying was one of the few left. Perfectly relaxed he flew over it, proceeding calmly, allowing himself a little break to enjoy the cool breeze on which he was travelling and the beautiful unspoilt landscape which surrounded him, but suddenly, in the open, he spotted an artificial multicolour light: a particular absolutely unexpected in the middle of the uninhabited valley, a decidedly wrong note in a forest so dark.

Intrigued he approached it, passing several cars hidden under the trees and finally identifying the source of the light: a big abandoned building, probably a barn or a warehouse, from which a rhythmic music came and towards which various groups of boys dressed in a bizarre manner were converging.

Puzzled he watched them walking, half-naked despite the cold, adorned with earrings, tattoos, studs and unnatural hair colours, talking excitedly in a language he didn't know and disappearing into that strange building, and it took little to him to decide: he had never seen anything like this in his three hundred years of life and he had no intention to miss such an opportunity to discover something new and that, moreover, overwhelmingly fascinated him.

Without any hesitation he landed in a clearing, amazed to be able to hear the music despite several yards and several trees divided him from the entrance to that gathering, then he smiled and stepped forward to explore.

New drawing made by HeilyNeko!

http://it.tinypic.com/view.php?pic=2s7i6mu&s=8#U0G1z_1_umt

Chapter End Notes

Next chapter will be published on Friday, see you soon!
WARNING: In this period we had a lot of thunderstorms in my country and many of them lasted for long, preventing me from using both internet and my laptop and,
obviously, to work on the fanfiction. This week I managed to translate all the chapter in a single day, and my friend gently checked it immediately, but maybe the next time I won't be able to do it: if I'm late, please, have a little patience, because I can't control the weather. Of course I'll always make sure to delay the update only for one or two days, and not more.
Chapter 4

Chapter Notes

Thunderstorms and my friend ill... everything is working against my fanfiction! This time I translated ten pages in a day for nothing, because I had to wait XD

See the end of the chapter for more notes

WE DON'T HAVE TO BE ALONE – CHAPTER 4

After carefully gliding above the treetops Jack landed in the middle of a clearing, sinking his feet in the thin blanket which had started to cover the ground, then he looked around to familiarize with his surroundings; the forest, in fact, was quite different from how he remembered it: the wild animals which inhabited it were gone, replaced by cars of every shape and size, the soft moss and the delicate ferns which formed the undergrowth had been crushed and turned over into clods by the tires, and the murmuring rustle of the leaves was completely muffled by thumping music's notes.

Thrilled by the atmosphere entirely new for him Frost hurried towards a small group of boys, whom he had glimpsed through the bushes, and he cautiously stayed beside them, fearing they could catch sight of him; noticing that it consisted of only three members he decided to risk, saying a brief greeting to attract their attention, but they gave no sign of having heard him and went their way; well determined to get to the bottom of it, in order to be sure they couldn't see him, he run to precede them, then he stood in front of them as to stop them, and, when he felt them pass through his body, he had the final confirmation he was invisible.

Rejoicing, perhaps for the first time in his life, at this discovery, the boy approached the small company without any fear, curiously observing the strange leather clothes which they had put on, the numerous narrow straps around the legs, hips, torso and even neck, the shoes very thick-soled they were wearing, the jewellery bristling with spikes which adomed their arms and ears: even the smallest portion of those outfits so absurd amazed him, and, albeit failing to find any logical explanation to put on clothes obviously so uncomfortable and impractical, he had to admit to himself that they were aesthetically pleasing, albeit slightly gloomy, and that he would have liked to try them on.

The detail that most fascinated him in those characters almost aliens, however, was definitely their head: the face, in fact, was covered with make up, with light tones on the skin to make it nearly cadaverous and tones decidedly darker on eyes and mouth, deftly shaded to bring out the irises and the pinched features; the hair, instead, was dyed a thousand bright colours, combined together to create rainbow strands, short on the nape and long on the top, combed to form crests and spikes that seemed to stand upright for magic in defiance of gravity.

Too curious to be able to hold himself back Jack flew, to better watch those hairstyles so showy, and he dared to evoke a slight breeze to ruffle them, but he couldn't get this satisfaction: they didn't bent
an inch; perplexed he sent a second gust to touch them, but they remained perfectly still again; now become impatient he summoned winds more rapid and intense, determined to see if the hair would have resisted even to similar currents, but, as soon as he heard the boys screaming and saw them trying to protect each other, he lessened his powers: there was no need to torment innocent people just to satisfy his own silly desire.

Regretting the fact he had inadvertently been rude he made sure to protect them from the snow, opening a gap in the middle of the snowflakes which were falling more and more thicker, and, considerate as a guardian angel, he escorted them up to the abandoned building's eaves, under where other comrades were waiting for them. He winced, scared, when he saw one of them punching another one on the shoulder, seriously afraid he was about to see a fight, but the enthusiastic tone of their voices reassured him: evidently that was just their way to say hello.

Chuckling at the idea that in the world, as well as languages for him quite incomprehensible, there were also a lot of peculiar habits and customs, the boy who let the group go away and he lingered under the makeshift canopy to look closely at two posters he had spotted, hoping to be able to get some more information to understand what was going on in that place. The first one had no use for him: completely black, it had a series of white squares in the central area, some wider, some narrower, some with rounded corners, lined up to form some kind of code which was completely meaningless to him; the second one, instead, was far more explanatory: on it it dominated a human face, white as a corpse, his eyes blacks as pitch and his mouth covered with blood running down to his chin. Although the scene had a clear grisly connotation, the photographed character didn't seem to feel any emotion at all: his face was perfectly relaxed, his features weren't distorted with rage, his mouth was closed, but not firmly shut, and his glance calm to the point it looked vacant; this his tranquillity, however, appeared far more disturbing than any angry expression: the way he was staring at the viewer, with the index slightly lowering his left lower eyelid and exposing the raw flesh, didn't bode well and sent cold chills along the spine.

Moving his pupils away from the subject Frost concentrated upon other manifesto's particulars, briefly analysing the red and white background red and white and then focusing on the writing on the upper zone; recognizing one letter at time he managed to form the word “Combichrist”, but he didn't read it aloud: he was not sure how he should have pronounced it, and he had no idea of what it meant.

Slightly disturbed by that vision he stepped back, hesitant about what to do, but when his eyes fell on the entrance all doubt vanished: he couldn't absolutely forfeit the opportunity to discover something new, and, moreover, if that place had really turned out to be dangerous, he had nothing to fear about, because he was invisible to all the presents.

Encouraged by this assurance he walked, lining up behind a group of young people even more eye-catching than the first, and he followed them to a sliding iron gate, which was opened up just enough to let the guests enter in single file; quivering with impatience he waited his turn, evoking a chilly breeze to make them go faster, then he crept behind them; unable to linger any longer he overtook them as they proceeded down a winding corridor, regardless of their arms, which, occasionally, passed through him, and finally he came out into an open space.

Before he could identify it or realize what was happening he heard a crash and found himself lying against the wall, in a precarious balance between a metal drum and a wooden beam, so disoriented he struggled to understand where up and down were: he didn't expect to receive a similar blow. The music, in fact, was so high it had directly hit him, like a shock wave, injuring his ears and making him startle to the point it induced him to lurch on a side; the little sense of direction that was left, then, was finally destroyed by the pulsating lights illuminating the area, which, in few and very short flashes, blinded him.
Too confused to be able to react promptly he availed himself of the keg as a support and he slowly straightened his back, leaning against the wall to prevent himself from falling; sensing that it would have taken a while to him to recover he decided to close his irises, at least to eliminate the hassle of those light rays, but with great dismay he realized that these were visible even through his shut eyelids; determined not to be disheartened by this he settled down better on his shaky legs, covering his eyes with his left hand, then he let out a sigh of relief, happy to be able to defend himself from those annoying glares.

While waiting for the spots on the retinas to fade away Jack tried to soothe the eardrum pain, focusing on the music to understand its rhythm and then intuit its cadence, but, unfortunately for him, he didn't succeed: the strident noises and the croaking voice which animated it, in fact, didn't seem to follow any scheme and took him by surprise whenever they arose.

Frustrated by the failure the boy forced himself further, and finally he managed to grasp a recurrent sound: the basses. Initially, too stunned by the noise, he hadn't even be able to notice them, but now he could hear them clearly: he perceived them resound in the ground, wincing under the feet, climbing along the legs, vibrating in the stomach, reverberating up to the skull and back again; he sensed them oscillating among the walls, rebounding between ceiling and floor, he even felt them shaking every fibre of his staff: those sound waves, in fact, seemed to permeate everything, and they also had the advantage of exerting a calming power over him.

Reassured by the discovery Frost let himself go, sinking into those vibrations until he could no longer distinguish them from the beating of his own heart or from the buzz of his own thoughts, then he dropped his left hand along his side and opened his eyes. The very first flashes dazzled him, forcing his pupils to contract until they become pinholes, but gradually he managed to get used to them, spotting at first the drum and the beam between which he had got stuck, then the ceiling and, finally, the humans present there.

Breaking away from the wall he embraced with his eyes the huge room where he was, moving the irises from a pillar to the other, chasing the coloured rays which branched out from some strange boxes, and he chuckled, amused: the pulsating lights revealed the environment only when they were on, then making it fall into the darkness when they turned off, and it seemed to Jack he was looking a quick sequence of black and white photos, where people moved jerkily from a position to another.

After shaking his head to pull himself together he focused his attention on two boys, who, a little far from him, waved on the spot, so concentrated as to seem immersed in a world of their own: following the music rhythm they moved their arms and bodies, in soft gestures and sinuous movements, animated by an inner fire which burned so intensely it made them sweat, and Frost knew instinctively that they were dancing. He couldn't fully explain to himself how he had had this intuition: since he was born in the eighteenth century he was accustomed to very different dances, much more organized and elaborated than that haphazard waving he was watching, yet he had had no hesitation in making that thought, nor a change of mind after.

Throwing a last glance at the two guys Jack firmly grasped his staff and began to walk, determined to explore the place from top to bottom: advancing along the wall he overtook several small groups, some intent to dance, others to drink, others so crowded they didn't let him catch a glimpse of what they were doing, and, in the end, he saw an isolated figure.

Intrigued he reached him, proceeding with caution, in order to prevent himself from tripping in the myriad of threads which covered the floor or striking the fragile instrumentation which thronged the corner, and he went behind him: as he expected the man gave no sign to have noticed him and he continued unabashed to move at the rhythm of the song notes, playing at the same time with a series of buttons and levers which stuck out from the table in front of him and occasionally checking a
bright screen on his right.

Puzzled Frost leaned over the coloured glass, trying to decipher the list written on it, and, after some efforts, he managed to read the first words: “Blut royale”. Blut... what? What meaning could that terms unknown to him ever have? Maybe was it written in a foreign language? Or maybe did he simply fail to recognize the sequence of letters?

Turning to the following writings the boy soon realized that every effort was vain: nothing was familiar to him in that script so regular, formed by words he had never heard and words he had had, but which made no sense, therefore, considered how much concentration costed him to keep his eyes peeled in that dark place and try to follow that tiny typeface, it was preferable desisting. Too stubborn to definitely give up he still lingered in that isolated emplacement, studying the unaware lone dancer's moves, staring fascinated at the pulsating lights on the thick board on which he worked, and after few minutes he solved the mystery: the list he had seen was nothing but the series of the available songs, and the man he was watching had the task to control it and choose the order in which it was played.

Satisfied by this intuition he mentally thanked Jamie, who, telling how he had learned to use the computer to create music discs, had allowed him to get to the bottom of the arcane, then he walked away, to reveal new secrets about that event he hadn't been able to classify yet.

As soon as he came out of the area invaded by cables the music suddenly increased in volume, assuming an even faster pounding rhythm, and he realized that the noise was emitted by the big black boxes arranged radially around the secluded corner; stunned by the sound waves he decided to move away from them, but after a few steps he stopped, astonished.

In front of him there were three individuals, two females and one male, clinging to each other so closely they almost looked like a unique creature: the man, in particular, was positioned behind the most petite girl, intent on urgently grinding against her butt with little courteousness and fondling her breasts; the woman, on the other hand, was placed in front of her, taken up to kiss her with such fervour not to leave her even the room to participate actively, and it took very little to her to move the hands from her hips to her groin, sliding them without any notice under the short, fluffy skirt and stealing from her lover a surprised and startled expression, half amazed and half satisfied.

Although he had grown in an era when homosexuality was not even mentioned, so great were the fear and the loathing which such unions caused, Jack had developed, over time, his own opinion in that regard, concluding that everyone should accompany themselves with whoever they desired without any problem whatsoever; about that little chaste embrace, therefore, he wasn't shocked by the fact that two girls were displaying their affection: what upset him was the fact that the participants were three, and that they were blatantly touching themselves in front of a large audience. Why were they three? Maybe did each of them love the other two? However, how was it possible to love two people at once? Perhaps the man and the woman loved the girl, but they didn't love each other? If so, how could he handle the situation, and why did he allowed them both to fondle her? But, above all, why did none of them show the slightest embarrassment to give and receive such intimate caresses in front of other people, regardless they were making a spectacle of themselves, almost smug at the idea they were reaching the satisfaction without having to waste time in looking for a more private place?

Despite the efforts Jack didn't manage to give a valid answer to any of the questions which had spontaneously arisen in his mind, and, actually, he wouldn't have been able to reach a solution even if he had thought about it for hours: as the affectionate and sincere person he was he was unable to conceive sex as a thing on its own, separate from that absolute feeling which had been bounding him to Pitch for months and months, and he would have never imagined that two or more people could meet and share experience so intimate without feeling anything for each other.
Finally able to look away from the strange trio the boy walked around, hopping among the bottles in order not to hit them, then he spotted in the distance a secluded chamber: the light which lit it up was weak, but permanent, and, albeit small, it was not crowded at all, so it seemed the perfect place to take a short break before throwing himself back into exploration.

Glad to have found a room where he could rest a little and clear his mind Frost headed towards it without hesitation, passing through the door just before it was sealed, then he crouched in a corner to see its contents. The room was old and neglected: its peeling walls had almost completely lost the plaster which covered them and the moisture stains oozing from them were so deep and wide they had cracked them, allowing mosses and lichens to take root in the concrete; the ceiling, however, was in far worse conditions: so soaked in water to drip, it seemed to stand for magic between the support beams and, in several places, it had collapsed, cluttering the floor with rotten boards and revealing the building's upper floor.

Disorderly arranged among the rubble there were crates and drums, some so consumed they crumbled under his gaze, others well preserved enough they could hold up without problems those who were using them as seats, and without wasting time Jack focused on them. As he had already noticed from the main room there were only five persons, three men and two women, dressed with clothes similar to those he had seen worn by the other guys, but with a make up so much more disturbing: the creams and the powders they had used had not been spread with care until they formed a compact layer, but they had been approximately smeared, forming clumps in some areas and leaving others bare, dripping down their cheeks and then drying up until they cracked, drawing them sloppy orbits and distorted mouths which made them look not even human.

Upset by that vision Frost left them to their intense conversation and focused his attention on a box they continuously indicated: curious he approached it, amazed to find it covered with a metal plate so clean and polished it shone, then he noticed a series of bags placed on it.

Advancing on the spongy planking he joined them to study them better, soon discovering that they were all filled with a fine, white powder, and he smiled, excited: he would have never expected to find icing sugar in a place like this! He had not seen food around, least of all cakes or generic desserts to decorate, but he didn't care: he had an uncontrollable craving for sweets, and certainly he would have not missed such an opportunity only to reflect on what was happening.

Rejoicing to see that a small amount of sweetener had been accidentally dropped on the plate Jack sank his phalange in it, determined to steal few grains at a time so as not to arouse suspicions or frighten those present, then he brought it to his mouth: with a happy expression he mentally foretasted that degustation so desired, but, as soon as he licked the fingertip, the smile disappeared from his lips.

He immediately moved away the fingers, coughing and trying to spit the dust: in his life he had never eaten a food so bitter. Although he had taken a minimum amount that sour taste had immediately invaded his palate, penetrating the flesh like a poison and shocking his papillas, and Frost had to struggle hard to regain control of himself: he found terribly difficult not continuing to grimace and wipe his tongue with the palm of his hand to remove that bad flavour.

After few minutes of vigorous rubbing he finally managed to neutralise that disgusting taste and, resigning himself to endure the sandy feeling it had left on his palate, he came back to observe the group of people, who had meanwhile settled down in a circle around the box; puzzled and worried he watched them split the pile of powder in smaller portions and spread them into strips, trying to figure out a way to alert them the sweetener had clearly got rotten, but, before he could do anything, he saw one of the women bend over and inhale it with a nostril.
Opening wide his eyes he pressed his left on his mouth, in order to prevent himself from screaming, and he helplessly saw the four other presents doing the same: what the hell had they done? Since when did people breathe the sugar? And why those five guys seemed so proud of that gesture just performed, to the point they were complimenting each other with jabs and uproarious laugh?

Too shocked to do something he stared at them while they briefly cleaned their nose with the back of their hands and pulled out the jackets lighters and some strange, irregular little cigars, and he didn't move even when the man closest to him, the only one who had used a match, threw it still on fire almost on his feet: the amazement and the dismay he felt were so great that, probably, he would have not been able to notice it even if it had burned him.

He stood there for few minutes, rubbing his forehead to try to pull himself together and give a reason to what was happening, but when the thick smoke which emanated from those fag ends reached his nostrils he woke up: he had discovered almost nothing in that place, except for strange people and even stranger customs, but he had explored and spied more than enough to understand that it was time to leave.

Forgetful of any caution he jumped in the middle of that giggly group, grabbing without any hesitation the room key, then went to the entrance, slipped it into the lock and unblocked it, out of breath from the desire to escape as soon as possible; feeling a nausea attack he turned the knob, but the door moved only a few millimetres, letting in a gust of air which, instead of giving him relief, choked him, shoving the thick, acrid smoke into his lungs and causing him a violent fit of cough; with the strength born of desperation he kicked the door, then he give it a push with his shoulder, finally managing to open it out of an inch. Panting he threw himself into the narrow passage, getting stuck almost immediately and risking to tear apart his hoodie with the wood's splinters, but it was enough to unleash his powers to freeze the fibres and compact them and, at the same time, make them sufficiently smooth to be able to slip on them and break free.

Stumbling on his feet he fell into the central room, suffering a new trauma because of the loud music and the intermittent lights, but he tried to resist: he had already made a great spectacle of himself, with the punches against the door and the frost he had evoked all of a sudden, so he absolutely had to make sure that he had not hurt anybody, nor catch their attention. Fortunately no one seemed to have seen him, but Jack preferred to recall the ice anyway: the floor was already abundantly uneven and full of rubble and garbage, and the last thing he wanted was to make it even more dangerous.

Concentrating deeply he managed to get rid of all the traces of frost in less than a minute, but the effort strained his body too much: once he had fulfilled this simple task he had to cling to his staff in order not to fall, and the notes emitted by the cases struck him again, destroying what little lucidity he had left.

Now definitely dazed he walked in a random direction, visibly staggering and without even trying to look for the exit: it was not enough in himself to be able to undertake such a challenging quest and, anyway, he had forgotten the urgent desire to escape from there.

With his mind clouded and the nausea rising he proceeded in the crowd, passing dancers solitary and in groups, teenagers full of energy or exhausted, boys and girls clinging to each other in promiscuous and indecent unions, men and women intent on exchanging cigars and bags full of powder, people drinking, anonymous figures who were advancing in the smoke and bright flashes, bodies which emerged from the dark, bestial creatures which attacked each other, and even the shape of a Nightmare majestically strutting, but he wasn't surprised: now nothing made more sense in that pit of hell, in that crucible of human degradation which he had so foolishly got into, and even if he had seen Toothiana's feathered head among all those colourful hairs he would have marvelled.
Suddenly something caught him by the arm and, turning with fatigue, Frost spotted a boy, much younger than him, who was dragging him towards himself, gesticulating and trying in vain to be heard over the music; dazed the Guardian allowed him, following with the irises his lips and letting him grab his left arm and throw it around his neck, and he didn't wander the reason of that gesture, grateful to finally have a stable support; the guy, however, didn't give him time to recover: without any hesitation he began to move, placing his palms on his hips and pushing to make him shake them, and Jack realized he was trying to teach him to dance.

Instinctively he followed him, trying to wave like he did and rejoicing for the smile he sent him when he saw him participate, but soon the nausea gripped him again, in a retching so violent to cause all his chest muscles contract; gleaning all his willpower Frost tried not to throw up, but in doing so he unwittingly drove away his new acquaintance, stepping back and getting lost in the crowd.

Weak and trembling he staggered, experiencing a debilitating feeling every time someone passed through him, and soon he stumbled and fell; gasping in pain he turned his head, struggling even just to breathe, but the only thing he could see among the bottles and the syringes was an army of boots, all blacks, all studded, all intent on beating on the floor to the music rhythm: there was no escape from that infernal reality.

Just when he was about to faint two strong arms pounced on him, hugging him and lifting him off the filthy ground; with much haste, but likewise care, he escorted him through the throng, pushing away the people and dragging him away from the pulsating lights which had already blinded him, and eventually he brought him out of the building.

Shivering for the sudden drop in temperature Jack let himself be laid on the ground and he heard a familiar voice asking him with an anxious tone: «Jack! Jack, can you hear me? My sweetie, can you look at me? How are you?».

Immediately recognizing Pitch the boy smiled, grateful to his love for the fact he had saved him from the nightmare in which he had voluntarily thrown himself, but soon he had to brought his hands to his mouth, to repress another wave of nausea.

Worried the Boogeyman demanded: «Baby, what's wrong? Do you have nausea? Did you eat something by any chance?».

Now able to see clearly again Frost stared at him and nodded weakly, praying he could hold back himself although the movement had stressed him a lot; the reaction he received, however, left him speechless.

«Jack, vomit, now!» ordered him the partner.

Grabbing him firmly by the shoulders he forced him to his knees, opening his legs and bringing a hand to his mouth, clearly intent to shove his fingers down his throat just to make him regurgitate. This gesture, however, was not necessary: it was enough to the boy to stop fighting in order to let himself go.

Following his muscles' movement he leaned forward and threw up, clinging desperately to his lover's forearm to ask him for help, but Pitch had already come to his aid: with the left he hold his forehead, while his right hand he kept his clothes back, making sure they couldn't be soiled and bearing with no problems all his weight; his support, however, was not only physical, but also psychological: even before he could realize it Frost found his face next to his own and he heard his beautiful voice vibrating against his ear, whispering sweet words of consolation and tender encouragements.

Perceiving a second retching coming Jack bent over again, disgusted by the situation, by the fact he
was forcing his love to witness and by the sour taste of the stomach acids he was spitting, but unfortunately he couldn’t help himself and had to let these flow along the throat, then dripping from his parted lips and mingling with the tears of pain he was shedding.

Trembling he remained in that position for another minute, letting the waves of nausea cross him and then decrease slowly; seeing him now calm Pitch wiped his mouth with his palm and asked him anxiously: «Enough, baby? Have you emptied your stomach? Very good, sweetie. Now I’ll take you to a creek not far from here, so you can rinse your mouth, okay? You don’t need to cling to me: I’ll hold you firmly. Just try to keep your head up and let me know if you feel the urge to vomit again».

Without putting up the slightest resistance the boy let him pick him up and carry him, focusing on keeping his head up as the other had asked him to do, but he didn’t have to resist long: after few dozen yards the Boogeyman laid him on the ground again, making him sit on a large, flat stone, then he rinsed his hands and cupped them, offering him a little water.

Touched by his loving care Frost allowed him to pour the liquid into his mouth, sliding it against the palate and turning to spit it out, then, supported by the partner, he bent over the mountain stream, waiting for it to wash his chin and lips and drinking few sips of the cold fluid.

«Jack» suddenly recalled him the man; «Jack, I know you're worn out and stressed, but I need you to answer one question: what did you eat while you were there? It was a pill, right? Was it round or square? Did it have a symbol drawn above? Did you eat one or more?».

Struggling to control his trembling lips the boy replied with difficulty: «Su... sugar...».

The Boogeyman stared at him, puzzled, but then the realization hit him and he asked: «Sugar? It was a fine white powder which looked like icing sugar, right? But it didn’t taste good at all, am I wrong? You tasted it and you immediately spit it».

Jack nodded weakly, letting his head dangling from exhaustion, but the man quickly took it in his hands and, giving him a light kiss, commented: «Good boy, my baby, such a good boy: you’ve been so good at explaining me what you ate. Now come with me: you need to rest».

Putting an arm around the boy's shoulders and one around his waist he helped him standing up, guiding his steps up to a small mossy clearing not far away, then he sat on the ground, leaning his back against a tree trunk; Frost, exhausted, plopped down on his lap, snuggling against his chest to ask him for a hug and rejoicing of the cuddles and the kind kisses he received, and after a while he let out a sigh of relief.

«Do you feel better, Jack?» solicitously asked Pitch.

«Yes, thank you» replied the boy, closing his eyes.

Without any warning the other grabbed his chin, forcing him graciously, but firmly, to raise the irises, and he harshly ordered him: «So tell me what the hell were you doing in a place like this».

Amazed Jack stammered: «I, I do not know, I was passing by to bring the snow and saw all those lights and cars, and then the people, and they looked so strange! I went here just to check what was going on, nothing more».

«Do not try to beat about the bush, Jack!» rebuked him the Boogeyman; «You let yourself be drawn by curiosity without thinking about the consequences, and you haven’t decided to leave until it was too late: you’ve been remiss! Learn not to nose into what doesn’t concern you next time!».

Wounded by the stern reproach, come unexpectedly after many cuddles, the boy tried to defend
himself: «But I did not know it was going to...».

«Do not even dare to finish the sentence!» interrupted him the man, almost growling; «That awful place was teeming with clues which should have dissuaded you from entering, from the posters outside to the music too loud, violent people, alcohol, syringes and all the disgusting things hanging there, you just needed to pay attention to only one of these to flee away screaming!».

«But no one could see me, no one could hurt me!» exclaimed Frost.

«Everyone and everything could hurt you in there!» boomed Pitch, now beside himself.

Frightened by that fit of rage the boy fell silent, waiting for the other to calm down and remain motionless, and soon he saw him relaxing; he startled when he felt the other grabbing his by the hips, but soon he realized that the partner just wanted to settle him better, so he let him move him and he sat astride his thighs, sending him a contrite look.

The Boogeyman took a deep breath, then, caressing his head, he told him: «Jack, let me explain and you'll understand everything. That gathering where you sneaked into is called “rave party”: it's an illegal party, which is organized in isolated places and which can last from several hours to days. As you saw the people who participate to it do nothing but listen to loud music, dance, drink and smoke, but you missed the most important thing: in order to resist for long without collapsing they take drugs. Worldwide there are substances which have effects on the human body and mind, altering the senses, giving energy or stealing it, even causing hallucinations, and the latter are the most popular at raves. Before the festival they are synthesized and processed, producing pills or vials of liquid to inject directly into a vein, then they are marketed and assumed: it's the only way to resist three full days in such a place, without eating and drinking almost exclusively alcohol. They are dangerous substance, able to upset the mind and even kill, if taken in excessive doses: that was why I was so worried when I heard that you had eaten something. Luckily for you you only tasted cocaine: among all the drugs is one of the least hard, and it doesn't explicate its effects if it's ingested. Either way you've risked a lot, because what that guys were smoking were not simple cigarettes: in these places even the smoke can be hallucinogenic».

Aghast Jack asked: «But for what an absurd reason would a person want to harm themselves in this way? Why did these guys come from so far away to risk to die during a party so disturbing?».

The man made a wry smile and answered: «For many reasons and no one, since there is no valid reason on earth to harm ourselves: they do it to break the rules, to go wild, to test themselves, to experience new sensations, to show the others their own strength, and so on. I could continue, but, in the end, the main reason why they come here is only one: to escape from reality. All in these rave, from the pounding music to the drugs, has the sole and only purpose of detaching the participants' senses, even coming to take away from them the awareness they have a body and causing them visions of a life that seems better than the one they are experiencing».

The boy shivered with that explanation and commented: «Absurd... everything is completely absurd. It makes no sense to take refuge in visions when life goes wrong: reality doesn't change until you do something to change it, and take drugs, risking even to die, certainly doesn't help to improve it. Anyway, how did you find me? This place is full of teenagers and adults: you shouldn't be interested in neither of them».

As soon as he heard him asking that question Pitch flinched and dodged his eyes, running the irises along the horizon just to keep himself busy, and a terrible doubt occurred to Frost.

«Pitch, you... you don't usually hang out at these raves, right?» he asked, his voice trembling.
His partner didn't reply, but the silence was an answer far more eloquent than any words. Opening wide his eyes with fear the boy grabbed him by the collar and, with a tone of despair, he cried: «Are you crazy?! You give a roasting to me and then you are the first one to participate? The risks are the same for both of us! Why, why do you feel the need to escape from reality?».

The Boogeyman snatched him by the arm, trying to hold him down, then he explained: «Jack, no, stop, calm down! You didn't understand anything! I do not come to these raves to escape reality, but to use hallucinations for my benefit! Those drugs don't cause only visions, but also give the opportunity to those who take them to see spirits like us, even if they do not believe in our existence, and that, for me, is more than enough to succeed. As soon as I find a drugged person who is able to see me I walk, lure them and then unleash my Nightmares, relying on their greatest fears and absorbing all the horror they feel: it is much more easier than causing a bad dream to a child, since the mind of a drugged man has not the slightest defence, and then the terror emanated from an adult body is decidedly more fortifying than the one which comes from an infant, because, in principle, it's much more difficult to obtain. In some cases, however, it is not necessary for me to summon my powers: those substances guarantee only hallucinations, not pleasant hallucinations. Some people have frightening visions, able to make them scream for hours in a panic and disturb them in the depths, and if these are too overwhelming they can break their will, damaging their mind permanently».

Trembling Jack dared to ask: «What do you mean with “damaging their mind permanently”?».

The man stared at him with a glance so serious to look grave and he said: «It means they never come back, Jack. After few hours the drug's effects end and all the hallucinogenic substances are consumed, but the visions remains: now it's their own mind which creates them, getting trapped into a nightmare world generated by itself, victim of its own fears, fall into a vicious circle from which it can't escape. It's a fate far worse than death, because these people are no longer able to understand or take action, not even to feel sensations, but they continue to suffer. I myself feel pain in seeing them, but the fear is the purpose which I exist for, therefore I can't ignore it when someone donate it: when a man gets lost I use his terror to create a Nightmare, much more powerful than the normal ones, since it has a victim which it can continuously draw power from. Afterwards, however, I leave: I cannot stand the sight of those people, still alive, but already dead, and I cannot bear even the Purebloods born from them. Generally I leave them in the wild, allowing them to torment who they want and not forcing them to come back to fortify me: I own only a dozen of them, one more horrible than the other, and I prefer not to watch them. Now do you understand why I was so worried, Jack? It was enough just to accidentally step on a syringe to ruin your life irreparably».

The boy snuggled against his chest, silently asking for pardon for the immense folly he had done, then a doubt occurred to him and he demanded him: «Pitch, can I ask you something? Why didn't you feel sick before, although, I suppose, you have spent much more time than me there?».

Pitch gasped and he hesitantly replied: «Well, to be sincere, actually we spirits are much more resistant than the humans to any substance able to alter the senses: in some cases we have to take large amounts of them to get some effect, in others, instead, we are simply immune. At raves I've always been annoyed by the excessive volume of the music, but I never felt sick, even after hours spent breathing smokes much harder than the ones you smelled. Frankly, I never expected to see you collapsing in that way, nor, least of all, that you could feel a nausea so intense to vomit: evidently you are more sensitive than normal».

Frost was again gripped by guilt for what happened and he curled on himself, whispering in a weak voice: «Pitch, I'm sorry about it: I didn't want to feel sick in front of you and force you to assist me».

The Boogeyman grabbed him by the shoulders, forcing him to look into his eyes, then he declared:
«Jack, don't say that, even as a joke. I haven't felt neither disgust nor annoyance to assist you: I'm happy to help you, and I'm going to do this every time you'll need it. You know perfectly well that you can rely on me for anything, and I want you to promise me you'll ask me for help whenever you'll be in need and that you'll inform me about your health. Do you promise? Good boy: always tell me how you feel. Now, I noticed that you don't have your staff: did you leave it out of the building or bring it in?».

Struck by that question the boy finally realized the absence of his loyal travelling companion and exclaimed: «For all the storms, I forgot it inside!».

The man smiled and reassured him: «Do not worry, Jack: I'll go and retrieve it. Wait here, okay? I'll leave here Voluptas, so you'll have company and can send it to call me if you feel sick again».

Throwing his arms around his neck Jack thanked him, then he pulled away just enough to allow him to stand up without difficulty; excited by the fact he was about to see his favourite Pureblood he waited for his partner to evoke it with a soft gesture of the forearm, then he stretched out his hands to draw it towards himself.

«Please, Jack, call me if you don't feel well» reminded him Pitch, heading for the building in ruin.

«I will, I promise!» shouted him the boy.

After seeing his silhouette disappearing into the trees he turned towards Voluptas, giving it a kiss on the tip of its sharp nose to greet it, but it surprised him: instead of keeping itself to itself, as it had done initially, or fawning on him, as it had begun to do recently, he sniffed his neck, then it trotted up alongside him and let itself drop. Bending the front legs first and then the rear it laid down beside him, leaning slightly to one side and making sure not to touch him with its hooves, then it turned his head to observe him and pressed on his sternum to make him lay against itself, eagerly licking his arms and chest like a mare would do with her colt.

Amazed by such a caring attitude Frost took a while to react, but as soon as he understood the horse's intention, he relaxed, resting his cheek just below its withers and responding to that sweet pampering with delicate caresses on its muzzle; closing his eyes he let himself go, feeling the animal starting to stroke his belly and allowing it lingering as long as it wanted on that area, and he couldn't say how much time had passed when he heard an amused voice asking: «Am I interrupting anything by any chance? Do you two lovebirds prefer to be left in peace?».

Chuckling the boy replied: «You taught it how to cuddle to perfection: now it's better than you».

«This is a challenge, and I do never back off when it comes to put myself to the test» concluded Pitch.

With a leap he pounced on him, tickling his hips until he heard him laugh out loud and then rubbing his open palms on his chest to calm the shivers, and Jack, once the hilarity subsided, enjoyed that break of sweet and double cuddles, appreciating both Pitch's soft kisses and the Pureblood's coarse ones.

After few minutes, albeit reluctantly, he pulled both away and said: «I'm sorry, but I really have to go now: this stupid detour made me lose precious time».

«You're not going anywhere, Jack: I will not let you until I'll be perfectly sure that you're fine» stated the Boogeyman.

Not surprised at all by the sentence the boy tried to reassure him: «Pitch, please: you see that I'm fine,
my fainting spell was only temporary».

«And what if it was not temporary? What if within half an hour it came back, and you were alone, lost somewhere and too weak to ask for help? No, there's not a chance in the world for you to walk away from me until I'll be sure you're fine».

«So what about you accompany me? In my opinion it's the best solution: I'd be able to carry on my work and make up for lost time, you could keep an eye on me and, finally, we could spend some time together. Would you like to?» suggested Frost.

The man reflected for few seconds, perhaps worried that the trip could be too tiring, but eventually he relented and replied: «All right, Jack: actually it's a good idea. Come on, stand up and turn your back on me; I'll help you climb on Voluptas».

Happy to have convinced him to accept that solution the boy stood up, helped by his partner, he waited for Voluptas to stand up, too, and let his lover grab him by the hips; slightly bending the legs he gave a slight boost, immediately raising the left calf to stretch it over the mount's back and get into the saddle, but this immediately lurched on a side, neighing frightened and turning again to caress his belly with its muzzle.

«What happened? Did you inadvertently kicked it?» asked Pitch, puzzled.

«No» promptly answered Jack; «I didn’t even touch it: as soon as it saw me stretch the legs to mount it it run away».

«We missed only a Nightmare's whims to complete the evening! Voluptas, what the hell are you doing? Come here, now!» snapped the Boogeyman.

Irritated to see that his servant continued to disobey him he stepped forward, perhaps to make it to stand motionless by force, but the boy had an epiphany and exclaimed: «No, wait: I understood what the problem is! See how it continues to stroke my belly? It's been doing this ever since you went away to retrieve my staff: I think it's convinced that my stomach hurts. Try to let me ride sidesaddle: in that position my belly is well protected from cold and blows, so it should approve».

«As if I needed the approval of a Nightmare to take a ride with you» muttered the man.

Despite the complaints he accepted the suggestion and, grabbing Frost by the hips, he placed him on the Nightmare's withers, with both legs adhering to its right side; throughout the operation the horse didn’t put up any resistance, remaining motionless and even stopping to breathe, and when the boy sat it turned his muzzle to make sure he couldn't slip.

«I'll undergo to your whim just because it coincides with Jack's sake, but I will never tolerate other rebellions, stupid Nightmare!» rebuked him Pitch, waving the index in front of its nose to emphasize the reproach.

Bending down to retrieve the staff he handed it to the boy, then he carefully climbed behind him, sitting on its rear to avoid the risk of bumping him and then sliding on its back then to gain a more comfortable position; using his hands to support himself Frost sat down in his lap, slightly moving his thighs to be more comfortable and making sure not to unbalance him.

«Are you ready, Jack?» anxiously asked him the partner.

«Yes» simply replied the boy.

Snuggling better against his chest, in order to fully enjoy his warmth, he waited for the Boogeyman
to hug him, then he clung to his waist and let himself be lifted into the sky, shivering with cold and excitement at the idea of the coming ride.

A new fanart made by Heilyneko!

http://it.tinypic.com/view.php?pic=nod5wi&s=8#.U1ZSG_1_umt

Chapter End Notes

I hope you liked this chapter! Feel free to ask me whatever you want. Next chapter will be published on Friday. This week I have more free time than the last ones, but we're still having a lot of thunderstorms, so, if I'm late, forgive me and have a little patience <3
Immediately after spurring Voluptas to fly the Boogeyman deftly guide it among the trees, making it gain altitude and heading it away from that building where the humans continued, undisturbed, to detached themselves from reality in order to sink into an apparent better one, but actually infernal, then he turned it towards the west and left it free at full gallop. As Jack expected the horse didn't take advantage of this and it trotted at a light and steady step, never bucking or shaking its back and allowing him to remain in saddle without any effort; actually, even if he were riding a wild bull, he would have not risked: Pitch was holding him so firmly and checked if he was comfortable and protected so often that even if the boy had tried to jump into the void he would have never be able to fall.

To an external spectator such a care would have certainly seemed overblown and stifling, and sometimes it seemed a little exaggerated even to Frost, but he never complained: that was how Pitch was, naturally inclined to excess, unable to adjust himself to a middle way in any situation, and he would have never changed. His, however, was not endurance: the boy adored this overprotective Boogeyman's side, this exuberant possessiveness which led him to behave in such a caring way, because it made him feel like he was the most special being on Earth, and living a single second in this state repaid him of centuries spent in solitude, ignored and forgotten by everyone. Staying in his arms could occasionally be uncomfortable, given the lack of freedom of movement which it entailed, but his gentle caresses always had the power to relax him enough to make him not feel the need to contract a muscle, and in that moment Jack couldn't ask for more: although the nausea had left him he still perceive his stomach upset, and he had no intention of repeating the degrading experience he had had after he had been saved from the hell in which he had voluntarily thrown himself.

Trying not to think too much about what had happened, to avoid being grasped again by guilt and getting stuck, the boy concentrated on the simple inhaling and exhaling, letting his lungs being pervaded by the brisk night air and hiding, from time to time, his face against Pitch's chest, apparently to protect himself from the wind, but actually only in order to steal a little of that musky scent that he was never tired to smell.

After a whole hour of quiet aimlessly wandering Frost felt sufficiently and definitely in good health, so he gave directives to his lover, so that he could take him in the few places he had missed during his icy journey.

Fulfilling his task along with his partner was incredibly satisfying for the boy: chatting about
everything and nothing after weeks spent thinking almost exclusively about his duty was a huge relief, covering with a white blanket the ground quick and easy thanks to his skills as a horseman, and listening to his petulant complaints for those few snowflakes which landed on his robe endlessly entertaining.

When the sun began to peek out over the horizon, however, Jack knew that this tender break had to come to an end: Europe had received too many candid attention from him, and it was time for him to move to Asia, leaving Pitch finally free to work in turn. The greeting they exchanged was brief, but intense: a simple kiss, passionate, but not languid, some sweet word from the boy and endless recommendations by the man.

Few seconds later Frost didn't have the heart to look any longer into his irises, which he was already missing, so he waved his arm one last time and flew away, shielding his eyes from the dawn's glare to reach the Land of the Rising Sun and praying in his heart not to take too long to whiten the last continent which was left.

Jack's pleas, unfortunately, were unheeded. The problems started straight away: the icy winds he had evoked to fly, in fact, had not been obedient as usual, but terribly rebellious and ready to take advantage of every moment of distraction to escape from his control, and despite the determination and concentration he had showed he had never been able to tame them. Continuously and capriciously tossed here and there by those currents that seemed to have disavowed their master, the boy spent whole hours to complete a journey that normally would have required few minutes, and when he reached his destination he found himself tired and exhausted, to the point he even felt the need to sleep; for a moment he seriously considered the idea to break into an empty house and take a nap, but in the end he refrained himself from giving in to that temptation: he had too much work to do to allow himself rest.

Unwillingly he climbed on top of the tallest building in the town where he had landed, raising the staff above his head to bestow his gift to the children, but with great disappointment he realized that even this one didn't react properly to the orders he was giving him: the stick, instead of lit up evenly and quickly summon tiny, iced flakes from the sky, burnt with a light intense, but pulsating and irregular, and it did nothing but randomly freeze the ground and the surrounding walls.

Piqued by his powers' umpteenth folly Frost snorted and, rolling the rod among his fingers, he observed it, sure that he would have soon found a scratch or a crack; after checking it carefully twice, however, he had to admit that it was perfectly intact, therefore, giving up to understand what the cause of these strange events was, he shook his head and tried again to activate it. This time, at last, he managed to: after few seconds the snow began to fall from the sky, white and silent as it had always been, and the move was so successful that soon he had to intervene to curb, at least a little, that dense snowfall's impetuosity.

Glad to have finally overcome his problems he let out a merry laugh, then he ran from a building to the other, chasing the white flakes which had made him sigh with fatigue, but which would have made the children sigh with wonder, and, in order to motivate himself, he mentally said: “You have to do it for them, Jack: you must do it for the kids. Just a couple of weeks of hard work and then you can rest”.

Encouraged by this self exhortation the boy smiled, then he leaped into the sky, ready to begin the journey without losing heart.
As he had promised Jack had held out, he had not allowed himself neither a break nor some rest, and he hadn't let himself be stopped by any obstacle, but the eleven days after his arrival in Asia had been a living hell. The staff had acted in complete autonomy, remaining inert when he tried to activate it and suddenly blazing when he didn't need it, the winds he had summoned had been increasingly rebellious and capricious and more than once they had abandoned him, leaving him falling to the ground or slamming him against trees and buildings, and even the snowflakes, which, since he was reborn as a spirit, had been almost like brothers to him, had betrayed him, becoming more and more difficult to evoke.

Gritting his teeth the boy had tried to resist, working hard with all of himself to accomplish his task in spite of the bad luck which seemed to have fallen upon him, but to complicate the operations even more it had intervened another factor: the nausea.

Actually he hadn't expected the return of that annoying symptom: Pitch had been able to take care of him to perfection, lovingly looking after him both while he had felt sick and after, and Frost had been sure he would have not needed anything else to recover definitely, considering how much the ride had restored him. Already in the second city visited, however, he had been proved wrong: the retchings had gripped him suddenly, during a reconnaissance flight, forcing him to land in a hurry and go along with them in the first available corner, and they had left him drained both in body and spirit, letting grow again a strong guilt for what he had done, carried away by his own curiosity in such a silly way, and for having eaten, however unwittingly, a substance that could have even killed him.

Trying to stay calm he had resolved to fly at a low altitude, avoiding manoeuvres and sharp turns and paying the utmost attention to his body, which, fortunately, warned him about the incoming symptom with light stomach cramps and a dizzy head sore; thanks to these precautions he had been able to prevent dangerous accidents, but certainly not to feel better: too often he had found himself alone, in a dark and wet alley, leaning against a dirty wall in the attempt to stand up while vomiting, surrounded by refuses and seeing himself as a refuse for the conditions in which he was, and every time he had been able to recover and get out, trudging on his trembling legs, he had felt more and more weak.

The first few days he had endured those outbursts in silence, striving with all his strength in order not to give too much weight to them and not to be discouraged by them, but after a week he had started to worry: why had the nausea, instead of diminish, continued to increase, catching him more and more often and persisting even for hours? He had eaten very little drug at the rave, he was absolutely certain about this, and with no doubt he had eliminated it all as soon as he had gone out, so why did the annoying side effect continue to reappear? Maybe had the substance been absorbed immediately, getting into the blood stream before he could have got rid of it? Maybe was his immortal body not able to work it off and this continued to poison him? Maybe was it destroying him from the inside? These and thousand other fears had tormented him, upsetting him to such an extent that he had lost all sense of direction and time as he struggled to bring the snow in that vast continent, but soon he had stopped worrying: whenever he had to throw up energies quickly abandoned him, leaving him so exhausted to prevent him even to think clearly, and he had not taken long to find himself reeling from a destination to another, his mind clouded, his mouth filled by that disgusting sour flavour that he had had to taste too many times and his cheeks wet with tears that he didn't remember he had shed.

At the expiry of the eleventh day Jack reached the eastern shores of that land that seemed to never end and he prepared himself for the crossing; he was well aware that he had left gaps behind him, hidden valleys and clearings which, given fatigue or simple distraction, he had forgotten to visit, but he didn't care: he could not go back, not with all he still had to do, and not in the condition in which
he was.

Concentrating hard, in order to evoke the calmest and most regular winds he knew, the boy managed to lift himself up in the air, crossing the strait which separated him from his destination and he landed, more or less softly, on the strange archipelago that had always fascinated him: Japan. Ever since he was born as a spirit he had been adoring exploring the lush gardens which adorned it, skating on its bizarre buildings' curved roofs and messing up the women's hair, coiffed in the traditional way, which recalled past eras as the long, colourful robes they wore, but that night he didn't indulge in any of those activities: he was so debilitated that it took several minutes to him to remember those past habits, and when he managed to he didn't feel the slightest joy.

Plodding along a narrow path Frost proceeded, freezing the ground where his feet rested to prepare it, then he raised his staff and, at the third attempt, he managed to evoke the first snowflakes: he realized almost immediately that they were falling randomly, creating huge piles in some areas and leaving others untouched, but he didn't care and kept walking.

After going through the entire valley he penetrated in a big city, making sure to remain in the residential area, in order to avoid the chaos of the centre, but when the houses began to disperse and leave room for the open country, he resigned himself and got ready to re-evoke the wind: although he feared to fall he knew that marching along the entire island was impossible and senseless.

Relying again to the safer and quieter currents at his command he let them lift him and then carry him over the vast plains lit by the full moon, gliding silently over the sleeping houses and barns and following with his eyes the fresh furrows on the fields ploughed for the incoming winter.

After about ten miles the landscape changed: a high wall topped by curved tiles suddenly rose from the ground, then another, and another, introducing the boy in a lush forest, then in a well maintained garden and finally into a fortified citadel; pausing for a moment to observe the small guard towers which defended the palace and the decorated columns which supported it, Jack reflected for a moment, then he decided to land: the building, in fact, was in a position higher than the surrounding lands, therefore it would have been a great vantage point from which to unleash a storm and monitor its development.

Wearily veering he headed toward the top of the highest tower, but, due to distraction and fatigue, he made an awful error of judgement: while dodging a standard he didn't notice the spike protruding from the roof behind it, extending the corner and making it more elegant and graceful, and he hit it in full.

Since he had slightly increased the speed, in order to be sure to overcome the height difference at the first attempt, he violently smashed against it, feeling each rib of the lower cage creaking for the impact and losing his grip on the staff; awakened with a start by this unexpected clash he had enough mental alertness to cling to the obstacle which had blocked him, desperately trying to hold on, but his weak fingers slipped on the smooth tiles and soon, unable to do otherwise, he let himself fall.

The impact with the ground was, if possible, even more traumatic: incapable of using his powers the boy could neither turn nor slow down, and he crashed into the stone floor almost on his back, violently beating the right clavicle and hip; shocked to the point he couldn't even tremble he laid still, his eyes wide open and all the muscles contracted, but finally he broke into a whine, realizing only at that time he had not been breathing for a whole minute.

Starting again to inhale and exhale steadily was not easy at all for him: at the first attempts he obtained only laboured sobs, so rushed even not to leave his lungs enough time to absorb the oxygen, but when, levering on palms and feet, he managed to lie down on the side, he felt his limbs relaxing and finally he began to recover.
He remained in that position for several minutes, curled in a corner of the large central courtyard, while hot tears rolled down from his eyes, wetting his eyelashes and moistening the pave: why, why on Earth was everything going wrong? Why, after centuries and centuries of training, during which he had learned to know every aspect of his powers, did they betray him? Perhaps had the children stopped believing in him? Impossible: until a couple of weeks earlier he had felt himself strong as never before, he had clearly sensed the infants' heady energy pervading him and permeating the staff, and they couldn't have suddenly stopped dreaming, not in such a short time, not after all the snow he had given them. Maybe had the powers increased excessively? Improbable: if it had been so he would have struggled to contain them, not to evoke them, and certainly he would have not got so tired just because he had visited a continent. Perhaps was he not worthy of them any more after visiting the rave? Even this response made no sense: if bringing the winter it had been no longer his job it would certainly happened a striking event, which would have finally made him disappear from the face of the Earth.

The answer to the questions which tormented him escaped from his grasp, but he was sure about one thing: it was time to find a solution. Until that time he had always managed not to give too much weight to his weakness and all these strange events, simply thinking they were due to the season and the circumstances and stubbornly struggling to control them all, but it was no longer time to beat around the bush; up to that point he had avoided asking anyone for help, coming to the point to hide himself when he glimpsed a baby tooth fairy or a coil of golden sand, in order not to show in what conditions he was, but now he had to resign himself: trying not to to worry neither his friends, nor his lover, when it was clear that something worrying was happening, was foolish.

After wiping the tears Jack bent his legs and, pressing his palms on the ground, he tried to stand up: between a moan and a groan he finally managed to sit up, then he paused to catch his breath, while touching his chest to make sure it hadn't been hurt. As soon as he brushed his ribs, as he expected, he felt strong pangs: since he was thin and not very muscular, his flesh had cushioned the impact at all and his poor bones had suffered it in full, but, albeit aching, they didn't seem broken; counting himself lucky for that fact he carried on with the massage, stroking his stomach which, oddly and incredibly, didn't seem to have been disturbed by the violent tumble, and finally he reached the abdomen.

Feeling a lump under his fingers he immediately made sure to settle the clothes, sure that they had rolled up on themselves during the rocambolesque fall, but when he had carefully smoothed them he realized that the protuberance had not disappeared; puzzled he decided to lift the hoodie, fearing he had dragged down a piece of roof stuck into the fabric, but when he uncovered the waist he realized that it was not so.

The bulge he had perceived under his palm was part of his body: a very slight swelling, a little prominent and well harmonized with the rest of the abdomen, placed exactly in its centre; confused Jack touched it with his fingertips, feeling it well compact under them, and he stared at it: what could it be? A bump by any chance? Or, since it was on the soft flesh, a simple bruise due to the accident he had had just few minutes earlier? In that case, why had it grown so fast, and why not on the rib cage? Maybe it was due to a previous fall that, given his tiredness, he had completely forgotten? But then why, straining his eyes in the dark night, he saw it perfectly hyaline, rather than livid?

As if in answer to his questions a moonbeam peeked out through the clouds which had begun to gather in the sky, illuminating the yard and part of the arcade and fully revealing the whiteness of Frost's skin, and suddenly he remembered: the cold night of few weeks before, the tree on which he had fallen asleep, the journey on the Moon which for centuries he had appealed to in vain, the encounter with his creator, the brief chat, the turn to the worst the situation had taken, the ropes, the slaps, his clammy hands stumbling on his skin and digging into the abdomen, his disgusting breath blowing on his neck while he murmured that, now, he had another task to accomplish in the world
than the simple Guardian's one, far more important, far more burdensome.

Jack stood motionless for few seconds, his eyes wide open, his mind still stunned by that sequence of images and information which had overwhelmed it; it did not take long to it to process them and understand that what, for fear and rejection, he had preferred to set aside as a dream, it was not so, and when he realized it a shocking cry echoed in those silent arcades, so steeped in despair to make the memory of the screams cried by the innocents murdered there fade.

By now more than two weeks had passed since the last time he had seen Jack, and Pitch was starting to lose his patience: where could that reckless boy be? He knew that he was busy bringing the winter in Asia, but he was starting to worry about the wait: that continent was vast, but, due to its configuration, it required little effort to Frost, since in many areas its climate was too sultry to let the snow fall, and in many other ones so cold to keep it constantly over the years. Maybe had the boy decided to give the best of himself for that season, in order to ensure a great number of children believing in him and completely recover from the upsetting experience had at the rave? It was possible and, if so, he certainly had a great idea: the Boogeyman had not seen him healthy in the morning when he had said goodbye to him, and he had refrained himself from following him and monitor him only because he was well aware that the partner would have never agreed to be escorted and looked after like an infant for just a moment of weakness he had had.

Albeit happy for the efforts Jack put in his work, and the consequent powers' increase he received in return, the man continued to hope he would have abandoned it and hurry back to him: the 30th of October was about to end and soon he should have left his lair, In order to fully exploit the most auspicious day of the year and lead the big game waiting for him.

While he stirred on the mattress and modelled a handful of magic sand above his head to kill the time, a very slight noise came to his ears, distracting him from his foolish diversions and causing him to turn: a faint rustling, as if something was dragged across the floor stone, alternated with an irregular ticking.

Stifling an exclamation of joy Pitch jumped up and ran into the hallway, too impatient to wait for the person who had so longed to join him; at the last bend he managed to restrain himself, taking a phlegmatic pace and his usual detached expression, so as not to let the other understand how much nostalgia he had felt, then he went beyond the corner and immediately froze on the spot.

His love was in pitiful conditions, to say the least: his feet were scratched and caked with mud, his clothes rumpled and torn in several places, his face dirty, his hair ruffled and full of leaves and twigs, and he clung to the staff with both hands, as if he was not able to stand by himself.

«Jack, what happened to you!?» cried the Boogeyman with a hint of panic in his voice.

Frost needed a moment to realize he had been called, raise his eyes, so reddened to show every single capillary which watered them, and focus on the figure standing in front of him, then he said: «Oh, hi, Pitch. I didn't expect to find you: I thought you were already out for Halloween. Go, do not care about me».

Shocked the man replied: «Are you crazy!? Do you think I'd have the heart to leave you alone in these conditions? Never! Come on, come with me: you are caked with mud and dust and don't want your wounds to become infected. No, do not even try to complain! I won't listen to you and, anyway, it's still too early for me to leave: Halloween will officially begin within six hours or less. May I know how you managed to end up like this?». 
After making a feeble stand the boy gave up and let Pitch guide him along a secondary corridor, allowing his to pass an arm around his shoulders to support him and meekly entering in a cave; staggering he managed to reach a large sitting carved in limestone concretions, slumping against the seatback almost immediately, and only at that point he decided to explain.

«I had a lot to do lately: I visited all Asia and I've been in Japan for three days, to make sure that the snow could cover the main islands and most of the minor ones. I didn't pay much attention to my appearance, I never stopped to look my reflection or take a bath, and when I arrived near your lair I run into an adverse current that made me fall into the bushes, rather than next to the entrance: that's why I am a bit dirty».

After removing leaves and twigs from his hair and combed this as best as he could, the Boogeyman commented: «Jack, I was not talking about your appearance: you're not just dirty, you're also exhausted. I understand the enthusiasm for your new Guardian's designation and the anxiety to maintain a great number of children believing in you, but there's a limit to everything: you worked too hard and too much».

Tearing a strip from his robe he crumpled in on itself and dunk it into the crystal clear underground lake on his left, holding it for a moment in his hands to warm it up and then gently brushing it on the partner's skin to remove the mud; he repeated the process several times, washing him from head to foot and insisting on the light scratches he had, then he threw the cloth away and evoked a clean one to wipe him. Satisfied by the fact he had managed to make his lover's skin as white as snow like it had always been he rubbed his palms on his chest, to remove the topsoil and the thorns stuck in the fabric, but Jack leaped up and exclaimed: «No, no, don't worry, I'll do it by myself here! If you want to you can check my hood: I felt a sting a little while ago, so I think there's a twig in it».

Reaching over his shoulder the man examined every single hood's fold, but he found nothing; just when he was about to start to touch it and so check if there was a hidden thorn, however, the boy stopped him and said: «Well, now my clothes are clean. Do not worry about the hood: the twig must have fallen down on his own. Now, if you don't mind, I think it's better for me to sleep for a while. Do not worry, Pitch, I can get alone in our bedroom: go and do your job».

«Are you deaf or something?» immediately burst out Pitch; «I will not leave you alone in this conditions. Come on, let me help you to walk: I will lay down with you».

Frost tried again to strike up some excuses, but the Boogeyman didn't even listened to him: grabbing him by the shoulders again he led him back along the same corridor they had went through together just before and further on in the one which ended in their room, then he let him free, removing the staff from his hands and cautiously placing it against the stone wall.

As soon as he turned he saw that the boy had already curled up on the mattress and wrapped himself in a blanket, so, puzzled, he asked: «Won't you take off your clothes, Jack?».

Without turning the other replied: «Oh, no, not today, I don't really feel like doing it: I'm cold».

Sighing the man reached him, laid down next to him and asked: «Jack, is it everything alright? Are you fine?».

«Yes, yes» hastened to confirm Jack; «I'm fine, I'm just a little tired. Promise me you will not waste time being after me and go out for Halloween night: it's your day and I don't want you to lose it for a trifle».

Pitch, annoyed, replied: «Jack, cut it out: I don't care at all if today it's my night or any day, I'm not going anywhere until I'll be sure you're fine. Now lie down properly: you're curled up like a cat, if
you stay in that position you will have cramps in the morning. Come on, hurry up. Jack...? Jack, can you hear me?».

Not hearing any sound in response, despite his insistent calls, the Boogeyman worried and sat up to check if his partner felt sick, but soon he realized that this had simply already fallen asleep: evidently he was so exhausted he couldn't even hold a conversation.

With a nervous sigh he bent over him, placing his palm on his forehead to measure his temperature and sliding two fingers on the carotid artery to count the throb, but even when he watched him closely he found nothing abnormal, so he resigned himself and laid behind him. Hampered by the blanket he settled down as best as he could, trying to slide his arm under him to hug his lover's waist, but the boy, even while sleeping, reacted sharply, curling up on himself almost to the point to male his knees touch the forehead and protecting his abdomen.

Touched by the involuntary reaction the man didn't any longer and, making sure not to tickle him, simply encircled his shoulders, caressing his legs and bending his own to surround him, then he fell asleep.

Pitch awoke only several hours later, just in time for the long Halloween night's start, and, as he expected, he found Jack still asleep. After quickly checking him he gave him a fleeting kiss on the forehead, taking care to be as gentle as possible in order not to disturb him, then he stood up and got ready to go out: since his little snowflake didn't have any kind of indisposition, except for that deep tiredness which had caught him, it was better for the Boogeyman not to lose such a fortuitous opportunity to strengthen himself and, at the same time, to let his love rested in peace.

With a smooth movement of the arm he evoked Voluptas, waited for it to stretch its legs and, taking its muzzle in his hands, he whispered: «Stay here and guard him, Voluptas, and when he wakes up bring him to me: I've been waiting to greet him properly and spend some time quietly with him for weeks, so I will not wait a second longer than necessary».

The Pureblood snorted, scraping the ground with the hoof as to nod, then it went beside the bed and began to watch over Frost.

Satisfied with its reaction the man turned and walked down the hall, full of expectation for the night of big game waiting for him, but especially for the encounter that, at the end of this, he would have as a reward.

The long Halloween night which followed was, for Pitch, the best and the worst he had ever experienced. Due the accurate preparations he had made and the efforts he put in evoking and controlling his dark cohort, the expedition was by far one of the scariest and most profitable he had ever directed, but the anxiety for his little snowflake prevented him from enjoying it fully.

As long as he had been in Europe no worries had gripped him: Jack had slept for less than seven hours, it was quite normal that he still needed to rest, so the Boogeyman had patiently waited, throwing himself headlong into his work to distract himself.

When, however, he crossed the ocean to attack America, he realized that half a day had passed and he began to be assailed by doubts: why didn't his partner hasten to join him riding Voluptas? Maybe he felt sick? Maybe had something serious happened to him? No, it was not possible: if it had been so the Pureblood would have undoubtedly hurried to warn him. And what if it was unable to do
it? What if Frost had been so ill as to require constant care and the horse was forced to stay by his side? Damn, he knew he should have left him more guards! Was it better for him to send another Nightmare to check him? But, if the boy was simply asleep, he would have risked to wake him up and bother him with s pressing supervision. But then, what was the best thing to do?

These and a thousand other conflicting thoughts crowded his mind, distracting him to the point he even took the wrong direction, but in the end he decided to ignore them, restricting himself to merely watch more and more often the empty sky in search of a beloved figure which never appeared.

Now at the end of the hunt Pitch hastened to recall the most part of the dark cohort, while still leaving some beasts free to roam and feed on the latecomers' fears, then he leaped into the saddle of the first Pureblood within his arm's reach and rushed in his lair; without slowing down, nor getting off the mount, he broke into his own room in haste, only to find it in the last conditions he expected: exactly the same as when he had left.

Jack, in fact, was still curled up on the mattress, wrapped in the blanket and in the same position in which he had fallen asleep, and Voluptas was standing next to him, intent on watching over him and caress him up with its muzzle; stunned the Boogeyman asked: «Has Jack been sleeping here all the time? Hadn't anything happened?».

The stallion nodded silently, immediately returning to lick the boy’s side, and the man brought his palm to his heart: on one hand he was happy to know that his partner had not had crisis or worsenings of any kind, but on the other hand he couldn't hold back himself from feeling worried to know that twenty hours hadn't been enough for him to recover from exhaustion.

Elegantly dismounting he dissolved the two present creatures, then he laid down beside Frost, enveloping him in a warm hug in the hopes of comforting him, and cuddling him gently to keep his muscles relaxed.

After about three hours of waiting he finally perceived a movement and a slight moan, so, pulling away to leave the other all the room he might need, he stared at him: he watched him stirring, curling up on himself and then stretching his limbs; with his eyes he followed his hands pushing aside the blankets, brushing the abdomen and then wrapping his waist as to mimic a hug; finally, hearing a small hiccup, he approached him and whispered: «Is it alright, sweetie?».

The boy, clearly taken by surprise, jumped away terrified, choking back a scream, then, staring at him with his irises wide open, he murmured: «You're here».

Gobsmacked the man replied: «Of course I'm here, Jack, this is my lair, my room, why shouldn't I be here? You slept for a long time, you know? Almost twenty four hours. Halloween has already passed, now I have no commitments and I can fully take care of you. How do you feel?».

Clearly upset Jack sat up with difficulty and commented: «Oh, twenty four hours? Probably I was really tired, wasn't I? Well, never mind, at least I let you work in peace. I'm fine, do not worry. Now excuse me, I must go».

Without waiting for a reply he crawled to the edge of the bed, climbing over the partner, but this grabbed him by the arm and asked: «What does it mean “I must go”? We've been waiting for this moment of peace for weeks! You brought the winter in all the continents, what else do you have to do?».

Deftly slipping away from his grip the boy tergiversated: «I have to go back to Asia, I forgot some valleys, and then it's better for me to make a reconnaissance flight: maybe in some areas the snow has already melted down». 
Piqued Pitch blurted out: «There is no need to plunge the world into a new ice age: no one will die if you take a week to rest! Stop being a big head, yesterday you came here exhausted and you slept for an entire day: you cannot get back to work».

«Of course I ca...» started Frost as he stood up, but falling to the ground before he could even finish the sentence.

«What did I tell you? Look at you, you can't even stand properly!» roared the Boogeyman, finally exasperated.

Extricating himself among the sheets and the robe he managed to get off the mattress and reach his lover, but, as soon as he tried to grab him by the waist, he covered his head and screamed: «Do not touch me!».

At the sound of those simple words the man froze: he had never heard the boy addressing him a sentence so harsh, but, above all, with a voice so drenched in despair. Disturbed to the depths and forbidden to caress his partner to reassure him he could only step back, moving around him until he stood in front of him, then he crouched down and, knowing Jack was hiding something, he simply said: «Jack, tell me what's wrong: stop lying».

The boy remained silent for a whole minute, perfectly still except for the times he was crossed by tremors, then he slowly straightened his back and, while staying on his knees and with his head bowed, he confessed: «I'm pregnant».

Pitch mentally thanked the fright he had had just before, or certainly he would have burst out into a loud laughter: among all the possible revelations this was the most absurd, so nonsensical that, among the hypothesis he had already put forward, he had not even included it. Flaunting an amused smile he leaned toward him and reassured him: «Oh, Jack, my sweetie, do not worry: men cannot conceive. Come on, come here: give me a hug and let me check you. You must have something else».

Instead of taking refuge in his arms, like he was used to, Jack escaped his outstretched arms and, hugging his own calves, he replied: «I'm not stupid, I know that men usually don't conceive, but this time it's different».

«Jack, you don't have organs suitable for growing a baby inside of you, it is physically impossible for you to be pregnant» softly insisted the Boogeyman.

«I don't know what is physically impossible and what is not, I just know that this time is different».

«I haven't noticed any change in you, Jack: there must be a reason that leads you to believe you're expecting a baby».

«I'm just expecting, that's all».

«These are not explanations!» snapped the man, losing his patience.

With a jerk he sprang up and gave his back to his partner: he didn't like the turn the situation was taking. The question itself still seemed ridiculous, but the boy's stubborn and apparently unjustified insistence worried him more and more: why did he continue to claim he was pregnant, although he was a man and he had no explanation for an event so unnatural? Maybe had the drug eaten at the rave party damaged his brain, causing him visions of a belly that, in reality, could not exist?

«If you don't believe me you'd better go away!» shouted Frost in a venomous tone, interrupting the train of his thoughts.
Trying to stay calm Pitch replied: «I'm not going to leave you alone, and, anyway, this is my lair: I won't go».

«I do not care if this is your lair, I don't want you!» cried the boy.

«Then get out!» roared the Boogeyman, turning abruptly.

Although he believed the exasperation he felt was more than justified he repented immediately of that act: in fact, he had not only vented all his anger on the person he loved most in the world, moreover in a moment when he clearly needed help, but, not realizing that this had risen, he had struck him in the face with a backhand, as involuntary as violent.

Caught by surprise Jack merely endured, taking the blow and then falling to the ground with a slight moan; terrified he could have hurt him the man reached out his hand to him, but the boy, in a broken voice, begged him: «No, please, don't hurt them!».

Pitch immediately reassured him: «No, Jack, I didn't do it on purpose, it was an accident, you know that you would never hurt y...».

He never finished the sentence, because he suddenly realized a detail of no small importance: the boy had said "don't hurt them", not "don't hurt me". He had never felt fear for himself, but for the creature whom he claimed to expect, and the way in which he protected his abdomen, holding it with a palm and hiding it from the sight, was an evident confirmation of what he had stated.

By now the Boogeyman was so confused and troubled he didn't know what to think, so, for his sweet snowflakes' sake, he decided not to think at all: focusing he set aside every doubt, every unbelief, every psychological denial and even the disgusting feeling of power which the terror emanating from Frost gave him; when he succeeded he fall to his knees, opening his arms as if to invite the other to join him, then he whispered: «Forgive me, Jack».

The boy stared at him, trembling, his eyes wide open in an expression of pure panic, and he seemed about to run away, but at last he heaved a hiccup and, with a leap, he threw himself against his chest.

Letting out a sigh the man hugged him, not amazed to hear him burst into tears, and covering him with kisses and caresses he murmured: «Cry, my baby, cry, cry as long as you want, and not be afraid: I'm here with you, and I'll be forever».

Hearing that official permission Jack let himself go, clinging to his robe with such a despair that he risked to tear it apart and wetting it with his tears, then, between a sob and a shudder, he stammered: «It was not my fault, I didn't want to, I was sitting quietly on a tree and suddenly it happened, I had a belly and I was afraid, I tried to go away and I woke up and I thought it was all a dream, I still wanted to tell you about it but I forgot because it was that day when you found me sleeping alone in your bed, so I gave up and then I was busy and we didn't spend much time together and I didn't think about it any more, but I was so tired, Pitch, so tired, even flying was hard for me, I couldn't stand the situation any longer and eventually I saw the belly and I realized it was all true, all horribly true, and I didn't know what to do, I was so scared and I didn't know what to do...».

Hearing he was panting Pitch hugged him tightly, accepting without questioning what he had told him thanks to the relationship of trust which had developed between them, and he intervened: «Quiet, Jack, quiet, you're choking yourself. You have to relax, or you'll get hurt. Come on the bed with me: I'll help you go back to breathe normally and then you can tell me the rest».

Gently picking him up in his arms he lifted him, brought him on the bed and placed him on the mattress, and immediately the boy gave him his back, curling up on himself as to protect himself;
without being offended, nor daring to force him, the Boogeyman petted him, stroking his arms and chest to help him breathe, kissing his forehead, cheek and neck to calm him and massaging his legs make his muscles relax, and eventually he achieved what he wanted: albeit with difficulty Frost stretched his limbs, turning around, and he stopped sobbing.

Taking advantage of this moment of submissiveness the man sat on his thighs, making sure not to encumber him with his weight, then he took his face in his hands and, smiling at him, he murmured: «Good boy, Jack, you've been such a good boy to relax, very good, as always. Do you feel like answering a few questions? You told me that you have seen the belly: when did you realize it? Did it happen while I was out for Halloween?».

«No, it happened three days ago» confessed the boy.

Pitch winced at that answer and exclaimed: «Three days? You spent three days alone, bearing such a burden? Jack, why did you do that? You should have come here immediately, you should have called me!».

«No, I could have never done it!» replied Jack; «I never wanted to be like this, I was ashamed even only at the idea, and I'm still ashamed. I would do anything to get rid of that belly, but I can't: I tried to wait, but nothing happened. It's still there, I know it's still there, I feel it even without checking, and, anyway, I don't want to look at it: that belly is not mine, it should not exist».

The Boogeyman felt a twinge of pain at his confession, not struggling to imagine how terrible it might have been, for his lover, to discover that his body was changing in such an uncontrollable and unexpected way, but a sentence disturbed him, so, staring intently into his eyes, he said: «Jack, look at me, look at me in the eyes: whatever happened, whatever state you're in, it's not your fault. Did you hear me, Jack? It's not your fault. You were the one who said it, you didn't want it, you didn't ask for a change, then you have nothing to reproach yourself for. I never want to hear you saying you're ashamed again, did you understand? You have nothing to be ashamed of. Now I need to ask you a thing: may I look at your belly? I know it annoys you, baby, but it's really important: I need to see how it looks».

The boy shuddered visibly at the request, looking away in a vain attempt to escape, but in the end, no needing to be asked twice, he rested his hands beside his face in a gesture of surrender and he nodded firmly.

Leaning on his lover the man kissed his forehead, then his nose, then his cheeks, neck and chest, trying to prepare him for what he was going to do, then, feeling him ready, he went further down; using all the possible sensitivity he slid his fingers under his shirt, lifting it with the hoodie up to the rib cage, then he looked down and immediately froze.

Frost's abdomen, which had always been so flat as to be almost concave, had a bulge, small, little pronounced, well connected to the thorax, but equally awful: that belly should have never been there. Although it was still almost imperceptible Pitch already have horror of it, and he shuddered when he saw how close it was to his cock: the association of two such different organs in the same body was the worst thing he could conceive.

Struggling not to show the upset he had felt, in order not to further trouble the other, the Boogeyman tried to observe more carefully the lump he had spotted: first using only the fingertips and then the whole palm he touched it, feeling it hard and not very elastic; placing his ear above it he checked if it emitted any sound, but he didn't hear anything; finally, at a second and more careful look, he realized that it was placed exactly halfway between the two protruding bones of the pelvis.

«So, how is it?» asked the boy, impatiently, albeit hesitantly.
The man sighed, then he explained: «It ‘a protuberance very little pronounced, but hard, so it can’t be a hernia. Due its compactness it might look like a cyst, but it is far too flat to be so. I know about other diseases which affect humans and which may cause a belly like that, but, you now, you are no longer a human being, so you can’t have contracted their illness, and, moreover, we must also consider that the lump is placed exactly in the centre of the abdomen: a circumstance too fortuitous to be ignored. No, Jack, it's useless to deny it: it seems in all respects the starting of a pregnancy».

Two tears rolled down Jack’s eyes, slipping through his hair, and Pitch, after carefully settling the shirt and the hoodie, hastened to wipe them, gently caressing the hyaline skin and whispering: «No, baby, no, do not cry. I know that the situation is not the best of all, but I'm here with you and I'll help help you to overcome it. We will solve it together, okay? I promise you I will never leave you».

The boy let out a sob, then he straightened his back and snuggled against his stomach, seeking comfort; the Boogeyman, of course, gave it to him right away, hugging him tightly and scratching his nape, but in the end he took a deep breath and said: «Jack, I want to immediately do something for you, so I won't delay, nor tergiversate: we have to go to Toothiana, and we have to go now».

For a few seconds he didn't perceive any change in the partner, and he almost believed he had accepted the suggestion without saying a word; after a while, though, he felt him stir, so he got ready to take action to keep him in place.

Another drawing by HeilyNeko!


And this is a fanart made by Frida ^^

http://fridarush.deviantart.com/art/Pitch-Jack-and-Voluptas-471628678

Chapter End Notes

Next chapter will be published on Friday. I'll make sure to translate it within Monday, so I'll avoid all the thunderstorms and my friend will have four days to check it: I hope this will be enough to be in time. Feel free to leave me a comment, if you want to. Have a nice day!
Chapter 6

Chapter Notes

Sorry for the late, as I wrote on tumblr my friend didn't manage to check the chapter in time. I hope the chapter will be worth the wait.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

WE DON'T HAVE TO BE ALONE – CHAPTER 6

Pitch had expected from the outset Jack would have demurred at the suggestion he had made, and he had got ready to oppose them with solid reasonings and a hug as comforting as decisive, but the reaction which followed took him completely by surprise. His lover, in fact, didn't simply protest and try to escape his grip: after few seconds of suspension, in which, probably, he had processed and fully understood the order he had just heard, he started screaming, showering him with accusations and insults and jostling with all his strength, going so far as to give him few punches.

Initially the Boogeyman tried to calm him down, uttering set phrases and stoically ignoring his blows badly struck, but when the boy reached out a hand right towards his face, sharply scratching him a cheek and missing the cornea by a whisker, he realized that this weak defence would have never been enough: albeit sorry he had to use more forceful methods and he had to do it now, for the sake of both of them.

With an agile jerk he grabbed Frost's wrists, trapping them against the mattress and forcing him to lie down, then he slightly parted his own legs, finally sitting with all his weight on his thighs and blocking his movements. The boy, of course, wasn't discouraged and continued to shout at him and order to be released, arching his back to elude his grip, but the man roared: «Jack, control yourself! You're hurting both of us!».

Hearing him bitterly reproaching him Jack froze, opening wide his irises, as if he had fully realized what he had done only in that moment; he stared at him for few seconds, not in the eyes, but few inches lower, while fear and despair flooded in his gaze; finally he relaxed every muscle, half closing his eyelids over his misted pupils which were no longer able to focus anything and shed a tear.

Now certain that the other had no longer the strength to attack him Pitch dared to free his forearms and take his face between his fingers, but the boy tonelessly murmured: «Why do you stay here with me? I've just scratched you and showered you with insults».

«And you, instead?» promptly retorted the Boogeyman; «Why are you still with me after all the times I tried to strangle you? Why did you always persist to come back even though I did nothing but insult you, why did you always be content with my cowardly silence never followed by apologies? I don't care if you tried to hurt me verbally or physically, as long as you need me I'll be here for you. Do you remember what I always say? You are mine, mine and mine only: an assertion which may
 seem selfish, but, actually, it means mostly that I feel responsible for you and, therefore, before claiming something for me, I have to make sure that you're fine and happy. I know that you knew that, you've always known, since the first moment, but, at least this time, I wanted to tell it to you openly, to let you be sure that you can trust me blindly. Trust me, Jack: I just want to help you».

The man struggled immensely to conclude the concise, but compelling, speech he had conceived: although he had become deeply familiar with Jack, he had not entirely overcome his shyness yet, nor, least of all, changed his nature, still bashful and not keen on such confessions about his feelings. In order not to fail in his purpose he had avoided thinking and even heaving, uttering the last words out of breath, but after few seconds of confused thoughts and a general feeling of shame, he was satisfied of his courage: the boy, in fact, seemed to appreciate the statement and, finally, to cheer a little.

After closing his eyes and starting to inhale and exhale steadily Frost asked: «Why do you want to bring me to Tooth?».

Pitch sighed softly, reassured by the calm tone with which the other had made him the question, then he answered: «Jack, can you promise me you will not try to escape? You are not comfortable in this position, and me neither: I would like to lie down next to you, but I'll do it only if you swear you won't take advantage of this freedom».

Without the slightest hesitation the boy nodded and the Boogeyman stepped back, getting up from his thighs which he feared he had almost crushed and finally lying down beside him; after settling down he pulled him closer, bringing his left leg on his own waist and allowing him to nestle against his chest, then he explained: «Is it better like this, Jack? Do you feel more comfortable? Very well. As I tried to explain before I just want to help you, so my suggestion was well pondered and motivated by good reasons. The first thing we need to do is trying to understand how it is possible that you've conceived: it's true, we are spirits and therefore we are not subjected to human natural laws, but even among the immortal creatures a male pregnancy is not normal. To be sincere I've never heard about such an event in my life, and you've not been able to give me much information about it, apart from a confused narration of the dream you had: tell me, Jack, is there something else you should say? Some details which, in a hurry, you missed? Do you want to describe it again and more slowly and quietly?».

Jack winced at that question, moving slightly away from the partner and clasping his arms around his own chest, then he murmured: «No. No, there are no other details: it was a very confused dream, telling it to you again would be senseless, I won't say anything more than I already did».

The man was not surprised by his scared reaction, sure that remembering that upsetting dream again would have been almost a shock for the boy, and he didn't insist further; after thoughtfully stroking his head and addressing him a tender smile he said: «Okay, Jack, that's fine, but you understand this is not much to work with, don't you? We need more information, additional details, news and tales about anything similar ever happened on this earth or elsewhere, and who else should we turn to rather than the Guardian of Memory? Toothiana knows down pat every event after her birth, and, although she has never openly declared it, she has a huge library filled with tomes much older than me: in her Palace is contained the World's history, included its early days' nebulous and uncertain one, and I'm sure that, somewhere, lies the solution to our problem. In addition to this you also have to consider that Toothiana, after all, is a woman: even if she never had children she's undoubtedly more accustomed to a pregnancy than us two. I'm sure she'll manage with more certainty and ease to guess if you are actually pregnant, and, if not, we could leaf through some books searching this topic: in one way or another we will make you feel better and, who knows?, maybe we could even find that, actually, both the belly and the sickness are caused by something else and laugh at the unnecessary fear which grasped us. Anyway, don't worry, baby: we will solve everything, and soon
this nightmare will be just a memory».

Frost, who had begun to tremble when he had heard Toothiana's name, let go a hiccup and confessed: «But I don't want her to know... I don't want anyone to see me in this condition».

Pitch sighed and said: «I understand, Jack, and I assure you that, if only I could, I would not involve anyone except of us, but we can't do otherwise: I need to consult Toothiana's library in order to understand how to help you, and I can't take years to browse all the books before finding the right one. I have to explain what the problem is, to let her indicate which are the most suitable tomes to be consulted, and, anyway, the fact remains that I need a second and more expert opinion about your condition. Come on, sweetie, don't lose heart: you know how discreet Toothiana is».

At that statement the boy let out a muffled, a first, little hint of laughter which, albeit not lighting up his eyes, finally bent his lips into a shy smile, and the Boogeyman rejoiced at the sight: the sudden and unnatural change had understandably upset his sweet snowflake, but, at least, it had not taken away all the joy which characterized him.

Laughing in turn he clarified: «Well, actually the words “Toothiana” and “discrete” sound very ridiculous when juxtaposed: I think I've never met in my life a creature more exuberant than her! Seriously, you know what I meant: she's close to us and especially to you, she always listens to us and gives us advices and, above all, although she often knew much more than we told her, she has never revealed anything to anyone. She's the Guardian of Memory and she knows how to treasure it: unless she's asked to do otherwise she keeps all the secrets for herself. I am sure that, if you demand her not to spread the fact, she will keep her mouth shut».

Still uncertain Jack let out a sigh, looking down as if to escape from that conversation, then snuggled against the other's chest and whispered: «I don't want to anyway».

The man was not surprised by his partner's stubbornness, because, although it could look childish, his was a perfectly normal reaction to this absurd situation, and for this reason he decided not to insist further: his lover was not in a condition to accept consciously the suggestion. It would have made no sense trying to persuade him with words, explaining fully and repeatedly why it was necessary to involve Toothiana, trying to convince him and risking to make the conversation degenerate into an argument: the only important thing was going to the Teeth’s Palace, and doing it as soon as possible.

Sure he had chosen the best course of action Pitch rubbed his partner's shoulder, looked him in the eyes and said: «Come on, Jack, the sooner we move, the sooner we will get rid of this problem».

Frost sniffled up and didn't answer, and the Boogeyman decided to take his silence as a “yes”; kneeling at first he helped him to sit up, then to stand up, and finally he evoked Voluptas and got ready to mount it. The boy, however, moved away from the beast, back to the bed, and, grabbing the blanket, he asked: «Can I bring it? Lately I feel cold when I fly».

Remembering well how Jack remained groggy because of excessive cold the man replied: «Of course, Jack. Rather, let me weave a longer and warmer cloth: this one is too thin to resist to the wind».

After evoking a robe identical to the one he was wearing he cut off the sleeves, sewed up the two holes left, slightly widened the form and added a large hood, then he concentrated, calling new black sand to thicken the fabric's texture and modelling with his fingers two thin strips to close it; satisfied with the result he draped the cloak over the boy's shoulders, tied it around his neck and covered his head, then he grabbed him by the hips and sat him sidesaddle on Voluptas' withers. During the whole operation Frost didn't show the slightest involvement, letting him shift him like a puppet and always remaining in the position where he was left, as if he had neither the strength nor the desire to
move independently, and Pitch had a heart pang seeing his misted eyes constantly lowered and his forlorn expression: the terrible discovery seemed to have taken away to his little snowflake even the will to live.

Trying to hide his pain, to avoid increasing his partner's, the Boogeyman flashed a friendly smile and handed the staff, patiently waiting for the other to grab it; when he saw him clasp his left hand on the wood he got on the steed, pulled the boy on his thighs and took care to tuck the fabric as best as he could, so that he wouldn't be hit by the wind, nor disturbed by pesky draughts; finally, certain that every preparation had already been completed, he said: «Well, Jack, here we are. You won't need to cling to me, I'll take care to hold you, so just keep the cloak closed. Are you ready?».

When he received a weak positive response he clung to Voluptas' mane, then he spurred it into the trot, entering the corridor and reflecting what access tunnel was more convenient to use.

After an hour of travel through mountains, passes and narrow valleys Pitch guided Voluptas along a ledge and, when it ended, he finally came out into Toothiana's realm. Unlike all the other times he had visited it he didn't stop to look at it, neither to locate hiding places and shadowy areas useful for his dark work, as he had done in the past, nor to get lost into the tropical forest's wonderful colours which bloomed there, as, instead, he had learned to do in the last few months: he only paused for few moments, just to shield himself from the sun's sudden glare and pinpoint the golden Palace's elaborate structures, then he spurred the beast, so that they could reach their destination with a steady, but fast, pace.

Reassured by the horse's docility he dropped the reins, to hug Jack with both arms and protect him from the noisy and indiscreet tooth fairies who, for sure, would have rushed towards them, but it wasn't necessary: as soon as they caught sight of them they began to chirp thickly, but they didn't come to disturb them, rather moving away from their trajectory in order not slow them down.

Unable to say with certainty if they did so for their diligence in carrying out their task or for their intuition the Boogeyman didn't waste time time and took advantage of the space left for him to advance, heading towards a wide platform and tightening his legs around the Nightmare's sides to hold himself easily. The Pureblood, for its part, did its best to spare its riders dangerous jerks: exploiting the calm currents which blew in that area it gradually slowed down, gliding towards the dais with a large curve, then it landed softly, bending the legs to cushion the impact and walking for few more steps before stopping completely.

As the beast turned its nose to sniff the boy a loud voice exclaimed: «Oh, boys, what a pleasant surprise! It's been almost a month and a half when I saw you last time, I was almost starting to worry! Have you... Jack, are you alright?».

Not surprised at all by the sudden change of tone Pitch dismounted and answered: «No, unfortunately he's not feeling good. Do you have a quiet place where he could rest? I'd like him to lie down: I don't want him to get too tired».

Without hesitating or indulging in her own curiosity Toothiana replied: «Sure, I see by myself that he needs rest. He could lie down on my bed: it's soft, big and, although it's near here, well protected from my fairies' traffic and noise».

As he grabbed his partner by the hips and set him down on the ground the Boogeyman whispered: «Do you want to rest on Toothiana's bed, Jack?».

The other nodded weakly, without staring any of the two interlocutors in the eyes, and the fairy
encouraged him: «Don't worry, Jack, it's not far from here: you just have to take the flight, climb about thirty steps and you'll immediately arrive in my room. Come on, I'll take you there».

Alighting on the ground the woman tried to take him by the hand and escort him, but Frost stepped back, frightened, and the man, in the attempt to cover up his act, hastened to put an arm around his shoulders, pulling him next to his imposing figure and protecting him.

Toothiana, as the good observer she was, didn't let the clumsy move escape her notice, but she didn't open her mouth, nor tried to insist further; soaring again she preceded the two lovers, leaving them every room to advance, and she patiently waited for them at every turn, never complaining about the frequent and duration pauses she had to do: the boy, in fact, put a foot in front of the other very slowly, heavily leaning on his staff and often staggering to the point he risked to fall, but he never asked for help and, moreover, he clung to his his considerate assistant as little as possible.

After five, endless minutes the trio reached the top of the stairs, accessing a large and gracious room, and Pitch took advantage of his partner's tiredness to admire it with his eyes wide open: he had never found it during his past spying expeditions, and he would have never expected that, in a kingdom so chaotic and noisy, there could be a place so peaceful and quiet.

The room, in fact, was inside one of the numerous elongated structures within which the caskets were kept, but, thanks to the high position and the prowess with which it had been embedded in it, it didn't allow any sound penetrate, with the exception of a feeble and relaxing background noise and the swishing breeze's rustling. Skillfully carved in the metal and the wood it was adorned, on every surface, by the same, minute tesserás which decorated all the buildings, painted in different colours and placed side by side so as to create an elaborate abstract mosaic, darker and more relaxing on the floor and brighter and more cheerful on the low ceiling. The impressive pointed roofing, in which, probably, were stored ancient teeth which hadn't been touched for years, declined along the circular perimeter, splitting into dozens of thin, golden branches which supported it as columns and which resembled so much the veinings of the small fairies' transparent wings, while in the central area it rose slightly, forming a sort of vault below which the mistress of the house's bed was.

Pushing aside the canopy's transparent veils, all hanged to a single ring, Toothiana revealed a round mattress and she hastened to plump up and rearrange the numerous pillows, round, too, so that the guest could lie against them; Jack, however, completely ignored that loving care, dropping the staff on the ground and crouching straight on the sheets.

Assuming a grieved expression the woman tried to stretch an arm toward the boy, perhaps to make him settle in a better position, or perhaps simply to encourage him with her mere presence, but Pitch grabbed her by the wrist and, controlling with difficulty his cracked voice, he whispered: «No, he doesn't want. I need to talk to you in private».

Toothiana turned to look at him, staring intently into his eyes, but she didn't utter a word; after few seconds she nodded silently and, casting a last glance at Frost, she took the man by the hand, leading him along with her.

The Boogeyman never looked back at his lover's huddled figure, well aware that, if he had glimpsed it, he would have never had the heart to go away leaving him alone, and he sheepishly let himself be guided by the mistress of the house; following her he reached the other side of the room, took a second flight of stairs that initially he hadn't noticed and went spiralling along the outer wall of the structure, entering a small terrace shaded by a slender gazebo and trees which, almost by magic, clung to the promontory which surrounded the place on two sides.

«Come on, Pitch, let's sit down, so you can tell me everything calmly» encouraged him the fairy, pointing to a table in wrought iron.
Lengthening his stride the man take the seat on the first available chair, approaching the flat surface and resting his forearms on it, then he sighed and said: «I'll be honest, I have not the faintest idea about how to broach you these news and, moreover, I don't even have time to do it, so I'll tell you immediately what's going on: Jack is probably expecting a baby».

«What!?» exclaimed the woman.

«You heard me».

At that confirmation Toothiana opened wide her eyes, hovering still on the stool which, for surprise, she had dropped, then she picked it up, sat down and commented: «I'm pretty sure that you know that only women can get pregnant, therefore I think you'll have good reasons to believe what you just said: explain them to me».

Pitch nodded, then answered: «I was the first who was surprised when Jack gave me the news, and the first who couldn't believe them, but I cannot deny that many disturbing facts happened and that there are several clues which support his words. He had a dream about it, he has been tired and detached for several weeks, and then he has little bump, really, I don't know what to think, it seems impossible, yet it's the only explanation which I can...».

«Pitch, stop, stop» interrupted him the fairy; «I'm not understanding anything at all: you have to explain everything thoroughly and calmly, trying to refer all that you know or that you noticed, and above all you have to start from the beginning and proceed in order. What was the origin of all, the first strange event? The dream, maybe?».

«Yes, it seems so» began the Boogeyman; «Until the end of September everything was alright: Jack and I spent some time together and I didn't notice any kind of change or indisposition in him, so I suppose that, at that time, nothing had happened yet. In early October we separated, in order to accomplish more actively our task, and during one of his trips Jack had a very strange vision: as he said he was on a tree and suddenly something happened, he found himself elsewhere and already with a big belly. In a panic he tried to escape, but he simply woke up, so he thought it had all been a bad dream and didn't give it any weight. It seems he wanted to talk about it anyway, but, since we didn't meet immediately, it slipped his mind and the next day he forgot to tell me. We slept together and, oddly enough, Jack rested for sixteen hours straight, struggling to wake up and clearly showing he was still tired. Then...».

«Before the “then” there's the “before”, Pitch» intervened the woman; «I asked you to tell me everything in detail, and you're skipping an important part. Do not have that confused expression, you know you didn't tell me you made love».

Wincing at the placid tranquility with which the interlocutor had presented such an intimate topic the man exclaimed: «That's none of your business! First of all you cannot know if it happened, and, secondly, the fact has nothing to do with the topic we are discussing about».

«First of all my women's intuition is never wrong and, in anyway, both you and Jack are hopeless when it comes to hide your intimate affairs, secondly, as far as I'm aware, usually children are conceived in that way» retorted Toothiana.

Pitch froze, unable to respond in kind, embarrassed by the ease with which the other was always able to guess what he did with Jack and suddenly struck by a thought to which, until now, he had never made room: the conception. He had never thought about how this could have happened, if by magic or by pure and simple insemination, and he had always thought that the creature the boy was probably carrying had been sprung out of nowhere, anyone's child destinate to belong to anyone: and if, instead, as the fairy had implicitly suggested, it were his? If it were his and Frost's descendant,
born from the combination of their genes and their essences, just like any normal baby?

Almost without realizing it the Boogeyman brought a hand to his chest, feeling a strange warmth pervading his limbs and a sudden pang in his heart at the idea of what he had planned to do, but soon every feeling vanished: that was not the truth, but only a mere supposition, and, anyway, even if, in the end, it had turned out to be true, nothing changed. It didn't matter if that being which he knew little or nothing about were his descendant or not: the boy had never wanted it, he suffered for its presence and considered it only as a problem, therefore the man didn't want it, suffered for its presence and would have regarded it as a problem, and he would have worked hard in any way to solve it.

«Pitch» called him the woman, casually intervening at the very end of his reflections and definitely closing them; «I'm not asking you to tell me even that event for morbid curiosity. Have I ever demanded you anything about it? Have I ever made intrusive questions? Your intimate moments are yours and yours only, I would never dare to pry into them, neither peeking at you, nor asking for information, but this time it's different: it's extremely important that you tell me about it, explaining every detail. I do not need you to describe everything, of course, but I need to know if something out of the ordinary happened, something that, in hindsight, could be due to the pregnancy we are discussing about. Think well, take all the time you need, speak calmly and pause whenever you wish, but try to be strong and tell me everything; it's necessary. See it in this way: the more information you'll give me, the fewer questions I'll have to ask Jack later. Spare him the trouble and the embarrassment of answering: he's already worn out, both physically and psychologically, and an interrogation would only make him suffer».

In that sentence Pitch gasped, shuddering at the thought of the pain and shame that his sweet snowflake would have felt if he had been forced to confess even their intercourse, and he got convinced: although he continued to consider the question extremely intrusive he had to admit that Toothiana had supported it with valid reasons and that a thorough reflection on what had happened could reveal important clues.

Letting out a long sigh the Boogeyman heavily fell back against the backrest, raised his irises to follow a frond's gentle swing and then explained: «It was an October night particularly clear and warm, absolutely perfect for a ride, and I was exploiting it to scare as many children as possible to prepare the ground for Halloween. After few hours of hard work, however, I started to feel tired and nostalgic of Jack, so I decided to release a dozen Nightmares and go back into my lair. I prayed with all my might to find him there, and so he was: he was on my bed, naked and asleep. I've always found him very attractive, but at that moment it seemed to me absolutely irresistible: it was enough for me to simply look at him, and I felt all the tiredness disappear and the desire to be with him growing more and more. Trying not to disturb him I approached him, courted him a little, and Jack, who in the meantime had woken up, showed to appreciate what I was doing, so I continued and then I got ready to go further. Immediately before I succeeded to, however, Jack suddenly changed his attitude and stopped me: a second before he seemed perfectly consenting, and a second later completely in a panic. I was really surprised, but of course I gave up and tried to reassure him; feeling guilty Jack told me he didn't know why he had stopped me, and after a short reflection, he asked me to go on, but gently. I cannot tell you why, and I think he couldn't, too: he has always enjoyed passionately intercourses, he has never complained about anything and, on the contrary, he had never hesitated to make explicit requests and actively participate».

«Yes, I know you devour each other when you make love» commented the fairy with a sly smile.

Feeling the embarrassment, already extremely high, rise to unmanageable levels at that sentence, the man slammed his fist on the table, causing it to vibrate so hard it almost jumped, and he roared: «Another comment like that and you'll regret to be born!».
Not frightened at all by the threat the woman laughed, then she replied: «Oh, come on, don't be touchy: I was just trying to play down! You stiffened like a statue when you started to speak, and you uttered the last sentences in fits and starts, without even catching breath: you'll feel sick if you continue like this. Try to stay relaxed, okay? Remember that we're doing this only to look for clues to help Jack. Either way, don't you think you were too amazed by his request? It's not difficult to understand that Jack is a passionate boy, but it's also obvious he's really sweet: perhaps, at that moment, he just wanted you to show him tenderness and this has nothing to do with it the rest».

«No, I assure you that it wasn't normal» countered Pitch; «Obviously there have been occasions in which he only desired tenderness, but everything had gone in a completely different way: he has been sweet right from the start, he's touched me only to cuddle me and he's been very submissive. That night, instead, he behaved in a very passionate way, as if impatient to go beyond, but when we got to the point he changed suddenly and I clearly perceived the terror which gripped him. He was afraid, Toothiana, scared by me as never before, and I felt like a monster».

«Don't feel like a monster, Pitch: you're not like that and you've never been».

Not reassured at all by that affirmation the Boogeyman turned his head, trying to dispel the memory of the horrendous feeling he had experienced, then he went on: «That was not the only strange event: it's true, I protracted the foreplays a lot, but joining with him was too easy and pain-free, his body's temperature, especially the inner one, was much higher than usual, and he fell asleep as soon as we were done. There is also another detail, but there's no need to report it: it's enough to say that it was not normal and that pregnancy would be a good explanation».

He didn't regret the rushed and almost annoyed tone with which he uttered the last words, nor the abrupt way in which he finally ended the speech: reflecting on the intercourse had helped him to notice details which he had previously given very little value to, but he had found hard facing it. He had encountered few difficulties in speaking about himself, trying to appeal on his own pride and on the pleasure he felt in flaunting himself and boasting about his performance in order to report everything, but he had hated having to talk about Jack: he seemed to him he had violated him by revealing their intimate secrets, and, if he had been able to finish the story, it had been only because, torn between jealousy and guilt, he had managed not to be overwhelmed by either of them.

Struck by a sudden recollection he hastened to add: «Oh, I almost forgot: Jack's scent changed during the intercourse. He usually smells of wind and snow, but in the end I felt a very intense scent of flowers. It faded within few minutes and the next morning it was basically gone, but it didn't take long to reappear and now it's clearly perceivable».

«Yes, I smelled it immediately when Jack passed next to me to lie down on the bed» confirmed Toothiana.

Taking her chin between thumb and forefinger she pondered for few seconds, then she commented: «They are all strange signs that Jack has undergone a change, but they're pretty general: they could be caused by an intensification of his powers, or the winter season coming. Let's move on: did you notice any specific symptom of pregnancy?».

Caught off guard the man stammered: «Oh, well, he... already has a little bump and he told me he has felt very tired in the latest weeks...».

«Let's momentarily leave aside the bump» interrupted him the fairy; «It's been only a month after the supposed conception, so it's very unlikely it could be caused by that, but I promise I will observe it. The tiredness, instead, is already much more significant. Anything else?».

More and more confused Pitch clasped his hands together and tried: «Uhm... something else...?».
The woman widened her eyes and exclaimed: «Pitch, don't you know the symptoms of pregnancy!? And to think you had... no, nothing. I'm sure that, if you thought a little, you could remember them, but I see no reason to put you to the test. Has Jack ever had nausea? Sudden mood swings? Overly emotional reactions? Dizziness? Cravings? Specifically sexual cravings? Swelling or heaviness in the legs?».

Overwhelmed by that sequence of questions the Boogeyman struggled to grasp them all, but eventually he managed to say: «Well, the overly emotional reactions started immediately: Jack has always showed himself very excited to see me, and this is normal, but he almost cried when we had to separate, and this happened both at the beginning of October and both in its half, when we met a second time. The mood swings, instead, appeared, but only this morning, when he confessed me everything, so I cannot tell if they were due to the pent anxiety or to this supposed pregnancy. He never expressed any special wish, so I don't know if he ever had cravings, but he surely had the specific ones: when we were at Jamie's house he practically jumped on me: if only that stupid child hadn't interrupted us he wouldn't have taken long to go beyond».

«Jamie's house!? What were you doing there together?» suspiciously asked Toothiana.

«Do not think ill!» immediately broke her off the man; «It was just a fluke: I had gone there to work Jack to visit him and, by sheer coincidence, we walked into his room at the same time. Stop looking at me like that, we didn't do anything in his presence and we fake we were enemies to keep our roles well defined and separated. Returning to our problem, he felt dizzy many times, he had no swelling in the legs, but, judging by the way he walks, I would say he feels heaviness in them, and about the nausea... he had it once, but you he went into a hellhole full of loud music and pulsating lights, so the cause might be the unhealthy surrounding».

Leaning back against the backrest Pitch sighed and he called himself a fool: shocked by the news he hadn't thought at all about verify it by checking if the usual symptoms of pregnancy had arisen. In hindsight it was not such a serious mistake: since he had no experience in that field he was aware of less than half of the ones mentioned by the fairy, and he was also convinced that some of them were pure legend, but the idea that he hadn't had the situation under control, and that he hadn't it even in this moment, was unbearable for him.

«Needless to say, both of you have an innate ability to get into trouble, right? Well, Pitch, I think we talked enough: if you have nothing to add we can get down, so I'll be able to check Jack, make him few questions and understand, finally, if he's really pregnant or not» concluded the woman.

Without even nodding the Boogeyman stood up and, neatly putting back the chair, he headed straight for the stairs, in order to precede his interlocutor and prepare his lover for the visit; hurriedly going down the steps he reached the lower floor, walked around the bed and, after clearing his throat, he sat next to the boy.

This, who in the meantime had taken off his cloak, didn't move and simply murmured: «You've spoken for a long time».

«Yes, Jack, we had so much to talk about. Now Toothiana would need to ask you some questions: do you feel like answering?» thoughtfully asked the man.

The boy didn't open his mouth, then Toothiana came and, kneeling on the mattress, she demanded: «Jack, did you have bout of nausea in the past month by any chance?».

«Yes» asserted with decision Frost; «I've had many, so many, too many: the last week I almost didn't have time to recover from one that another began. I threw up several times, I felt weaker and weaker, I always had headaches and pain in the legs and the feet and my stupid staff did nothing but throw a
tantrum, and then I also felt dizzy and found hard to fly, and countless other annoying things that would take me a lifetime to tell».

Assuming a pained expression the fairy whispered: «Jack, Pitch told me that you have a little bump: may I check it?».

«No!» suddenly snapped the boy, making startle with fright both his lover and his friend; «There's nothing to see, it's just a stupid belly with a stupid baby inside that I never wanted to have! Why the hell are you so interested in looking at it? It's horrible and that's all, I'm disgusted by it and I won't show it to anyone! Do you need to be sure if I'm really pregnant? Is it such a great effort so believe me when I speak? I'm not telling lies, I know what I dreamed and that I'm expecting a baby, so stop wasting time discussing about silly things and looking at me! If Tooth doesn't know what to do I want to go into her library and look for a solution to this damn problem, and I want to do it now!».

Although Pitch felt his blood freeze in his veins in seeing such a sudden aggressiveness, the woman seemed not to give much weight to it and, in a serious tone, she explained: «No, Jack, I believe you: I wanted to see the belly just to understand what its state is and what it looks like, because it's not normal at all it already started to grow, but if you don't feel like doing it now I will check it later. Speaking about dreams, instead, don't you have anything else to tell me? Pitch reported me a story extremely short and confused».

Jack shuddered visibly at the request, curling up even more than he already was on himself, and then he stammered: «No, I have nothing to tell: it was a hazy dream, which I understood little or nothing about».

Toothiana frowned and, going closer to his face, she insisted: «Jack, are you completely sure? Wasn't there a person with you?»

«I said no» spelled out with a venomous tone the boy, grinding his teeth, but looking elsewhere; «Are we done with the questions? Can we finally look for information?».

The fairy stood there, staring at him, for a long time, turning her expression into a suspicious and, at the same time, worried one, but eventually she shook her head and concluded: «Alright. Unfortunately I never heard about a male pregnancy, so I cannot help immediately, but, as suggested by Jack, we can check my library: I have several ancient tomes which could turn out to be useful. I will send here Baby Tooth to lead you up to the Palace's wing where it is; in the meantime, I'll precede you and start to select the most interesting volumes».

After that statement she jumped down the bed and, using the back entrance of the room, she flew away, disappearing quickly from view and leaving the two lovers alone.

Whole hours had passed since the trio had entered the library, going through the tall, narrow corridors to get to the cave where, on rough shelves carved directly into the stone, the most ancient tomes were stored. Exploiting the light of many candles they had begun to consult them, each on their own, but, despite the pile of books had considerably decreased, they still hadn't achieved any result: in all the stories they had analysed they had not only found no male pregnancies, but those few conceptions they alluded to were barely mentioned and soon dismissed in few lines.

Closing with a snort the eighth book he had examined Pitch looked up and saw Jack still bent over the first he had taken, intent to hold his head with both hands and struggle with all his might in order not to close his eyes.
Touched by his perseverance the Boogeyman whispered: «Jack, you've been really good to help, but now you're exhausted: it's not necessary for you to strive so much, take a break to rest».

The interlocutor sighed and, in a cracked voice, he commented: «But really, look, you've already read eight books, Tooth six and I barely arrived halfway through the first! I cannot leave now, at least let him finish this».

«Jack, do not make comparisons: everyone takes their own time to read, and there's no need to rush» reassured him Toothiana.

«Of course there's need to rush, I cannot take years to find the solution!» snapped the boy.

Pulling his chair towards his partner's the Boogeyman put an arm around his shoulders and murmured: «Jack, you're not alone in this quest and, anyway, few hours of rest will not be an excessive delay: if you force yourself you'll proceed more and more slowly and, even worse, you'll risk to miss some important information because of tiredness. You have already done a great job so far: this book's script is uneven and much tinier than the texts' on which we practised, the sentences are long and boring and the words complex, I'm surprised to see you endure until now. Do not make comparisons with me or Toothiana: we've been accustomed to read for a long time and we just need to look for keywords in order to figure out if a page is interesting or not, while you can't and need to read everything».

Frost bit his lower lip, clearly saddened by the fact he wasn't able to proceed at the same speed of the others and perhaps willing to insist, but eventually he gave up and said: «Okay: that's enough. I'm really tired, I can hardly keep my eyes open and I'm not even able to hold my head straight up, so I'd better get some rest: I can't risk to let the solution to my problem slip under my nose».

«Well done, Jack, that's a good decision. Go back to rest in my room: I assure you that the pillows are really comfortable for a nap! Do you want us to accompany you?» thoughtfully asked the fairy.

«No, no» immediately interrupted her the boy; «I remember the way and I'm able to walk. Stay here: I'll be back as soon as I recover».

After rubbing his eyes Jack stood up, grabbing the staff he had leaned against the edge of the table and exploiting it right away as a solid support, then he walked away without a word or a look, his back bent and his legs occasionally shaken by tremors.

With a grieving expression the man watched him limping, feeling a twinge every time he stumbled and struggling hard to prevent himself from rushing to his aid, but he forced himself to remain motionless: the boy felt already enough useless and psychologically oppressed, and a continuous and urgent assistance would have done nothing but depress him further, making him feel incapable of making even the simplest gestures.

As soon as Frost disappeared behind a corner Pitch sighed and stood up to grab a new tome, but the fairy preceded him, passing him one and saying: «It breaks my heart seeing Jack in that state».

The Boogeyman let out a weary and bitter laugh, then he commented: «Yes. That's why I'm consulting all these books: in order to find a solution to this absurd problem and bring the energy and the smile back to him. I still cannot believe that such a thing could have happened, and I still can't understand».

«And this is the real problem» intervened the woman; «Before we can do anything we need to understand and, frankly, I don't think that these books will help us. I am not suggesting to stop reading: if we really managed to find a story or even just an excerpt concerning a male pregnancy we
could undoubtedly learn how to deal with it, and this would only be useful. The point, however, is another: we need to understand what really happened. It's not possible that everything happened by chance and without any telltale sign: there's something which escapes us.

The man pondered for about a minute, but, as soon as he realized his mind was completely blank, he wearily replied: «What can I say, Toothiana, I've told you everything I know and, even if I reflected on this for hours, I wouldn't be able to add anything. Definitely understanding how and why this pregnancy happened would help us, but, in the end, it is not essential: the important thing is to understand how to put everything back in place».

«I do not think we can...» began Toothiana, but soon she fell silent, staring curiously down the hallway.

Started by the sudden stop Pitch turned, narrowing his eyes to see what was going on, and he finally spotted a coloured speck; accompanied by a continuous rustling and sobbing chirps this quickly approached them and it didn't take long to the Boogeyman to realize it was Baby Tooth: he would have recognized her acute voice among a thousand ones.

Grabbing the tome which had been offered to him he opened it, quickly reading the title and hurrying to turn the page, and, as he imagined, the fairy went beyond him, reaching the mistress of the house and starting to talk thick and fast to her. Focusing as best as he could he tried to ignore the newcomer's chirping trills, struggling to examine the text without missing any detail, but after few seconds, the woman exclaimed: «Jack fell!? Where? When?».

Suddenly raising his head the man asked: «What did you just say!?».

Toothiana lingered for few moments to talk with her little helper, then she grabbed him by the arm and ordered: «Come, now! Jack fell down the stairs!».

Cursing himself for not having escorted his lover Pitch jumped to his feet, overturning the rough chair on which he sat and immediately taking the exit corridor; running as fast as he could he followed the others along the library's labyrinthine meanders, and when he finally came out he rudely pushed them aside, sweeping the area to locate the partner.

«Where is he?» he asked eagerly, since he couldn't spot him anywhere.

«He fell from the suspended flight, Pitch, he should be on the ground!».

Hearing that statement the Boogeyman felt his blood freeze in his veins: even a simple tumble down the stairs could be dangerous, especially since Jack was expecting, but such a fall into the void seriously risked to become fatal.

Appealing to all his self-control he leaped toward the edge of the platform and, from there, over the forest below, wandering his eyes to find a blue spot in the midst of all that green while falling at breakneck speed; when he was just few yards far the ground he managed to catch a glimpse of a well-known hoodie peeping out from the undergrowth, so, hastily summoning a cloud of darkness, he drifted over it, taking advantage of the friction with the sand to slow down enough and tumbling awkwardly into the fernery.

Disentangling himself with difficulty among the creepers and the bushes he stood up, stumbling all the time and calling in a loud voice his lover, and Toothiana imitated him, flying as fast as she could from the top.

With the strength born of desperation the man reached the boy first and, seeing him, he feared the
worst: Frost was lying on the ground, his face buried in the moss and the right arm bent in an unnatural position, and he laid perfectly still. Using all the delicacy which he was capable of Pitch grabbed him by the shoulders, turning him slowly on his back, and he let out a whine at the sight of his face bruised and completely covered in blood.

«Pitch, let me see! For all the teeth, he's completely covered in blood! He's still breathing, isn't he?» anxiously asked the fairy.

«I feel the pulse, but it's very weak, and I don't like at all the cut on the forehead: we must immediately do something to help him! I need some clean cloths, hot water, healing herbs and bandages, do you have them?» urgently demanded the Boogeyman.

«No, but I know where to find them» replied the woman while already stepping back.

With trembling hands the man stroked Frost, to check if he had suffered fractures or other injuries, then he kissed him on the bloody forehead and whispered: «Jack, can you hear me? Are you awake? Hold on, sweetie, as soon as Toothiana is back I will cure you and I promise you that I will do everything to make you recover, everything you need and everything you want! Hold on, sweetie!». 

After few seconds Pitch heard a thud on his right and was hit by a warm wind, but, before he could realize what had happened, Toothiana shouted: «Get in the portal, Pitch!».

Without further ado or ask any questions the Boogeyman picked the boy in his arms, lifted him up and ran towards the portal that had just been opened, supporting his sweet bundle's head with a thin tentacle of darkness and praying with all his might that, besides the injuries to his body, his little snowflake hadn't received others to his mind.

Here there's a new fanart made by HeilyNeko!

http://it.tinypic.com/view.php?pic=igydsj&s=8#.U3sOd_1_unt

Chapter End Notes

Next chapter will be published on Friday. As you've surely noticed lately my friend have been tired and needed more time to check the translation, so, if you see I'm late, try to have a little patience. I would delay the publication date on Sunday, but I'm sure that, in that case, I will end to publish on Tuesday, and I don't want to. I'll just give my friend the chapter as soon as possible (on Tuesday for this week) and hope it'll be enough. Feel
free to leave a comment, if you want to: I like receiving opinions, and I find them useful.
Chapter 7

Chapter Notes

It seems that life is jeering at me: the last time I wrote I didn't want to end up publishing on Tuesday, and here I am, on Tuesday. Honestly, since my friend has asked me to delay the updates so many times, I think it's better for you to check my tumblr if I'm late (I always publish a note about this), or simply have patience. However, you can be sure that I'll never give up with this translation, nor with writing the story. I hope you'll enjoy this chapter.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

WE DON'T HAVE TO BE ALONE – CHAPTER 7

Hobbling with difficulty in the undergrowth Pitch walked hurriedly towards the portal, rushing into it without any hesitation, but making sure, just before entering, to evoke new tentacles of darkness and wrap Jack in them: he had no idea about what effect that magic passage could do to a traveller, and he had no intention of risking, especially considering his lover's miserable condition.

Bowing his head to shield himself from the intense gusts he ran as fast as he could, trying not be disoriented by the crazy swirl of colours which surrounded him, nor by the wind's very spicy scent, and he wasn't surprised when he found himself in a large hall of wood and stone, heated by a huge fireplace and adorned with Christmas decorations: he had imagined at the outset that Toothiana would have brought him to North's Palace.

Focusing on the thought of his partner in agony, in order not to be overwhelmed neither by the forced visit, nor by the fear the boy might fall into a panic because of it, he looked quickly around to find the corridor which led to Santa Claus' personal workshop, but before he could spot it a deep, booming voice exclaimed: «Pitch! To what do I owe the pleasure of seeing you? It's been a long time since you visited my Palace! What are you carrying in your arms? You know I don't want your nasty beasts in my house!».

Turning abruptly towards his cheerful interlocutor the Boogeyman shouted: «This is not one of my Nightmares, fool, it's Jack, and he's injured! I need to medicate him, and I need to do it now!».

The master of the house startled at that revelation, clearly disoriented, but, as soon as the man recalled the coils of shadow to show his bundle, he nodded vigorously and urged him: «Come on, let's get him to the infirmary! Follow me!».

Pitch followed him without questioning, being careful not to overly toss his lover in order to spare him additional and unnecessary pain, and, realizing he was going into a wing normally unused, he sped up his pace, fearing he could take a wrong turn and lose precious time.
After a minute which, albeit fast, seemed to last for hours, the two came to a blind hallway, at the end of which there was a small and featureless door; opening it with a slap Northern hastened to move away from the access, to let his guests in, then he carefully closed it, to prevent the draughts of cold air, which sometimes blew in the corridors, penetrate and disrupt the wounded.

Hindered by the low lintel the Boogeyman had had to bow in order to pass it, advancing cautiously so that Jack's ankles couldn't hit the jamb and dragging his own feet on the floor to avoid stumbling in his robe; only few yards far from there he dared to raise his head and, although it was definitely unusual for him entering an unfamiliar place without first examine it and explore it, he went on, and he reacted in such an unexpected way he astonished even himself.

Normally, in fact, he would have allowed himself at least few seconds to gaze at the scenery, as he had done when he had found Toothiana's bedroom: it would have been entirely sensible, for him, fathoming the room with his eyes, lingering on the walls and the ceiling covered with spruce wood and the impressive stone fireplace on his right, but, in this moment, the only thing he could notice was the little cast iron cauldron next to it, already full of water, but still cold; it would have been a usual move, for him, staying enchanted in front of the shelves filled with dozens and dozens of small jars and feeling the irrepressible impulse to reach them and open them all, but, in this moment, the only thing he could pay attention to was that the plan was too smooth and hard to properly accommodate a patient.

«What should this table represent to me? A doctor's? Do not expect me to lay Jack on it: he's worn out enough, I need blankets to keep him comfortable! And what about those jars of healing herbs all covered in dust? You should take care of your pathetic infirmary and replace all the ingredients regularly, not let them rot! How will I manage to help Jack if the leaves will be too dry? And put the cauldron on the fire, I need hot water, not ice lollies!» he snapped, angry and anxious at the same time.

«Actually, using ice to prevent the formation of a bump or something worse wouldn't be a bad idea» exclaimed the fairy, suddenly disappearing from view.

Before Pitch could complain, however, she continued: «Anyway, calm down: North couldn't know that we would have arrive, nor that we would have needed the infirmary, and it'll take only few seconds to prepare everything! Here's the covers, let me settle them on the table, then I'm going to get some clean cloths and bandages. Do not worry about the healing herbs, North regularly checks them and we replaced the useless ones less than a week ago: the powder must be sawdust, am I wrong, North? The last time I came here the table hasn't been carved yet».

«You got it! I finished sculpting yesterday and, well, you know I'm not very good at housework: I cleaned the table and the floor, but I didn't noticed the dusty shelves» answered North, placing the pot on the fire and seizing a mortar.

Trying not to do pay too much attention to their silly chatter the Boogeyman hastened to lay his lover on the plane, now made soft by the wool blankets skilfully draped by Toothiana, then he piled them beneath his head to form a sort of pillow and he made sure it stood still, firmly blocked by the fluffy folds of the fabric.

When she handed a white cloth to him he didn't thank her and sharply grabbed it, quickly shaking it in the air to open it and starting to gently rub it on the boy's cheeks to clean the blood, but, to his
utmost disappointment, he noticed that this had already become dense and, rather than adhere to the cotton's texture, it smeared on the skin, making impossible to figure out if the epidermis was cut or just dirty.

«Damn it, the blood is already half coagulated: I need a bit of water to remove it! Hand me a scoopful of it, cold or hot may be!» he snapped.

Without hesitation the fairy jumped up, flying fast as a hummingbird to the hearth and grabbing a bowl along the way, then she dipped it into the cauldron and turned back, deftly avoiding Santa Claus' portly figure who was messing about jars and pestle and landing next to the table; after retrieving the pile of gauzes, which she had hastily abandoned next to Frost's thigh, she rummaged for a while, choosing two very fluffy and thick cloths, then she soaked them with water and carefully squeezed them, passing the first to the man and keeping the second for herself.

They worked hard side by side, bent on the wounded and accompanied by the mortar's rasping sound, the first trying to staunch the left cheekbone, the second the right one, the hair almost intertwined to the feathers in order to have the best possible view, and Pitch nearly burst into a hysterical laughter in seeing his trembling hand next to the fairy's firm one: what a great irony was that he, the King of Nightmares, shuddered with fear, while the Guardian, which he had so often tormented and regarded as a frivolous and pathetic victim, was able to stay calm. It was terribly wrong that hands so big and strong were fallen prey of tremors, unable to control the spasmodic contractions of the panic which had gripped them, incapable to give comfort and cures, but, although he was trying with all his might, the Boogeyman couldn't appease the chills: he had felt an unspeakable terror when he had known his sweet little snowflake had fallen, he had almost died when they had found him lying in the undergrowth, and now, after all that time spent waiting for a response which had never come, he was starting to be overwhelmed by anxiety.

Fingers thin as roses stems intertwined with their, brightening in their flesh pink against the grey skin which they fondly started to cuddle, and a soft voice whispered: «Look, Pitch: there are no cuts, except for the one on the forehead, nor broken bones. The situation is far less serious than we thought».

Not reassured at all by that awareness Pitch withdrew his hand and countered: «It's a serious cut: it's deep, open, and located on a very delicate point of the skull».

«Jack's head is as hard as a rock, he'll be fine soon» intervened North; then, going around the table to reach them and handing them two bowls, he added: «Here I infused sagebrush and rustyback, to create a disinfectant; here, instead, I mashed leaves and flowers of hypericum along with red oil, to help healing».

Throwing away the dirty rag he had used the Boogeyman grabbed a new one, plunged it in the first solution and gently rubbed it on the wound, passing several times to make sure to remove all the dirt and the moss which had spoilt it and lightly dabbing the flesh to cover it completely with disinfectant, but while he was working he heard the master of the house asking: «How did he get hurt?».

«He fell off the stairs» answered the man.

«Off the stairs? How could he injure himself like this? It seems he took a pretty hard blow!» commented North, incredulous.

«Indeed, he fell off the stairs, not down the stairs: he fell off from the flight to the ground» replied Pitch, frowning in order to concentrate better.

«But, since he fell from the flight, why didn't he use his staff to call the wind and glide towards the
ground?» insisted Santa Claus.

Irritated by the questions quick and, as if on purpose, well focused, the Boogeyman lied: «He didn't use the staff because he didn't have it with him».

«And why didn't he have the staff with him? Where had he left it?» asked again the other.

«He had left it to me, because he didn't need it» said the man with his teeth clenched.

«What do you mean with “he didn't nee...”».

«I don't know!» boomed Pitch.

Both the Guardians jumped back in fright, clearly amazed by his angry reaction, but the Boogeyman wasn't relieved by this: he felt himself trapped in that stuffy little room, so small, so low, so crammed with objects of any kind and no way out, except for the access door, and he clearly perceived his mind yielding and breaking up because of that situation. He couldn't stand staying in there, he would have never wanted to bring there Jack and he was sure the boy would have never wanted to get in there, too frightened by the idea that others might find the ongoing pregnancy, but he couldn't have done otherwise and he had adapted himself; at that point, however, he was certain he had endured far too much, and had no intention to let anybody push him on a barrel with curious, pressing questions: he had promised his little snowflake that he would have protected him, and so he was going to do.

«I don't know and I don't care» he continued, trying to be as trenchant as possible; «The only thing I care about is doing everything possible to make sure that Jack is fine and will recover, and if, in order to do it, it will be necessary to choke you I will not hesitate for a single moment! Your series of silly questions is useless and slanted, and I'm not going to tolerate it: it's distracting me, and this is the last thing I need right now».

Despite the harsh rebuke North didn't counter, nor gave sign he had got offended, and, after nodding, he turned away to retrieve a small spoon and clean bandages; once he had placed the objects on the table and realizing that he couldn't participate in the medication he suggested: «While you medicate the cut I could check out the rest: you said that Jack fell off from the stairs to the ground, he surely got other wounds».

«No!» cried the man, his voice almost cracked by panic at the thought that, while checking, the other couldn't notice Jack's belly.

«Pitch, are you okay?» asked Santa Claus, perplexed; «I am just trying to give a hand and speed the medication, we cannot all work on that cut, why don't you want me to check elsewhere?».

Become suddenly aware of the serious mistake he had done Pitch tergiversated: «No, you don't need to check: I've already looked at him before we came here and he's fine. Don't waste time elsewhere, I need you here: put one hand under Jack's nape and lift it gently, so I'll manage to bandage his head».

Convinced by the justification botched at the last the master of the house did what he had been asked, gently slipping his right hand under the boy's nape to lift it up and softly pushing the left on the top of his head, to prevent him from reclining it; the Boogeyman, instead, took a tablespoon full of hypericum's mixture and smeared it on the wound and, then, after allowing Toothiana to cover it with two thin gauze, he started to bandage it, using up his strength sparingly in order to make sure that this wasn't neither too tight nor too loose.

In that network of fingers, wrists and medicaments, which intertwined to each other to they point they almost got stuck, something moved and a faint groan emerged, reaching with difficulty the
«Jack!» exclaimed the three improvised nurses in unison.

«Ah... don't shout... my head...» muttered Frost in a faint voice.

«Forgive us, Jack» intervened the fairy; «We didn't mean to disturb you: we were just greatly worried about you. Don't strain yourself, okay? We don't want you to feel sick again. Stay relaxed and keep your eyes closed: we've almost finished your medication, then we'll let you rest».

Refraining himself from blowing all up to take his love in his arms, cuddle him and ask him how he felt, the man hastened to conclude his work, carefully wrapping the bandage around his forehead and securing it with a metal hook, then he made him lay again and, bending over him, he asked: «Can you hear me, Jack? Can you see me? How do you feel?».

The boy blinked few times, uttering a faint cry, then he answered: «Yes, now I can see you. Where are we? I don't remember this place».

«We are in North's infirmary» explained Pitch, stroking his cheek to reassure him; «When we found you you were unconscious and your face was completely covered in blood: we had no time to retrieve everything we needed to take care of you, so we came here. If you need anything, just ask, okay, Jack? Everything for you. And don't worry, we'll go away soon: I know that, at the beginning of winter, you suffer from the heat».

The boy, who had widened his eyes and started to gasp when he had realized where he was, seemed almost not to hear the reasons of this unexpected transfer and was about to open his mouth, but at the last sentence he nodded vigorously, catching immediately the truth behind the lie and showing to be ready to use it in order to get away as soon as possible.

Maybe realizing Jack's anxiety, or maybe just by chance, Toothiana came up to them and said: «Now I and North will leave alone for a while, okay? We have to wash cloths, clean the bowls and do other things. If you need help just call us: we will not be far away».

After cuffing the patient about the cheek the woman picked up all the cloths and bowls they had used, precariously stacked them and then walked away, calling North to ask for some information; this, in turn, immediately lent a hand, relieving her load and answering every question, then, waving his hand, he led her into the hall, closing the door carefully and disappearing from view.

«Did they go away? I can't hear well wrapped in these blankets, and turning my head to the right hurt» asked the boy.

«Yes, sweetie, they went away: you can relax now. Is turning your head in this way which hurts you? So don't strain yourself, let me move».

After settling better the blankets under his nape the Boogeyman walked around the table, so as to be at his partner's left side and spare him the pain to turn his head on the hurting area, then he began to stroke his hair and commented: «You're so stubborn, Jack: if only you had allowed me to accompany you I would have supported you, and you would have never slipped on the steps».

«I didn't slip» admitted Frost with a guilty look; «I was flying, but my staff betrayed me: as I was following the flight of stairs it suddenly lit up, it summoned a current which made me crash into the steps and then everything went black».

Upset by that statement the man replied: «Were you flying? Are you crazy? You've been complaining so much about your staff playing up and you didn't find anything better to do but using
it? I thought it was pretty clear that the child is interfering with your powers: you should have never tried to employ them!».

Pushing his hands on his mouth to hold back a scream the boy gasped, clearly struck by a sudden realization, then, with tears in his eyes, he exclaimed: «The child! Oh, Pitch, damn it, the child! I fainted before falling, I don't know how I landed, or if I bumped against something, what if I took a blow to the stomach? What if they got hurt? What if they died? What should I do now? Damn it!».

«Jack, Jack, do not panic, stop: do not panic, my sweetie, you're wounded and you're only risking to harm yourself more. Breathe slow, baby, slow, as I'm doing: do you feel my heart? It's calm, and even yours should be: breathe slow» intervened with a sweet tone Pitch, bringing the other's palm to his heart to make him feel his beat.

Initially Jack stirred, clinging so desperately to his rescuer's garment he threatened to tear it up and sink into the flesh below, but soon he was persuaded and, reassured by his serene gaze and his pampering, he calmed down, relaxing the contracted muscles and half closing the eyes.

Pleased with the positive reaction the Boogeyman rewarded him with delicate kisses on his fingers and wrist, then he went down to massage his chest and help him regulate his breath, and he took the opportunity to reflect: why had the boy seemed so worried about the child? Since he had discovered he was pregnant he had been upset by the awareness of having another being growing inside himself and, although he had never explicitly said he wanted to kill the creature, he had clearly disclosed he wanted to get rid of them: why, then, had he showed so much concern for their fate? Maybe he had begun to develop a maternal instinct towards them? Maybe he had started to care about them? Maybe he had never really wanted to hurt them? The man couldn't give a definite answer to those questions, but one thing he was certain about: if Frost was afraid he had the duty to reassure him in the best way possible, even without fully understanding the reasons of his distress. Checking costed nothing and, moreover, it was better making sure everything was alright: if the boy had suffered an internal injury or he was carrying in his belly a child now dead he would have not been able to survive for long.

«Good boy, you've been very good at returning calm: do you feel better now? Don't be anxious about the child: I just need to lift up your hoodie to check if there's something wrong. May I? Will you allow me?» asked Pitch, using all the kindness which belonged to him to talk about that delicate topic.

Jack hugged tightly his own chest, glancing at the door and whispering hesitantly: «And what if in the meantime someone come in?».

Addressing him a smile the Boogeyman patted his head and assured him: «No, Jack, don't worry: I haven't seen Yetis in this Palace's wing, nor Elves, and I think North and Toothiana will take a while to get back here. However, if they return earlier than expected, we will certainly have no difficulties hearing them: among his heavy footsteps, her wing's flutter and their constant chatter we would realize they're arriving many hours beforehand».

The boy laughed at the joke, finally revealing, albeit only for few seconds, the cheerful and playful soul which had always characterized him, then he moved his hands beside his own face, to expose his chest, and he whispered: «Okay, Pitch: I trust you. You can check my belly, but I want to see it, too».

«Of course, sweetie: cling to me» immediately indulged him the man.

Passing the right arm around his partner's shoulders he helped him to straighten his back, making sure to sit him up slowly, in order not to cause him dizziness, then he grabbed his hoodie's hem, lifting it together with the shirt and rolling it almost to the collarbones.
Observing his abdomen he heaved a sigh of relief: the small protuberance which interrupted it was still present, but it hadn't swollen up, nor moved, and the skin perfectly candid didn't show bruises or scratches.

«How is it?» demanded Frost, trying to tilt his head in order to see better; «Is it all right? It seems to me that it's the same as before».

Pitch dared to close the cupped hand on his belly, moving it slowly to stroke it, then he answered: «Yes, Jack, it's exactly the same as before, intact and as white as snow. Does it hurt you, by any chance? Do you feel twinges if I press a little?».

The boy curled his feet when he felt the touch, letting out a small groan of disappointment, then thought for a while and replied: «No, no pain: it's just a bit annoying, but it's always been like this, since it appeared».

«So it means that everything is alright: the child is fine, you don't have to worry» concluded the Boogeyman.

Eager to reward him for his calm and, at the same time, brave demeanor, he pulled down the hood with his nose and reached the little special spot under his ear, but, as soon as he placed a soft kiss on it, he clearly felt his muscles contracting under his lips and start to tremble.

Puzzled he raised his head and what he saw froze the blood in his veins: the door was wide open and on the threshold had appeared Bunnymund, his legs bent and his ears lowered in order not to hit the lintel and a look of pure astonishment on his muzzle.

They all stood still for several seconds, staring at each other, clearly too surprised to react, then the Pooka asked: «Ehm, did I...?».

Before he could complete the question, however, Jack let out a sobbing whine, scraping the blankets and trying to move away as far as possible from the new visitor; taken aback by that gesture and overwhelmed by the waves of fear emanating from his mind the man perceived him slipping away from his arms, and he felt a pang in his heart when he heard him tumbling sprawled on the floor: he had to do something to calm him and block him, or the panic would have induced him to harm himself again.

Using a soft and gentle voice he tried to tranquilise him with sweet words, urging him to sit there with him to talk and decide what to do together and hugging him to prevent him from escaping, but the boy had lost his reason: kicking and scratching he did everything to reject him, and, not succeeding in, he shouted: «I trusted you, I trusted you! You said nobody would have come in and I trusted you! You have betrayed me from the beginning, you brought me here on purpose, you wanted everyone to know! I hate you! Leave me, leave me!».

Ignoring the insults Pitch tightened his grip, forcing him to his knees and trying to block his head, fearing he could accidentally head butt the cupboard or the table's leg, but in doing so he passed his hand in front of his face, and Frost didn't hesitate to bite it.

Taken by surprise the Boogeyman cried out in pain, feeling those sharp, little teeth sinking ruthlessly into the sensitive junction between wrist and palm and the joint warping and creaking as it was being crushed, and he instinctively stretched his forearm to escape their reach. The boy, however, didn't loosen his grip, remaining firmly attached to the limb and allowing himself to be throw forward, and only when he fell to the ground he opened his mouth, leaving his victim and taking advantage of the momentum to slip away.
Ignoring the pangs caused by the bite the man lunged after him, moving above him to seize him with his body, but Jack preceded him, elbowing him on the sternum and giving him a kick dangerously close to the groin; grunting the offended collapsed on himself, allowing the other to gain ground, but, as soon as she saw him firmly dragging himself toward the flames he panicked and grabbed him by the ankle.

«Jack, no, stop, do not go towards the fire! I know you want to escape through the chimney, but you can't! You're weak, you're wounded, you don't even have your staff, you would never be able to go beyond the flames, and even if you managed to you'd die from suffocation! Please, think, Jack, listen to me!» he exhorted him, trying desperately to make him come to his senses.

In this chaos of kicks, strokes, scratches, hugs, insults and pleas he heard rushed footsteps and, turning towards the entrance, he saw the Big Four as a whole, piled on each other and intent to stare at them with their eyes wide opened.

Put through the mill Pitch decided to set his pride aside and, albeit with his eyes lowered, he cried: «Sandman, help me! Jack doesn't listen to me, you have to make him fall asleep or he'll harm himself!».

Hearing the call Sandman didn't hesitate a moment and, moving his hands, he summoned a globe of golden sand, which he promptly threw towards the designated victim; in his confused shaking, however, the boy managed to dodge it, being struck only glancingly and simply becoming drowsy, but not unconscious; taking advantage of his weariness the Boogeyman caught up with him and took him in his arms, immediately checking his face to make sure he didn't got hurt, then he left home to the Bringer of Dreams, allowing him to put his hands on his bandaged forehead and definitely plunge him into a deep sleep.

Heaving a sobbing sigh of relief the man let himself go, his chest shaken by the gasps of fear and fatigue, and he began to gently rock Frost, hiding his face against his neck in a childish attempt to stay close to him; before he could put himself together, however, Bunnymund demanded: «May I ask why Jack fell into a panic when he saw me!?».

Gritting his teeth in anger Pitch turned sharply and yelled: «It's all your fault! Learn how to knock, idiot, you're nothing but a beast!».

Offended the Pooka retorted: «Said the King of the Fairies, huh? My paws are too soft, they are not suitable to knock, and anyway I don't understand why I should have done it! Jack is my friend, I don't need to ask for a permission to see him».

«I've never heard in my life an excuse more pathetic than this! “My paws are too soft”... next time use the head to knock, that's pretty hard to beat on the wood, and also empty enough to resonate!».

«Never as hard as yours!» snapped the Easter Bunny, slamming the foot on the ground; «Anyway, you have not answered my question: why Jack fell into a panic when he saw me? What happened? I just caught him with his shirt lifted up, but obviously it's not the first time I see him bare-chested: his reaction makes no sense!».

Growling the Boogeyman leaned over mate, sheltering him from prying eyes and starting to drag him on the floor, but he heard Toothiana explaining: «The problem was not his chest, Bunnymund, but...».

«Not more words!» he yelled, feeling his head throbbing with pain for the strength he had shouted with; he waited few seconds, in order to let the uncomfortable sensation fade, then he narrowed his eyes and continued: «Not more words, fairy: open your mouth again and I swear that I'll slip into it
my shadows to suffocate you».

Not intimidated at all by the violent threat the fairy replied: «You'll solve nothing by threatening, Pitch, even if you killed all of us you'd not eliminate the main problem! You cannot hide the truth forever, sooner or later it would come to light, and that time has already arrived: talk to us, Pitch, let us help you».

«I don't need your pathetic help! I've always been alone, I never asked for a hand to anyone and I'm not going to do it now! Jack was fine as long as he was with me and he started to get anxious only when he saw you: if you hadn't got there none of this would have happened. He would have never wanted to come here, so now get out of my way: I'll bring him home» snapped the man, picking his love up in his arms and standing up.

«No» exclaimed the fairy, flying towards him to stop him; «Pitch, don't do anything crazy! Jack is not in the condition to go back to your lair: he's injured, exhausted, upset, he has been suffering for weeks, you can't hope he will recover only by sleeping. He needs medicines and treatments, how are you going to help him if he feels sick again? Think about him, I beg you: what he's asking for it's not what he needs. I know the idea of revealing his conditions upsets him, but you must not indulge his fears to keep him quiet: sooner or later he would have to pay the consequences».

Pitch turned abruptly toward his interlocutor, ready to yell venomous words at her and even to push her aside by force in order to get away, but her pleading and genuinely concerned look made him hesitate, and he was enough for him to lower his irises to understand that what she had said, albeit painful to admit, was true. His sweet snowflake was completely worn out, his skin pale and drawn, his eyes red and sunken, his breath panting and his muscles constantly shaken by tremors: it broke his heart just looking at him. Probably, if he had brought him in his lair, he would have been able to tide him over for few weeks, maybe even for few months, spoiling him with cuddles and attentions, making him sleep most of the time and picking up some healing herbs from the forest above, to prepare the strictly necessary medicines, but, although he adored taking care of him, he knew perfectly well that this was not a workable plan: Jack would have withered each day a little more, consumed by immobility and by the creature growing in his belly, and he could have done nothing to avoid it. He couldn't assist him and look for information about how to free him from the child at the same time, not alone, and not without having access to well-stocked libraries: he needed someone who could take a turn at his bedside and who could make ancient tomes available to him, and the Guardians were the only ones who corresponded to this description. Obviously Toothiana would have been more than enough to achieve this task, and in fact, at first, the man had turned only and exclusively to her, but now the others had seen too much to be kept in the dark about the situation: with his conniption Frost had blown up everything, drawing the attention on himself even before verifying if, indeed, they had been discovered, and the Boogeyman had neither the time, nor the energy to stifle their spontaneous curiosity and keep them out of it.

Trying not to show the immense pain he felt he tried to take a neutral expression, and, gently caressing his lover, he whispered: «Jack needs to rest in a comfortable and quiet place: our quarrel upset him, even if he didn't wake up, and I don't want this to happen again».

«Sure» immediately contented him the fairy; «You can bring him in your room: I and North had gone there precisely to prepare it for you to rest. Follow me: I'll show you the way».

Hugging better his little bundle in his arms Pitch followed the thoughtful interlocutor, keeping his eyes on her tails to avoid the presents', and he didn't raise his head, not even when he passed them; without talking he heeled her along the maze of corridors, not complaining about the length of the path, nor ever asking how far their destination was, and when he finally saw her entering a door he did the same, coming into a warm room. It took him only few seconds to recognize the bedroom
where, months ago, he had been hosted during his convalescence, but he didn't even glance at it: he had other things to do at the moment than digging up past recollection and get lost in bittersweet memories, and he was too psychologically worn out to deal with other emotions.

Advancing on tiptoe he reached the bed, rested Jack there and, after settling him in a comfortable position, he took off his robe and draped it on his body like a blanket; he could have simply used the sheets, of course, but these would have surely got dirty with the soil and the moss still stuck in blue hoodie's folds, and, above all, they would have had a smell as nice as insignificant: in this moment the boy desperately needed to be reassured in every way, and the man, well aware of the remarkable calming effect that his scent had on the other, was willing to take advantage of every ace up his sleeves in order to see him turn serene again.

While he lingered to comb with his fingers the silvery strands perpetually ruffled a little hand rested on his shoulder, squeezing it gently, and a gentle voice whispered: «Come, Pitch: let's talk in another room. Don't worry about Jack: Phil will be here to watch over him, while another Yeti will bring some ice, in order not to let the wound swell up and run to us in case of need».

Only partially reassured by the presence of the two hairy giants Pitch felt the strong temptation to leave one of his servants to guard Frost, but in the end he refrained himself: Voluptas would have been perfect to accomplish that task, but it was far too massive for that room, while any other small Nightmare would have just ended up to mess up everything.

Being content with the two Yeti he stood up, deftly recreated his robe and nodded, as if to show he was ready, then he followed the Guardians in the hallway, paying attention to the path in order to remember it; just when he was about to blurt out and halt the small group to make it turn and choose a more accessible place, however, North stopped, fumbled for few seconds with a decorated door's lock and then opened it, inviting everybody to enter.

Too agitated and worried to able to notice the stained glass windows, the carved columns, the inlaid table and any detail in this beautiful and bright living room, the Boogeyman sped up his pace, reaching a chair, but he didn't sit and began, instead, to impatiently stamp his foot.

After he had carefully closed the door and sat at the head of the table North asked: «Well, now that Jack is safe and we are all quiet, may I know what's going on? I got a fright when I saw you two fight in front of the fireplace!».

«Jack is expecting a child» sharply answered the man, looking elsewhere.

As he expected the audience reacted with astonished exclamations, expressions of disbelief and puzzled comments, and he didn't intervene, allowing each one to express themselves without interrupting or countering; when the chatter faded, however, he stated: «Although it may seem absurd I told you the truth: Jack is expecting a child».

«But it makes no sense, Jack cannot conceive, he's a male!» snapped Bunnymund.

«No, really, you don't say?» scoffed Pitch; «In all these months I haven't realize he was a male!».

Hearing him teasing him the Pooka threateningly pricked up his ears, but Santa Claus stopped him and pointed out: «Pitch, Bunnymund's observation is sensible: Jack is a male, he cannot conceive. How can he expect a baby?».

Rolling his eyes the Boogeyman explained: «He told me he had a dream about it, but very confused and rambling, to the point that I can't even be sure if it really played a role in this matter, so, basically, I don't know how he could get pregnant». 
«Probably solely and exclusively because of you» commented the Easter Bunny.

«Oh, yes, sure, I always wanted to play with Jack's body to the point to deform it and then gain a screaming, little child to deal with, really, I don't know how I managed to refrain myself until now, considering how much I craved to find myself in this situation!» cried the man, gesticulating to give more emphasis to his speech.

«I doubt you like the baby's part, but you surely like to play with Jack's body: If only you had kept it in your pants you would have never found yourself in this situation!» replied Bunnymund.

A red veil fell over Pitch's eyes and a piercing buzz filled his ears, impeding him both to see and to hear the presents' reactions: he would have never expected such an affront from the Guardian. Blinded by anger to the point he was barely able to move he whispered: «Don't you dare...».

«But I dare, look at the conditions you have reduced him to! Since he joined you Jack has always suffered!» stubbornly countered the Pooka.

«Don't you dare!» boomed the Boogeyman, slamming a fist on the table with such energy he cracked it and spread dark tentacles and black sand all over it; «I know better than you his miserable conditions! Do you think I enjoy it? That I see Jack as an extravagant pet? That I consider him a toy in my hands, to be used as long as I feel like and left forgotten in a corner for the rest of the time? You're pathetic! Pathetic and envious! Being alone eats you, am I wrong? The company of your ridiculous eggs is not enough to fill your warren with joy, right? You're missing a mate, you're missing someone to take care of and taking care of you, you suffer when, in the evening, you go to sleep and you curl up on yourself in order to try to fill the emptiness inside you, it is not so? Is it not so!? You have nothing of this, nothing, and you'll never have, but I, that I finally won, I am not going to throw it away! I would do anything for Jack, I would sell my soul, I would cede my powers, I would give my life just in order to make him feel good, and if I knew that my presence hurts him I would not hesitate a moment to disappear forever from his sight!».

«Pitch, try to...» started Toothiana with a gentle tone.

«“Try to” what?» shouted the man, now definitely out of himself; «“Try not to pay attention to the stupid things we’re saying”, perhaps? You are pathetic, and I will not tolerate this conversation a second longer!».

Too angry even to think he turned, letting the magic sand flow freely along his limbs in sinuous tentacles, then he hurled it against the door, unhinging him and immediately leaping into the hallway to return to his love.

As soon as Pitch came out of the dining room Toothiana, who had gave up stopping him, turned towards Bunnymund, and the other Guardians did the same; feeling under scrutiny the bunny blurted out: «Do not look at me that way, I just expressed aloud what we all think».

«Speak for yourself!» retorted North, while Sandman shook his head sadly.

Taken aback the Pooka lowered his ear, but then he insisted: «Well, it doesn't matter whether you think it or not, because it's the truth anyway! If only he had hold himself back nothing would have happened».

«But you cannot absolutely know this!» exclaimed the fairy.

«For that matter you can't, too!» remarked the Easter Bunny.
«It's true, I cannot be certain, but I have an idea about it» replied the woman; she waited few seconds, to make sure he had the attention of all the presents, then she continued: «I talked with Pitch for long, and enough with Jack, and I think I understood what really happened. I'm fairly sure that the dream is the key, and I'm absolutely certain that Jack is lying about it: he said hastily that he had confused visions and that he remembers little or nothing about them, but he didn't manage to look at me in the eyes as he talked, and, behind his aggressive attitude, he seemed really upset. This conception cannot be happened by chance: you need considerable powers and abilities to make a male abdomen suitable to grow a child, and I see no reason to strive so much if not to achieve a goal. Whoever intervened to prepare Jack wanted him to get pregnant and wants the child to be born and even if Pitch had made a vow of eternal chastity he would have not managed to spare him this destiny».

«Are you insinuating that someone else is involved? But who could be? And then, at this point, the child would be his, right?» asked Santa Claus.

«No, no, I'm sure that Pitch is the father» stated Toothiana.

She allowed herself a moment to think back to what the man had told her about the intercourse they had had in early October and to rework some of the thoughts she had elaborated in the meantime, but eventually she shook her head and said: «I will not explain now what makes me think this: some details are private and I'm not going to disclose them, while others are the result of some reasonings I did, but I'd rather make sure of few supposition before talking about them. Now, I need to act alone, so, no offence, but I don't want you to stand in my way: decide by yourself if you want to wait here, move to another room or even leave the Palace, the important thing is that you don't show up and stay away from Jack's room, understood? Especially you, Bunnymund! Sandy, from you I'd need a different favour: may you follow Pitch? I'll make him go into my realm to retrieve Jack's staff, and I fear that I will need your help when he comes back».

Ignoring Bunnymund's snorts and complaints she looked at the two other Guardians, waiting for an answer, and when she saw them nodding she concluded: «Well, thank you. Have a little patience: soon we will solve this situation. Now I'll go into Jack's room: I'll see you later».

Without further ado she soared, flying over the table and reaching the unhinged door, then, after glancing at the deep cracks and dents which Pitch had imprinted in the wood, she preened her feathers and rushed; she travelled fast through Palace's maze of corridors, deftly dodging the furniture and the walking Yetis, therefore, found the room she'd been looking for, she landed silently and went inside.

As expected the two hairy giants she had left to guard the wounded were gone and the only creatures present were the boy, lying on the bed and still asleep, and Pitch, sitting at his side, intent to observe him and hold a rag full of ice on his forehead, his body completely enveloped by dark tentacles in eternal motion.

Advancing cautiously beside him she entered his field of view, then she stared into his eyes, which had become almost completely black, and called: «Pitch?».

«What do you want from me?» he flatly asked.

Toothiana took a deep breath, then, trying to be as gentle as she could, she said: «You're completely wrapped in shadows and black sand, Pitch, and from your robe's edges are starting to rise creatures that I've never seen before: I'm sure that you don't want to hurt Jack, but if you don't control yourself it'll happen soon».

Struck by that revelation the Boogeyman jumped back, withdrawing his hand and holding his arms
close to the torso to hold back the magic sand, then, staring at his love, he whispered: «Don't be silly, I would never hurt him».

«Pitch, I'm not doubting your will, but your self-control» insisted the fairy; «You're full of rage right now, and you're well aware of it, so why should you risk? I fully understand the reasons of your anger and find more than normal that you cannot calm down in few seconds: you need time to calm down and process everything. Why don't you go out for a while? Look at Jack, he's already beginning to stir in his sleep, if you stayed here overthinking soon he'd have nightmares, and you don't want this to happen, right? What about going in my realm to retrieve his staff? It's a journey neither long, nor short, ideal for you to relax without getting too far away from him, and then you'd kill two birds with one stone: you'd vent and bring back to him something he needs».

«But I don't want to leave him alone» countered the man, his eyes already full of concern.

«But he won't be alone, Pitch» promptly reassured him the woman; «I'll be here to take care of him: I promise you that I'll do anything necessary to make him feel good. Don't worry, the others are gone away and I'll not let anyone in, and, if it makes you feel more comfortable, you can leave here Voluptas: I've seen that she's very thoughtful, I'm sure she will help me. Do not fear, Pitch: Jack is sleeping, he won't even notice your absence and, when he awakes, he'll be happy to see you brought back his staff».

Pitch hesitated for a moment, clearly frightened by the idea of abandoning the other without warning him and when he was in need, but in the end he stood up and, after hastily summoning Voluptas, he strided toward the door, murmuring: «I'll be back in no time».

«Take all the time you need, Pitch» replied Toothiana.

Keeping her ears open she followed Boogeyman's movements, listening to his light footsteps reaching the end of the corridor, then to the neighs, emitted by the Pureblood he would have surely ridden, echoing in the main hall, and when she heard no more sounds she dejectedly sighed and got ready to awaken Frost.

New amazing fanart by Vampira86!


And new amazing fanart by HeilyNeko!

http://it.tinypic.com/view.php?pic=2rw9szr&s=8#.U4w3lPl_umt
As always feel free to leave me a comment, if you want to: I appreciate them a lot. Well, well, I already translated chapter 9 and I'm about to start chapter 10, so what about publishing on Friday, and this time for real? Yes. Yes, I'll publish it on Friday. My friend told me she will end the chapter in time, and I hope she'll manage to. See you soon, and have a nice evening. Or afternoon. Or morning. Or whatever.
Chapter 8

Chapter Notes

As I wrote on tumblr my friend needed more time. I took a decision about when publishing this translation, and I'll describe it in the conclusion

See the end of the chapter for more notes

WE DON'T HAVE TO BE ALONE – CHAPTER 8

Jack closed his eyelids with a sigh and settled on his lover's lap in a better way, looking for the perfect position to enjoy at its best the magic moment. He was in a room, maybe made of wood, maybe of stone, lit by a large fire, perfectly sunk in silence, maybe because it was little, maybe because it was so large to prevent every echo from reaching his ears; indeed, about that room which, however, seemed to have something familiar, he was able to grasp little or nothing, his sight clouded by tiredness and strange grains of sand floating in the air, but he didn't care that much about it: the important thing was having Pitch there with him, and the smell of moss and foxglove which surrounded him was an evidence more than sufficient of this for him.

Groaning he curled up on himself, letting out a weak yawn while the Boogeyman sweetly cradled him, and he rewarded his warm grip, more enveloping than ever, with gentle kisses on his wrist. After a while, he sensed him leaning down on him, whispering gently: «Jack...».

The voice which had spoken was warm and deep, as usual, but at the same time unexpectedly drowsy and echoing; giving not that much importance to this detail, the boy stirred a bit, complaining weakly and trying to hide his face, but what now seemed undoubtedly a female accent insisted. «Jack... Jack, you have to wake up... Jack, wake up, it's time...».

Too annoyed to keep on sleeping, Frost woke up, slowly emerging from the dream's land, then, blinking, he asked, confused: «Pitch? Where are we?».

A gentle hand stroked his hair, leaving him all the time he needed to pull himself together, then Toothiana came into his sight, answering: «It's Tooth, Jack, not Pitch: I'm sorry. He went back to my Palace to retrieve your staff, while we are in your room, at North's Palace».

At that answer the boy's eyes widened and he started to tremble, fighting against the blanket wrapping him to look around, but the fairy immediately intervened: «No, Jack, don't panic: there's no one here with us. Sandy is out to work, North and Bunnymund are together on some business and all the Yetis are busy in the workshop: there's no one within feet and feet, and, above all, no one will come to bother us. You're safe here: you can trust me».

Bending his arms in the attempt to free himself from the fabric which trapped him, Jack recognised almost immediately Pitch's robe and, feeling betrayed for the second time, he shouted: «No, I'm not
safe! Damn you, why did you bring me here? I trusted you, you both knew I didn't want the others to know about this and I thought you would have helped me! I trusted you and you betrayed me!».

«Jack, no, we didn't betray you!» exclaimed the woman, moving closer to comfort him; «We didn't bring you here out of mere malice, but of sheer necessity. When we found you in the undergrowth you were unconscious, you didn't answer and your face was covered with blood: you were so in an awful state that we feared the worst. We were scared to death and we didn't have anything useful to medicate you, so I decided to bring you here: as you can see, North and I had fitted out an infirmary well stocked, in which we took only few seconds to find everything we needed to make you feel better. There was no other way, Jack, we couldn't risk you received permanent damages just in order to prevent anyone to see you and, anyway, I can assure you we didn't let anyone find you out: as long as we stayed with you, we kept North's attention away from your belly. I don't exactly know what happened next, because, when I arrived, you were already trying to run away and I haven't had the chance to talk to Bunny yet, but, as far as I understood, I suppose that he caught you with your hoodie lifted up, isn't it? Well, Jack, I'm sorry to say it, but, from the way he reacted after, it's probable that he hadn't even noticed a thing: it was your panic attack which made him suspicious, not your belly. However, now, don't get yourself down: I didn't tell you this to make you feel guilty, but to make you understand that, in order to solve this thing, it's necessary to keep calm; otherwise any problem, no matter how little it is, can degenerate into something out of control. Don't worry about the others, for now: they reacted like me, they're ready to help you and they won't judge you. You couldn't have hidden your pregnancy for long, and, anyway, as I said, they're not here. Let's not talk about them now: let's talk about you. I need to speak with you and, above all, I need you to speak with me: I know you lied about the dream. It wasn't as confused as you told us, wasn't it?».

At that focused question the boy startled and he sharply replied: «No, it was confused and I remember little or nothing at all about it».

Toothiana hesitated for a moment, as if she was reluctant to insist, but then she raised her head and repeated: «No, Jack. That's not true. Enough with the lies: tell me the truth. You remember it pretty well, don't you? Was there someone with you?».

Feeling urged Frost denied and turned his head, trying to elude that woman too keen, but soon she took his face between her hands and, staring at him with resolute irises, she insisted: «Denying is useless, Jack: I know you're lying. There was someone with you, right? Was the Man in the Moon? Was it him, Jack? Was it him the person you met?».

As soon as he heard that name he tensed, fighting the memories which were violently emerging inside him, then he dodged her pupils, staring intently at the corner of the ceiling and muttering: «No, I said no...».

«Jack, don't lie to yourself, hiding the truth won't make it disappear» kept saying the fairy, trying to force him to turn.

«Please, stop, leave me alone, I don't want to talk about it...» whispered Jack in a feeble voice, struggling harder and harder to stay focused.

«Jack, it's important: tell me if it was him, you can just say “yes” or “no”!».

« Enough! »

The boy startled at that cry so loud and so full of despair: he hadn't even noticed he himself had shouted it, too overwhelmed by those incessant questions, and he had unconsciously let it escape from his lips, looking for a deliverance which, yet, didn't come. Instead of giving him relief, that imperious and almost brutal command left him empty, completely deprived of any will and defence,
and all the fears that, until this moment, in a way or another, he had been able to keep at bay, attacked him at the same time and from every side, making him shiver uncontrollably and cutting his breath off.

Realizing his discomfort, the woman intervened, ripping off the robe in which Jack had trapped himself and stroking his hair and his cheeks in the attempt to calm him down, then she whispered: «Calm down, Jack, calm down: you're safe now. You're in a well protected Palace, surrounded by strong Yetis and friends willing to give their own life to protect you: you have nothing to fear about. No, no, Jack, don't do like this, don't arch your back: you're hurting yourself. Breathe, Jack, breathe, slowly, like I do...».

Clawing the sheets under him, Frost let out a harsh sob, arching even more his back, as if he wanted to leave that body which he didn't feel like his any more and which was more and more victim of awful sensations, but, eventually, numbed by the lack of oxygen, he had to gave up and lay down again: docile as a lamb he breathed out, helped by his friend who pressed her hand at the base of his sternum to make him exhale all the air he had collected, then he let her settle his arms and neck in the best position she saw fit and cuddle him.

While he tried in vain to breathe he heard her keep on talking, but, instead of being comforted by her sweet words, very similar to the ones uttered by Pitch, he felt more and more upset: what was reassuring for her, in fact, took another meaning for him. “You're safe now, Jack” she tried to convince him, but he had never felt so in danger in his all life; “No one can come in here, Jack” she repeated, but he however saw two black eyes staring at him; “I'm here with you, Jack” she murmured, but the problem was the second and disturbing presence he sensed; “Don't keep your muscle tense, Jack” she exhorted him, but the memory of sticky hands sliding on his skin prevented him from stopping quivering; “Breathe slowly, Jack” she requested, but he didn't want to inhale that warm and nauseating breathe which had almost suffocated him; “There's nothing to be afraid of, Jack” she comforted him, but fear was the only thing he could feel; “Don't do like that, Jack, you're hurting yourself” she scolded him, but he couldn't imagine a worse pain than the one he was already experiencing.

Overwhelmed by the memories of that encounter so long desired and, yet, so easily degenerated, the boy gave up and didn't stop the tears which had wet his eyes, letting them roll down his cheeks and, from there, in his hair, and even though this, slipping through his ears, started to tickle him, he didn't laugh: he felt too sad to indulge a laughter.

He cried silently for some minutes, his thorax occasionally shaken by a sob and his eyes blank, unable to move; eventually, the little outburst helped him to relax and, albeit in a feeble voice, he managed to whisper: «Yes: it was the Man in the Moon».

Toothiana, who hadn't stop even for a second to assist him during his violent crisis, interrupted the massage to his chest and, squeezing his shoulder as if to praise him and support him, she said: «Good, Jack, you've been very good at telling me this: I knew he had a hand in all this. Now, we should think about...».

«He brought me to the Moon and he showed me his Globe» went on Jack, his voice dull and his look vacant while he talked over the fairy, who promptly fell silent; «It was full of coloured lights, each for one of us, but they kept turning off and those which were still on flashed. He said we are dying, that the world needs a new Guardian and that he had called me for that purpose. He tied me up, he slapped me...».

«What?!» exclaimed the woman, his eyes widened in surprise.

Ignoring her question, the boy frowned, trying desperately to focus on that little corner of the ceiling
which had now become all his world, then he continued: «He slapped me again to stun me, then he lifted my hoodie and he had started to go down and he touched my abdomen and... and...».

Without further ado, Toothiana threw her arms around his neck, holding him tightly and starting to sweetly rock him, then she murmured: «Oh, Jack, I'm sorry, I'm so sorry! I knew he had cast you a spell against your will, but I though he had availed himself of a deceit, not of such a brutality! I'm sorry, I've been so tactless before, I had assumed you felt angry for the deception and ashamed of confessing you've been tricked: I would have never imagined it went like this».

Sobbing, Frost tried to hold back the tears and stammered: «I was so confused, I've wanted to meet the Man in the Moon for such a long time and I didn't think he was so cruel, I tried to defend myself, but it was useless, and then I felt hot and when I looked down I had the belly and I felt so confused, I didn't understand why, why that, why me...».

Supporting his chest like he was a baby, the fairy whispered: «I'm so sorry, Jack, he has been so cruel and evil for no reason at all. Vent, vent as much as you want: you have all the rights to do so».

With a gasp more acute than the others, the boy clung to his friend, managing with the little lucidity left in him not to scratch her wings, and he took refuge against her shoulder, seeking comfort in those soft feathers whose colours made a sharp contrast with his mood.

While he was still fighting with the memory of that pudgy hand digging in his abdomen, he felt the woman going down to caress exactly that spot, and, tensing, he cried out with a voice broken from pain: «No, not there!».

Wriggling, he freed his right arm and he violently slammed it down, well determined to put an end to that inappropriate intrusion, but, as soon as he hit what he supposed was her forearm, he felt it bigger than normal, made of a strange sandy consistency, and, above all, impossible to remove.

Moving away from the collarbone he had been leaning his forehead on, Jack lowered his eyes and found in front of himself Voluptas, tenderly bowed over him and intent to lick his belly, with the same caring and protective attitude with which it had took care of him the last week, when he had snuck into that rave party, hiding involuntarily a symptom of his pregnancy which, otherwise, would have been clearer.

Moved by the unexpected assistance, the boy sighed and didn't try any longer to ward off the animal, and instead he twisted a little his torso to give it more space, allowing it to slightly lift his hoodie and brush his bare skin; as a reward for the cuddles he had received, he began to caress its forehead, in that space between its eyes that he knew it was particularly sensible for the horse, and, a few moments later, he heard Toothiana murmuring: «Are you happier now that Voluptas is here next to you? Pitch left her here to watch over you: she never took her eyes off you even for a minute, and I think she approached you only now to let you speak. She's a very intelligent creature. I'm sure she'll stay beside you when you'll talk to Pitch».

In hearing her last sentence, Frost felt the blood freezing in his veins and, trying to maintain a quiet voice and a calm attitude despite the cold sweat already rolling down his spine, he asked: «Talking to Pitch? About what?».

«About the dream, of course» answered the fairy.

At that obvious statement the boy panicked, new fears piling on the old ones while he struggled to deal with both of them, and, pretending nonchalance, he commented: «I don't see the point in telling him: something like this could just get him angry. It's not a detail that will help us to find a solution, so it's useless revealing it».
The woman slightly withdrew from the boy, just enough to be able to stare at him while she continued to hold him in her arms, and she exclaimed: «Jack, you're kidding, right? Does it seem like nothing for you? A simple “detail”? It's a capital information, he has to know! We both know he'll get angry, but it's not a good reason to hide the truth from him».

Shivering just at the thought of what Pitch might have done at the news, Jack withdrew from his friend and, backing slowly, he insisted: «Tooth, it's not true, it's not a capital information: it's just a detail. Now that I'm fine, we should go back to your Palace and continue the research: better not losing time, right?».

With a serious expression, Toothiana stated: «Jack Frost, you know well that it's not just a detail. It would be better if you yourself tell him, but, if you don't feel like, I'll do it».

Taken aback by what sounded with no doubt like a threat, the boy gasped and, taking her hands in his, he begged: «No! No, please, don't! Please, I don't want to be alone, please...».

«Jack, what are you talking about? What does it mean “I don't want to be alone”?» interrupted him the fairy, grabbing him by the shoulders.

Frost hesitated for a moment, so tempted to confess that huge fear it had haunted him since the encounter with the Man in the Moon and, for a split second, relying on the familiar intimacy he had with his friend, he was about to do it, but in the end he gave up: he felt too much ashamed of confessing such a thing and, considering how evident it was, he was clear that the woman already knew it and was just ignoring it.

Now, with the mind of a hunted prey, the boy exhaled a groan, looking around in order to spot all the possible ways of escape, then, chosen the window at his right, he gave a hard push at the improvised nurse and screamed: «Get off me! I'll never tell him!».

He exulted with an insane smile in the moment in which he realized he had thrown the fairy off the bed, eased by the effect of surprise and her tiny figure, and he almost laughed when, with a kick, he finally manage to free himself from Pitch's robe, but soon that moment of sick joy ended. As soon as he turned towards the window, his sight went blurry and his ears began to buzz, while a severe nausea overwhelmed him, forcing him to bend over for the pain; groping in the darkness Jack gripped the sheets, trying desperately not to throw up all over them, while something or someone kept crawling on his spine and along his neck; he strenuously endured the first, intense retchings, managing to keep under control his stomach ruined by the continuous regurgitations, but in the end, exhausted, he had to give up.

An acrid, too familiar taste filled his mouth, arousing in him revulsion for himself and his miserable condition, and he clearly felt the acids rolling down his lips on the mattress, soiling the blankets newly washed which had been settled for him and making him feel even more guilty. He let himself be lift like a puppet, sitting sprawled on the sheets with his back against a pillow curiously pointy and his cheek against a strange shivering support, then, now overwhelmed, he whispered in tears: «I'm scared», and he fainted.

«Where the hell did that stupid staff go?» swore Pitch, clenching his hand like claws and opening his arms to better let out all his anger.

Remembering the suggestions Jack had given him, he had exploited the upper winds to move, spurring the Pureblood he was riding at full speed and managing to reach Toothiana's Palace in few minutes, but the advantage he had earned had soon been nullified as the research had gone on: he
had looked around far and wide, scouring the undergrowth for yards and yards, climbing down the surrounding caves and checking every inch of the little lake's surface at the feet of the rocks, but even after a long and endless quarter hour he hadn't found anything yet.

Exasperated he kicked a small fern, instantly uprooting it and throwing it in the forest, and he seriously considered the idea of tearing off the entire underbrush in order to locate the stick bringer of frost, but in the end he refrained himself: acting like a brute would have not been appropriate for him, nor, least of all, useful for the purposes of the hunt.

Realizing that the darkness was taking control over him again he took a deep breath, wiping away with a slap the eerie creatures which were rising from the edges of his robe and composing himself, then he rested his chin between thumb and forefinger and began to reflect: where could that damn staff have ended up? It was not animated, so it could not be flown somewhere. Maybe it had sunk into a hidden crack in the soil? Impossible: Pitch had checked carefully every single inch of that land, not missing even those fissures too small to comfortably accommodate a rod of that size, and he had also taken care to go far away from the building, exploring areas where it was almost physically impossible the object had fallen. Maybe it had slipped into the water and the current had dragged it away? Improbable: the pool he had spotted was quite large, but clearly closed, and if it really had a connection to a larger system that would have it on the bottom, far too deep to suck the wood in. Maybe it was still on the platform? Plausible: actually the Boogeyman didn't remember he had noticed it as he was running behind Baby Tooth, but at that moment he had had other things to think and care about, and it was possible he had missed such a detail.

Dissolving himself into a stream of fine sand he flew toward upwards, crawling along a rock wall and from there on the tiles which decorated the Palace's surface, then he reached the main ledge and he rematerialized. It took him few seconds to realize that the staff was not there: the place was bright and perfectly clear, and no matt objects interrupted that glittering expanse of tesseras of thousand colours; this, however, didn't discourage him: Jack had explicitly told him he had fallen while he was flying over the stairs, so it was unlikely that the stick had stood balanced on the steps. Approaching the flight in question he knelt, placing his hands on the edge to lean down, then, shading his eyes from the sun with a tentacle of darkness, he strained his eyes.

He remained in that uncomfortable and ridiculous position for several minutes, trying to ignore both the giggles from some hilarious fairies and the chirping questions from others, more caring and concerned; unfortunately for him he didn't manage to locate the object of his desire, but, in the end, he spotted a detail he hadn't noticed before. At first, in fact, he had assumed that all the slender columns, much like tendrils, supporting the chests' storages and the platforms were born from the soil and grew upwards just like a bean's stem; looking better, instead, he realized that some of them bent, firmly heading towards the mountains' sides and sinking in the ravines.

Wrinkling his nose suspiciously Pitch dared to advance a little, bending his neck and back to look more closely at the pillar immediately below; he followed the coils with his irises as far as he could, struggling not to get lost in that tangle of gold and small feathered helpers; finally, confused by the landscape, but sure to have guessed what had happened, he turned into a shadow and threw himself into the void.

Without any hesitation he hastened to go down the column, twisting around it to dodge the flying assistants and rapidly shifting along the spirals, then he plunged under an arch, and, in the niche in which the pillar sunk, he found the yearned staff.

With a snort half incredulous and half annoyed he grabbed it, a sarcastic grin on his face in front of the unfortunate and absurd reality: the wood, falling, had hooked himself to the tubular structure, slipping along it as if it were a rail and so ending up in a place where no one would have ever
thought to seek it.

Refraining from yelling complaints and curses the Boogeyman turned and snapped his fingers to summon a Pureblood and he jumped into the saddle, landing heavily to make it neigh and clear out the sky from the twittering fairies and immediately kicking it to spur it at full gallop.

Less than two minutes later Pitch violently yanked the Pureblood's reins, ignoring its pained neighs and drifting downward, then, without slowing it down, he made it plunge into the round opening on the roof of North's Palace, skilfully guiding him around the Globe and dismounting airborne. As soon as he put his foot on the ground he strode along the hall, not deigning to look neither at the Yetis, nor at his own Nightmare, which, now free, had began to spread terror among the present Elves; threatening eyes glared at him and loud curses were addressed to him, but Santa's helpers didn't try to stop him, nor to hinder him, probably thinking that that aggressive attitude was due to his Boogeyman's nature: what they didn't know, actually, was that all that furious rush was caused by something else.

Ever since he had seen the half-timbered building peeping through the snowy mountains the man had perceived a wave of fear emanating from it, intense, creeping, acute, and yet incredibly dense, but, above all, terribly familiar: he had felt it pervading his limbs like an energizing, but, at the same time, stinging balm, and filling his nostrils with a sweet perfume of flowers.

Speeding up his pace he entered the hallway towards which he was heading, quivering with anxiety and guilt, then he reached the door he was looking for, flung it open and burst into the room without announcing himself, and when he did it he stopped, transfixed by the vision standing in front of him.

Jack, his little, sweet snowflake, was awake, abandoned on a pillow hastily placed against the headboard and attended from both sides by Voluptas and Toothiana, and he was in tears, his eyes widened, but blind, and his mouth opened in a vain attempt to breathe. As soon as he saw his lover coming in, instead of cheering, he seemed to panic even more, flattening himself against the pillow and staring at him as a hunted prey looks at its predator, and Pitch, who was now at a loss, asked: «What's going on here?».

The fairy, who, too busy helping the boy, hadn't noticed the newcomer, turned and answered: «Jack is not feeling good: he's had another panic attack and nausea. Give him time to recover, then we'll talk».

Hiding the pain that this news caused him behind a resolute expression the Boogeyman stepped forward and ordered: «Stand aside: I'll take care of him».

Even if he had barely moved he saw Frost wincing and clinging to the woman's shoulder with a pleading look, shaking his head and wetting her feathers with the drops trickling down his cheeks, and the Guardian, caressing his head, said: «Pitch, I beg you: wait just a few minutes. Don't you see that Jack is upset? Give him time to recover and then we'll talk».

Without obeying her request the man exclaimed: «What do you mean with “wait just a few minutes”? Do you think I'll stay here watching you while he suffers? Not even in your wildest dreams! I've been taking care of him ever since I met him and I will continue to do so, so go away! Leave him to me».

Despite the resentment he felt since he had been left aside and the growing anxiety for that situation absolutely incomprehensible, Pitch had made sure to moderate the tone of his voice and choose his words wisely: he had not shouted, but simply blurted out, and, although it was natural for him
continuously affirming that Jack belonged to him, he had omitted that sentence so possessive, focusing more on reiterating the sense of responsibility he felt towards him.

All these precautions, however, were useless: the guy didn't change his terrified expression, nor his fearful attitude, and the improvised nurse didn't move away, slowly shaking his head as if to beg him not to insist.

For a moment the Boogeyman, dumbfounded, slowed almost to a stop: why, why nothing of what he was doing gave the desired effect? Where was he going wrong? He was sure, he had maintained his normal behaviour, showing to be rather more loving and expansive than usual, so why on earth had he achieved such a disappointing result? No, he couldn't have made any mistake: an external element should have intervened to disturb the balance of their relationship, and the only way to find out what had happened and remedy was talking with Frost.

Resolute in his intention he stepped forward again, but Toothiana, straightening her back, stated: «It was the Man In The Moon who did all this: he's the one who caused Jack's pregnancy».

As soon as Guardian of the Guardians' name was pronounced the boy let out a high-pitched and almost sobbing whine, starting to tremble and to painfully crawl away from the woman, and the man instinctively commented: «You must feel really hard pushed to come out with such a statement. Do I have to consider this as the last, failed attempt to stop for any reason?».

«No, Pitch» replied the fairy; «It's the truth: the Man In The Moon caused all this. He brought Jack in his Palace, he talk to him to entice him, then the immobilized him and cast a spell to his belly against his will to make him pregnant: Jack himself confessed it to me a while ago. Actually It's for this reason that he had the panic attack. I would have wanted to avoid interfering and let him tell this to you, but the only idea seemed to scare him to death, and there's no longer time to wait».

Pitch stopped, listening in silence to her words and standing perfectly still when she concluded the explanation: he simply didn't want to believe what she was saying. It was not true, such a thing could have not happened, it was not possible that the Man In The Moon had dared so much: it had been centuries since he had intervened in person to influence the events, remaining well holed up in his gleaming satellite while the creatures around him were born, fought and died, and it made no sense that, suddenly, he had decided to manifest himself that way, showing himself to a spirit whom he had always ignored and deforming his body to make it become almost a freak of nature. He couldn't picture him peacefully talking to Jack, he didn't want to imagine his pudgy hands touching his flat stomach, he couldn't even tolerate the idea he had forced him to do something he didn't desire: his sweet snowflake was his, his and his only, he had suffered more than enough during his life and no one should afford to lay his eyes upon him with evil intentions. No, he didn't want it to be gone that way, but his lover's crystal clear irises shouted the contrary: polished with the tears of an experience he would have never asked to live, deep and light for a fear he wasn't able to drive away, the pupils opacified by the despair which now had definitely gripped him. No, he didn't want it to be gone that way, but the reality, unfortunately, didn't coincide with what he desired.

He remained quiet for a few seconds, as if he still were not able to fully grasp the news, his eyes downcast, but his face raised, the air he was reflecting on the story which had just been reported; soon, however, he bent his lips into an angry and disgusted sneer, and, without further ado, he let the anger pervade himself, awakening the darkest powers he owned and opening his arms to release them.

«Sandy, stop him!» cried Toothiana, stretching out her hand to intervene.

Made suspicious by his words Pitch turned, finding himself in front of the Bringer of Dreams on full battle alert, and in an angry voice he warned him: «Don't you dare to hinder me!».
Frowning to focus Sandy opened his fists, evoking two whole handfuls of magic sand, then he threw them at his opponent's feet: immediately the two small puffs expanded to no end, covering the floor within three yards and wrapping the Boogeyman's ankles and calves, then they twitched, wincing and splitting into dozens of thin ropes which flung themselves at him.

The man let out a growl at this move, unleashing his shadows to smother the other's light, but new strings rose up to replace the destroyed ones, clinging at his limbs and stretching until he dropped to his knees; roaring threats and insults he exploited his energies whole hog, corrupting the sand he managed to touch and shaping it to form monstrous creatures, but Sandman was not intimidated and pulled out his deadly whips to defend himself; blinded by the desire for vengeance Pitch bared his teeth, biting the ropes to loosen them and summoning the blackest darkness he knew to use it against his temporary enemy and clear the way to get to the real one, but a familiar voice caught his attention.

«No, stop, don't hurt him!» cried Jack behind him.

Immediately the Boogeyman heard a thud, a flutter of wings accompanied by flustered reproaches and then violent coughs, and it didn't take long to him to guess what had happened; oblivious of his battle he turned, ignoring the three ribbons of sand wrapped around his neck, and after locating his lover on the ground, busy spitting blood, he rushed towards him, risking almost to strangle himself.

«Sandy, free him or he'll end up hurting himself!» hastily ordered the fairy.

Almost instantly the man felt the constraints which trapped him loosening and he violently tugged at them, tearing them and finally advancing on all fours towards the partner to help him, but when he saw him flinch, scared, trying to look as small as possible while an uncontrollable terror emanated from his mind, he stopped, bringing a hand to his chest to soothe the pain from that rejection.

The fairy, who, meanwhile, had intervened to assist Frost, let him go, following him with her eyes and addressing him a compassionate gaze, then, turning to Pitch, she whispered: «Please, Pitch: he's already feeling bad, don't make him suffer more with your anger. I'll leave you alone».

After standing up with difficulty she flew away, sadly proceeding into the hallway, then, when Sandy had reached her, she quietly closed the door, leaving the lovers finally alone.

The Boogeyman waited a whole minute, maybe to be sure that the two Guardians had got far enough, maybe, more likely, to gather the courage, then he simply asked: «Why didn't you tell me, Jack?».

Hearing his name the boy winced, slowly raising his head, but keeping his eyes lowered to the ground, and when the man tried to approach him again he reacted like a hunted prey, crawling up to the night table and nestling against it, clinging to it so desperately that it almost seemed he wanted to merge with the wood: the umpteenth rejection from Jack, the umpteenth bitter blow to Pitch.

Covering his mouth with the palm, in order to prevent any lament from escaping, the man swallowed and tried to think with a clear mind: why, why did his little snowflake reject him like that? Maybe he didn't love him any more? Maybe he was sick of his occasional outbursts and his rude attitude towards his friends? Maybe he had begun to be afraid of his power and of the dark shadows he controlled? Or maybe, more than for himself, he felt fear for the creature he carried in his belly?

«Jack» he whispered with difficulty, trying to concentrate in order to sound as reassuring as possible; «I'm sorry I got angry before: I apologize. I didn't mean to scare you, or hurt you, and I don't want to do it now: I'm here to help you. You know this, you've always known it, even before I realized it, yet you continue to flee and I clearly perceive that you're scared by me: why? Give me a reason, Jack.
Give me a reason to all this, and, if I do I am the cause, I promise you I'll go away and won't bother you any more».

It cost him a lot uttering the last sentence, but in the end he was glad he had done it: few months earlier he had promised to himself he would have done anything to make sure that his lover was healthy and safe, anything, including leaving him forever to avoid harming him, and he was not going to break his own word.

The boy, meanwhile, seemed greatly surprised by that promise, so amazed to widen his eyes and turning to stare at him, but he quickly composed himself, returning to rest his head against the night table and wrapping his arms around his own chest; he remained in that position for a few seconds, clearly struggling against the tears which rose spontaneously in his sapphire eyes, then he murmured: «You are not forced to stay here for pity: I know you want to leave, then go away».

The Boogeyman, taken aback, frowned and was about to show his incredulity, but in the end he managed to restrain himself and, keeping a serious tone, he replied: «Do not assume things you don't know: just answer my question».

Frost shivered slightly at that authoritative request, then he confessed: «I'm not worthy of you any more».

More and more puzzled, but at the same time happy for the other's submissive attitude, the man took advantage of this and, hardening his voice, he ordered: «You're too vague, Jack: explain yourself better».

The boy curled up even more on himself, starting to tremble and constantly eyeing the space under the bed, perhaps willing to take refuge there, but eventually he gave in and stammered: «I'm not worthy of you because now I've been ruined by someone else. I know well the compliments you used to make to me: you always told me that I was beautiful, sweet, innocent, albeit impish, that I was as pure as snow, that I was your angel come from heaven. I've often tried to wake up before you, to hear you whisper these words in your sleep, or to stay focused while we were making love, in order not to miss them, because they always made me feel so special, but this is no longer so: I am no longer so. I'm horrible and I'm becoming more and more deformed, I'm pathetic, I lost my powers and I need help to do everything, but, above all, I am no longer pure: I have a child that you never wanted growing inside of me, and I cannot go back. I'm not your beautiful angel any more: I'm loathed by myself, and I know you're loathed, too».

Pitch kept silent throughout the speech, leaving the other all the time and the room to explain himself better, then, when he finished, he asked: «Is that all? Is there anything else which makes you flee away from me?».

Jack looked surprised by the question, but soon he answered: «No, that's all».

Taking a deep breath the Boogeyman stood up, with a few strides he covered the distance which separated himself from his love, he grabbed him as he tried to crawl beyond the night table and, kneeling behind him, he held him in his arms and whispered: «You're such an idiot, Jack».

The boy jumped when he felt the jerk, probably fearing he would have been beaten or punished in some other way, and he stiffened in the embrace, unable to refrain himself from commenting: «So you're... are you not loathed by me?».

«No, not at all» promptly replied the man.

Wrapping his forearms around his waist he lifted him up, making him sit on his thighs and began to
gently rock him, then he said: «You said so many nonsense that I don't really know where to start. Let's talk about beauty: leaving aside the fact that it's altogether secondary, why would you call yourself “horrible”? Your body is deforming, that's evident, but not in an exaggerated way, nor in an irreversible one: a belly is not enough to make you ugly, nor to make me run away disgusted. You're not pathetic, Jack: you're sweet just like you've always have been. I'm sorry if I lost patience when you've had mood swings, or if I looked at you with a compassionate expression: I don't pity you, baby, it just pains me seeing you suffer. As for your powers, however, you didn't really lose them: the child interferes and prevents you from using them as you wished. As soon as this will end you'll be able to control them again, believe me, and, please, do not feel useless in the meantime: you're autonomous just like any human being, and, anyway, if there is the need, I'll gladly carry you in my arms and perform every task instead of you».

«I don't want to force you to be my nurse» weakly protested Frost.

«Hey, Jack, you've forgotten who you are?» demanded Pitch, wiping his tears with delicate kisses; «You're my little, sweet, beautiful snowflake: you're mine and mine only, and I will always take care of you, whatever your needs. There's nothing I wouldn't do to to make you happy and keep you healthy».

The boy seemed to cheer up at that statement, but soon he curled back on himself and mumbled: «But I'm still ruined».

Hardly holding back an annoyed growl Pitch took Jack's chin between thumb and forefinger, he pulled up to make him raise his face and, staring deep into his eyes, he stated: «No one can ruin you unless you let them change you for the worse. Did you understand, Jack? No one. And I'm not talking about physical appearance: I'm talking about your soul».

The boy blushed at that sentence, struggling to keep the eye contact and almost immediately snuggling against his chest, then, grabbing the collar of his robe, he murmured: «I'm sorry, Pitch. It's just that I didn't like what the Man In The Moon did to me».

A that statement the Boogeyman clearly felt his blood freezing in his veins, fighting against the gruesome images of the abuse his lover had experienced to try to control his anger and pain, then, when he felt quite calm, he took Frost in his arms and whispered: «No wonder, baby. Now come on bed with me: we'll talk about that, and I promise I'll make you feel better».

Another beautiful fanart made by HeilyNeko!

First of all I hope you liked this chapter, and I tell you again that, if you want to leave
me a comment about it, you should feel free to do it, and I would be really happy to read
it.
Secondary, I decided I'll post the new chapters ONLY on Friday: if my friend is in time
I'll update in time, if she's not I'll update the next week. Obviously I'll post a note on
tumblr if I'm forced to delay. I know this decision can seem severe, but I hope it's for the
best. As you've surely noticed lately I always ended up publishing on Sundays' evening,
and this wore me out every time: first of all I was terribly stressed, because I spent two
days waiting for my friend who always told me “Don't worry I've almost finished” and
not knowing when and if she arrived, then I always checked the correction in a hurry
and late in the night, struggling to stay focused enough in order to offer you the best,
and for what? Nothing, because, obviously, since on Mondays people work and go to
school, few saw the update and pretty nobody read the chapter. It was stupid and useless
both for me and for you. In this new way I'll give you the chapter in the best moment of
the week, allowing you to read it calmly, and I'll create a regular “schedule”, which will
let you always know when you should check for the update, and let me be less stressed.
Talking about the next week, I've already translated chapter 9 and started the 10th, so
my friend should be able to check it, since she has six whole days, but if she can't I'll
post a note on tumblr on Friday. I hope I won't have to. Have a nice evening
Chapter 9

WE DON'T HAVE TO BE ALONE – CHAPTER 9

«No wonder, baby. Now come on the bed with me: we'll talk about that, and I promise I'll make you feel better».

Happy for the faint, but sincere, smile Jack addressed him, Pitch settled his hoodie and stood up, gently holding him in his arms and then resting him on the blankets. Remembering the way in which the boy had reacted after he had confessed he was pregnant he slightly withdrew, leaving him room to curl up on himself and reaching for the foot of the bed, intending to grab the last piece of the frayed blanket he had left him to repair it and then wrap him, but his lover surprised him: instead of letting him do what he wanted and give his back to him he clung to his shoulders and, taking refuge against his neck, he whispered: «Can you stay with me?».

«Of course, Jack» promptly replied the Boogeyman.

Unable to reach the dark fabric he'd aimed at he gave up retrieving it and sat better on the edge of the mattress, in order to lie down next to Frost, but he didn't manage to: this, in fact, had throw his legs around his waist, catching him in a suffocating and increasingly desperate embrace, and he didn't have the heart to push him away. Holding back a pained sigh he hugged him, so as to make him loosen his grip, then he knelt on the bed and bowed his back, softly resting the boy on the sheets and, at the same time, lying on him without encumbering him; exploiting the fact that his pelvis was still raised he stroked his back with open palms, trying to tranquilise him with a massage that he knew had a calming effect on him, and finally he succeeded in his intent: the other gradually relaxed all the muscles, slowly slipping on the blankets, and eventually he let him go, laying on the back with the hands beside his face and the opened thighs resting on the man's.

Satisfied with the partner's quiet attitude Pitch addressed him a smile, to encourage him and show him how proud he was of him, then he rearranged the bandage, which in the meantime had moved slightly, lifting some rebel strands; seeing his expression turning in a pained grimace he decided to reward him for his strength and he placed a little kiss just under his ear, as he usually did, but this time a voice interrupted him.

«He started from there» said Jack.

At that statement the Boogeyman's blood froze in his veins: the very idea that his little snowflake had been attacked by a stranger had filled him with anger, but hearing directly from his mouth the description of the incident, even albeit just short and not specific, made him feel so bad that he almost feared he could throw up. Beset by nausea and doubts he hesitated a moment, unable to decide whether it was better hushing the boy and endeavouring to make him forget the incident or encouraging him to tell everything, but after a while he heard him go on his own volition and he decided to let him, remaining ready to intervene in case of need.
«To be sincere he didn't start from there» specified Frost; «The first thing he did was stroking my hair, a bit like parents do with disobedient children, but that gesture only annoyed me: it was the rest which scared me. He went down on the cheek and then along the neck, and I clearly felt his little finger sliding on that special spot under the ear, and then on the jugular, where you always bite me, and also just above the collarbone, where you often press your nose. He did it on purpose, I'm sure: I don't know if he did it in order to try to put me more at ease, to make me feel guilty or to ruin all the good memories I have of the time spent with you, but he certainly did it on purpose, and he managed to hurt me. It's been horrible feeling him touching all those spots you usually stroke, it felt so wrong! And he was wrong, he, along with his greasy and sticky hands which I still perceive on myself. It doesn't matter whether I sleep or stay awake, whether I let myself go or concentrate, whether I'm alone or in company, whether I'm in an unknown place or at home: I still perceive him on myself, I feel suffocated by his presence and I can't stand this any more. Fight him out, I beg you: fight him out, Pitch».

Shaken to the core by this confession the man swallowed hard, striving in order not to tremble, nor to show his upsetting in any other way, so he did the only thing which came to his mind: he took his head between his hands, both to support and to protect it, and he began to kiss him. If that disgusting creature's finger had managed to impose themselves on him to the point they had imprinted in his mind their touch's memory, making him shiver continuously despite they had gone since a long time, then his lips could replace them, giving him nice cuddles to make him understand that that terrible moment had passed and it would have not returned, and to make him remember the innumerable and pleasurable moments of intimacy spent together; of course he was fully aware that what he had was just a hope, not a certainty, and that it would have anyway been a solution temporary and suitable only for some of the unwanted caresses received by his lover, but it was the best he had at the moment: the boy had clearly showed he required physical contact to be reassured and he was not yet in the condition to be able to listen, and Pitch himself needed time to process what had happened and articulate a useful and sensible speech.

Closing his eyes he pressed his lips on that skin of pure velvet, letting himself go to retrace by instinct the path he would have never got tired to follow, and he slid down, slowly going along a tense sinew; he lingered for long on the areas he knew were more sensitive, redrawing their every inch, but making sure not to use neither the teeth nor the tongue, in order not to turn sensual what was meant to be a pure act of tenderness; after a whole minute he left the throat to pass to the left shoulder, slightly pulling down his hoodie to uncover the collarbone and stroke it with his nose, and when he gentle rested it on the minute, semicircular hollow just above the sternum he heard the partner speaking.

«Since I didn't stand still and quiet he slapped me and cut my lip, then he slapped me again to stun me» added Jack with a trembling voice.

Lingering still a bit on his chest to grind his teeth and drain the anger in a silent snarl the Boogeyman shook himself and moved on his left cheek; he didn't ask him if that was actually the first spot where the Man In The Moon had hit, because he didn't want to force him in any way, nor make him even more painful to describe that terrible experience, but he gently tightened his hands around his head, in order to perceive every thrill and guess if he were acting in the wrong way.

With great relief he felt the other relax and saw him half close his eyes, so he didn't further ado and covered his cheek with delicate kisses, from the cheekbone to the jaw, from the ear to the corner of his mouth, and then back on the other side of the face, breathing softly against his skin, as if this were still red after the backhanders and was likely to get irritated easily; he took all the necessary time to complete what he had planned, making sure even to stroke with the fingertips his rebellious hair to make him feel more at ease, and then he moved right on the chin, resting his mouth on his in a fleeting caress and taking then his lower lip with his front teeth.
He sucked it slowly, just as if he had found it injured and bleeding, and when he freed it he kissed it again, redrawing its every bend to make sure to pamper even the point which it had actually been cut; feeling it twitch he stepped back, so that the boy had all the room he needed to speak, but as soon as he did it he saw his partner trembling, so he whispered: «Jack, you’re not obliged to tell me anything, if you don't want to. I never asked you to describe me what he did in details, and I'll never do: I let you talk because I thought you wanted to vent, but I don't need to know everything to help you feel better. Let's stop here, okay?».

«No!» exclaimed Frost.

With a desperate expression he immediately clung to the man to force him to move closer, but he managed to calm down almost immediately; he stood motionless for few seconds, staring intently into his eyes and taking long, deep breaths, then he let him go again and, lowering the irises, he asked him: «No, don't stop. I don't like telling what he did to me, but it helps me get rid of the burden: if I didn't talk I would continue to think about it and feel sick. Can you continue helping me? I like the cuddles you're giving me: they're driving away his hands».

Striving with all his strength in order not to show the pain he felt for that request and how much it was putting him through the mill Pitch smiled at him, trying to focus on the fact that the other was benefiting from the treatment, then he hastened to reply: «Okay, Jack: tell me and I'll do everything in my power to fight out the bad sensations you're feeling».

Reassured by the response the boy dropped his arms on the mattress, then he squirmed a little, and, turning his head, he stammered: «He raised the hoodie, he put his hand on my stomach and then he... he went down».

Shuddering the Boogeyman stepped back, moving down to his sternum, then he slid his fingers under his hoodie and began to raise it; he proceeded slowly, taking care to be sweet, but also quite hard in order not to tickle him, and he hoped until the last that Jack stopped him, but it didn't happen: eased by his arched back arched he managed to pull his garment up to the chest, and at that point he was forced to bend down, to keep a promise that he regretted more and more.

Not feeling ready yet he tried to gain time, rubbing his nose and forehead against his stomach so flat to be concave, but eventually he had to resign, clamp the jaw to stop the tremors and rest his lips on his alabaster skin. He kissed him with much less conviction than before, redrawing at first the two last ribs and then sliding down along an imaginary straight line toward the lower belly, but when he reached the navel he had to go back: he couldn't continue.

The more he thought over and the more the idea he had had seemed to him silly, superficial and even dangerous: repeating the exact same moves performed by the Man In The Moon might seem a good solution to banish from mind the horrible memories, but actually he was doing anything but forcing him to relive them, and, considering how terrible they were, a couple of caresses couldn't be enough to make them fade. Fondling him induced him to pretend to feel better, but in truth it did nothing but accentuating the sexual component of everything happened, threatening to disturb and confuse him, and the more they proceeded, the more the trauma rooted and could become incurable; what frightened him most, in fact, was not what he had done, but what she was about to do: how long would Jack have asked him to continue? And what about him, how long would he have been willing to indulge him? How far would he have pushed himself to support his false desire? Caresses were a good compromise, kisses an expedient still acceptable, but when he had had to get under his belt what would he have done? Would he have gone on, as if nothing had happened? No... no, he would have never managed to. He wasn't aroused at all, he didn't want to use his fingers to make up for that deficiency, he wasn't even going to allow him even the foreplay: a night of love would have never erased the rape. In due time they would have done it, working to heal with sweetness the horrible
wound the boy had received and, consequently, his life and the relationship with the Boogeyman, but that was not the right time, nor least of all the way: they would have had to get there calmly, talking, trying slowly, making sure in every way to not force Frost's mind and not to overlook any detail of his wellness.

Determined, however, not to stop too abruptly that unusual cure he had allowed him, Pitch swerved down again, went beyond his navel and focused on the little belly which had already grown: he pampered it, covering it with kisses and stroking it with his lips, always careful not to press too much, but also not to appear overly hesitant, and he made sure to caress with the tip of his nose every point he had just given attention to.

He went on for a long time, allowing the boy time to get used to it and then to relax under that soft touch, then, just when he was a whisker away from his trousers' hem and he got ready to talk to him, he heard him whispering: «He stopped there».

Gobsmacked the Boogeyman stopped, widening the irises and looking up: what had he just said?

As if he had heard the unspoken question Jack lifted his head, settling on his elbows to observe him more easily, then he blushed and said: «Oh, you, you thought he had...? No, not really, it was just this, I... I... I'm sorry, I didn't mean to scare you, I've made a scene over such a stupid thing, I made it sound like it was serious, and instead... sorry, I've been stupid, I...».

Without hesitation the man crawled up until he could stare the other into his eyes, then he pressed his index on his lips and murmured: «Shhh. Don't you think even just for a moment such a silly thing, baby: you have not made a scene, and you have not done a stupid thing. It doesn't matter that the Man In The Moon didn't go all the way: he however forced you to do something you didn't desire, beat you and even changed your body until you got pregnant. You have every right to be upset, but now... Jack?».

Although he was convinced that proceeding as quickly as possible with his speech would have been good and dutiful in order to reassure the other, Pitch couldn't help but stop when he saw him rolling his eyes and stirring, worried he had said something wrong; just as he was about to ask him, however, the partner abruptly pushed him away, unceremoniously forcing him to straighten his back and climbing up on him to cling to his shoulders.

The Boogeyman didn't take long to understand the reason for that behaviour: he just needed to look down to see the lover tense, his head tilted back, his left hand pressed on his mouth and his eyelids lowered in an expression half suffering and half concentrated, and then draw the obvious conclusion.

«Nausea, Jack?» he sympathetically asked.

The boy nodded vigorously, remaining with the muscles contracted for a few moments, then he relaxed and, removing his hand, he explained: «Yes, another bout of nausea. I'm sorry I pushed you away like that, but I really feared I was about to feel sick. It was one of those strong but short attacks, however: in these cases, if I straighten up my back enough quickly, nothing happens and I recover soon. They're not all the same, you know? A couple of times a day I have lighter, but more persistent, ones, and it doesn't matter what position I take: sooner or later I always end up vomiting; other times, instead, they come like this, and fortunately I manage to resist. Maybe now it's better for me to sit up: do you mind?».

«Not at all» promptly replied the man.

Moving the palms on Frost's hips he slightly lifted him up, so that he could stretch his legs over the edge of the mattress and sit in the usual position, which avoided them to go numb, then he settled the
boy on his lap, making his right side lean against his chest and passing his arm behind his back to support him.

«Pitch? May I finish?» demanded the boy in a faint voice.

Realizing the partner was referring to the dream Pitch encouraged him: «Sure, Jack, but only if you feel like doing it».

«Yes, I do» immediately replied Jack; «When he reached the trousers' hem he stopped, he pressed his hand firmly, telling me that I'd have given birth to the new Guardian the world seems to need, and then he let me go. I felt so hot after he touched me, I couldn't stand by myself and I bent over, and when I did I had the belly. It was even larger than this, it scared me so much along with the Man In The Moon's expression, so, when I saw him approaching, I tried to get away, even if I had been tied to the columns. He never managed to reach me: just before he touched me I opened my eyes and found myself in the same place from where I was before, in Russia. At first I thought I had just awakened from a bad dream, but now I'm afraid he had simply brought me back, making sure that I believed nothing had happened for real. That's it. Are you happier now that you know how it went, and that the Man In The Moon didn't do what you thought?».

The Boogeyman listened intently his whole speech, allowing himself a small sigh of relief when he was confirmed that the Man In The Moon, despite having made a horrible and deplorable act, had at least refrained from committing a complete sexual abuse, barely holding back a growl when he heard that the lover had been tied up and shaking his head in disbelief when he learned that everything had really been disguised as a dream, and finally he replied: «Of course I'm happier, Jack, but for you: for you and for you only. Don't you ever think that such an experience could tarnish you, or make you not worthy of me any more, because it's not so: the fact you've only been caressed, supposing that we can really use the adverb “only” in such an occasion, reassures me not because it confirms me you're still pure, but because you've suffered a less traumatic event, which therefore you'll overcome more easily. Do you understand, baby?».

Snuggling even more tenderly in his arms the boy whispered: «Thank you, Pitch: thank you for everything you've done for me».

Moved by such gratitude the man hugged him tightly, slowly rocking him while absently combing his hair with his right hand, then he allowed himself a moment to reprocess his thoughts and get ready to continue; consoling his partner, in fact, was only the first of many steps he intended to take: a far cry from these deeds were waiting for him, much more striking and, above all, much more decisive.

After placing a little kiss on the bandage still wrapped around his forehead, to make him feel at ease and, at the same time, to catch his attention, Pitch murmured: «Oh, baby, you don't need to thank me: listening to you and consoling you was the least I could do. Helping you is my duty, I accomplish it more than gladly and I have no intention to back away, even now: that's why I'm going to proceed. What the Man in the Moon did to you is unacceptable: kidnapping you, tying you, torturing you, and even making you pregnant! Only a beast would be capable of such acts! I won't leave him unpunished, Jack: I will realize the right vengeance you can't take by yourself. I will wage war on the Moon, recalling all the Nightmares which are under my control and winding them up against him, I will smother that hateful satellite's bright light once and for all and I will violate its rooms full of hypocrisy, unleashing my most skilled and talented Purebloods to dig that disgusting being out and give him what he deserves. I'll tie to my lair's columns, just as he did with you, I will punish him with the most atrocious torture, I will make him cry for days, whole weeks, until his throat will start to bleed because of his desperate screams, I will let him pray and beg, at first for freedom, then for the coup de grace, but I will not give it to him: he made a mistake too great to deserve mercy. I will
continue to scourge him, gouging out his eyes, ripping out his tongue, amputating his limbs and tearing apart his internal organs, and only when I'll see him broken and unable to understand and take action I will let his soul escape to the hell which is destined to: I will cut his head off, taking care not to remove it with a clean blow, to make sure that he'll suffer until the end, then I'll take it to you on a silver plate, and at that point we will never have to worry again about him. Are you glad to get rid of him, Jack? Is there any detail you would like to change? Something special you personally conceived?

Frost, who, despite having always kept his eyes down, seemed to have listened carefully to every word, answered with difficulty: «Actually, yes».

Glad to see him so interested and involved the Boogeyman encouraged him: «Tell me, baby: I'll do anything to make you happy».

Jerkily raising his face up to display two irises full of anger the boy blurted out: «Everything! That's what I would like to change! Are you crazy or something? How could you even have conceived such a thing? And the plate, then, for all the storms, it makes me sick just thinking about it!».

«If you don't like that part just tell me and I'll avoid it. We don't need you to see: I myself will take care of everything, regardless, and if you don't want to look, even just to see that the matter has been finally resolved, I'll make sure to hide the corpse, so that you won't feel sick» promptly intervened the man.

«No, I do not like any part of your absurd proposal!» countered Jack; «Do you realize what you're planning? Killing the Man In The Moon, the Guardian of all the Guardians, the one who created us and who has always protected us!».

«Oh, yes, I see how well he has been protecting you for all these years!» teased him Pitch; «Let me make a brief summary: he created you to respond to his needs, he has made you working all the time, when I attacked you he remained well hidden in his satellite without lifting a finger and now, huh, what a strange fact!, he has new needs and woken up to shape yet another servant to exploit! Open your eyes, Jack! It doesn't matter that he created you, because after that he has only used you: he gave birth to you on mere whim, he left you wandering alone for three hundred years, not caring about your needs and about the fact that invisibility was almost bringing you to the brink of despair, realizing that you could have come in handy he appointed you a Guardian and made you fight me without giving you any protection, and now this! The gratitude of a son towards his father for giving him life ends when the father no longer behaves as such, and this, between you and him, happened more than three centuries ago!».

«What you're saying is not true, Pitch!» retorted the boy; «I was not created on a pure whim, but because I'd saved my sister, and if only in those three hundred years I'd been thinking a little more, or gone to ask for help to North or the others, I would have definitely discovered much more quickly what my centre was and I would have not felt so alone. It's normal that the Man In The Moon did nothing to help me about that: his task is not promoting us».

«Oh, no, of course it's not, he would be rather ridiculous wearing a skirt and high heels, intent to sponsor you at the exit of a station or in a shopping mall» quipped the Boogeyman.

He allowed few seconds to the partner to dispose of the amazement and the confusion caused by that statement, then he decided to change tactics and he asked: «Okay, Jack, do as you want: pretend that everything which happened since you were born until I defeated you had been a pure act of love by the Man in The Moon, and that he has always acted to protect you and make you feel good. Let's focus only on what happened few weeks ago: how do you explain it to me? How could a creature so good and generous decide to kidnap you, tie you, hit you and get you pregnant against your will?
Oh, it's true, because we need a new Guardian, so it's more than fair forcing one already in office, moreover male and whose mission is spreading fun in the world, to carry them in his belly, mangling his abdomen to adapt it to an unnatural pregnancy and imposing him a task so serious and heavy! Fair and sensible, really! How long are you going to be an incubator for your dear father?».

«I don't know what an incubator is, but it doesn't sound to me as a great compliment: don't start to rage on me only to dissuade me or because you're angry, because you'll just annoy me! I never said that what he did were a right or a justifiable thing, but waging war is an overreaction! Whether you like it or not he is the one who oversees everything and, considering how easily today's children stop believing, the last thing we can afford is losing our guide. What do you hope to gain by killing him? Do you think that what happened will suddenly vanish? That everything will return all nice and cheerful as before? What he did cannot be erased, Pitch: cutting off his head will not make me forget his slaps».

Struck by surprise by a truth he couldn't deny the man pressed him: «So, what are you going to do? Bowing your head and submit yourself to his will?».

Jack, who, by coincidence, had just lowered his head before uttering his last words, straightened up suddenly, risking almost to hit his the chin, and exclaimed: «No, I'm not saying this! It's just... we can't do what you say. We can not, and I don't want to do, then I'll stay here».

With an exasperated tone Pitch insisted: «Oh, yes, right, you won't bow your head, you'll just stay here, waiting for the fate to fall on you. A completely different thing from being submissive, am I right? Jack, I'd very much like to have to urge you, but I must: the more time passes, the more your belly grows, the farther the solution gets! If the Man In The Moon managed to make you pregnant he'll surely know how to bring you back to normal: it's exactly for this reason that I want to torture him before killing him. We need that, Jack, we need the one who ruined you to make you feel good again: what has been done can be undone, but only if we act decisively. You saw that being only for a short time, as you said, but I'm sure you've guessed that he's a person who reveals only what he wants and who cannot be controlled».

The boy bit his lip, his expression full of determination, but also of bewilderment and resignation, and finally he gave in and admitted: «Yes, I guessed almost from the beginning. It's because of this reason that I think it would be useless going to him: even if we politely asked him he would never help us».

«Asking politely was not my intention, in fact» insisted the Boogeyman.

At that umpteenth threat Frost snorted and, staring intently into his eyes, he said: «Pitch, stop proposing me to kill him or torture him: we can't, and that's all. Promise me that you'll not try to go to him, and that, if you happen to see him, you'll not harm him».

«Not even in your wildest dreams!» immediately snapped the man.

Seeing him resisting the boy sighed, then, showing his crystal clear irises full of sadness and concern, he murmured: «Pitch, I beg you: do it for me. By being gentle we would obtain nothing from him, by being aggressive we would obtain only accidents: he cannot be the key. Please, Pitch, please, don't go to him, don't you feel I'm afraid for you? You have no idea how powerful the Man In The Moon is, you don't know how cruel he turns, you don't imagine how sneaky he can be! If you went to him you'd never get out alive from his Palace, trust me! Please Pitch: don't leave me here alone. Don't do it».

Pitch hesitated in front of his lover's desperate expression, but he remained tense and frowning: he didn't want, he could not surrender to this reality. Accepting the partner's suffering as if nothing had
happened, seeing him wasting away day after day, perceiving him withering slowly while the mangling's maker lounged about in his glittering satellite was inconceivable to him, a pain he couldn't even imagine to endure, and yet it was the real victim himself of this horrible situation to ask him to act like that, to let it go and wait for something he didn't know to come. Why, why did Jack seem so determined not to punish the man who had kidnapped and tortured him? Why did he prefer to resign himself, instead of trying to fight? Perhaps that attitude was due to the traumatic experience suffered, but there was also something else: some slap and a caress too many were not enough to break a proud and stubborn spirit as Jack's. Fear... fear: that was what he perceived in him, the determining factor, the additional and main reason which induced him to do so. It was a fear intense, dense, deep, partially irrational, but also well motivated: a fear impossible to remove, even supposing to fully exploit the black sand and the shadows' powers which always worked in these cases.

Turning his eyes towards the burning hearth the Boogeyman took few deep breaths to dampen his ardour, then he began to reflect: the fear that the other felt, in fact, was not unfounded and deserved further examinations. Although he hated beyond imagination admitting his weakness he couldn't deny one thing: if he had gone on the Moon he would have seriously risked not to get out alive. To be sincere this, rather than a belief, was a feeling: he knew he had fought against the Man In The Moon in days of yore, he vaguely remembered his own army of Nightmares involved in the attack, a fierce battle against a faceless character and the enemy's terrible, pure white rays crushing on it and reducing everything to dust, but all those memories were fuzzy, faded and so fragmentary that, every time he tried to get his thoughts in order, he struggled hard to recall them; however, belief or feeling it was, it was a real risk, which at first, however unwittingly, he had been willing to run, but which now he didn't feel like facing any more: he could accept to die, but not to disappoint his little snowflake by falling in a war that he himself had asked him not to wage.

While he delved deeper and deeper in these reasonings, studying every aspect of each of the two courses of action and getting lost in trying to compare them and judge which was the best, he suddenly had a realization and finally saw the light at the end of the tunnel: there was a third solution, less defeatist and static than the first, but also less aggressive and dangerous than the second, a passable compromise among everyone's needs, that, in truth, he had conceived from the beginning.

«Pitch? You've been thinking for a long time» pointed out Jack, hesitantly.

Blinking a little to dispel the image of the dancing flames which had become imprinted on the retina Pitch replied: «Yes, I had much to think about. I cannot make you such a promise, Jack».

Letting out a sobbing gasp the boy exclaimed: «Pitch, please, don't do this to me!».

«Let me finish!» immediately burst out the Boogeyman, not trying in any way to hold back the anger he felt; «I cannot satisfy you because the promise you're asking me is too binding. I'm a man of my word, and I have no intention of violating an oath, nor of being forced not to do the right thing in order to comply with it: what you're asking me is just too much, and you didn't even realize it. I can make a deal with you: I'll promise not to attack the Man In The Moon, but only if he doesn't hurt you. He'll be free to sit holed up in his satellite, or even to come out and visit us, but only as long as he'll keep his hands to himself and his forked tongue behind his teeth: if he makes a wrong gesture or utter a word too many the deal will fall through, and I'll take care to tear him to pieces with my bare hands».

This promise, actually, costed him much more than he was showing: not being able to take revenge, nor to vent all his anger on the ignoble person who was the cause of his lover's malaise and sadness, was a sacrifice not little for his standards; however, judging by how much the Man In The Moon had exposed himself to accomplish such a mess, it was almost certain that he would have made a wrong move again, handing him on a silver platter the opportunity to rage on him for yet another good
reason, and, if the opportunity hadn't come, Pitch himself would have took care to create it by deception.

«Do you really promise?» asked Frost, the expression a bit scared while interrupting again his thoughts.

«Sure, Jack» confirmed the man; «And I'll promise you also something else: I'll free you from this belly you never wanted, whatever the cost. So far we've not found anything useful in Toothiana's library, but we examined only a small part of the tomes, not to mention all those North owns: I'm sure the answer lies somewhere among those pages, and I'll find it for you. I'll start immediately: I don't want to waste precious time».

Without further ado he shifted the boy from his lap on the mattress, standing up and straightening his robe, then he declared: «I'll go, Jack. You, instead, will just stay here: you recovered well, but you're still weak, and I don't want you neither to get a headache, nor to risk to slip and harm yourself again. Don't worry about your safety: I'll surround North's Palace with throngs of Pureblood to protect you, I'll leave here Voluptas to watch over you and assist you, and even some little Nightmares to check your health condition and keep me updated. You can sleep easy».

Jack, who had reacted with amazement to his proposal, grabbed him by the wrist and exclaimed: «No, wait! Don't...».

Readily kneeling in front of him to press a finger on his lips and hush him Pitch insisted: «Shhh, baby: don't panic. There's no need for you to worry, because it won't take long for me to find the solution: be patient just a little longer and you'll see that everything will become just a memory».

Deaf to his calls he turned and strode toward the exit, determined to put his long run well-being before the immediate one; once he reached the door he impetuously opened it, breaking into the hallway and almost risking to crush someone in his run, then, recognizing Toothiana, he narrowed his eyes and asked: «Did you remain here to eavesdrop on our conversation?».

Preening her feathers the fairy answered: «No, not at all: I arrived now to check that everything was alright. Have you talked to Jack?».

«Yes, I have. You can easily imagine how much it costs me refraining myself from destroying the Moon piece by piece with my hands, so don't make me waste my time: I need a snowglobe and your ancient tomes» sharply replied the Boogeyman.

Gobsmacked the Guardian asked: «The tomes? Now? Pitch, what are you going to do? Don't you hear Jack's calls? He needs you now more than ever, you can not leave him alone!».

Visibly annoyed the man started walking down the hall and countered: «I'd like to take him with me, but he's too weak to travel and spend hours and hours reading: I prefer him to stay here. He doesn't need me, but my help, and that's why I need the tomes: I have to find a way to free him from the belly and end this once and for all».

In a shocked tone Toothiana commented: «But you can't do this! You can't make him abort like this!».

«And who are you to state such a thing?! Don't you dare to tell me what I can or cannot do, especially about such a matter!» boomed Pitch.

Sanding in front of him to block him the fairy insisted: «Pitch, think before acting! The Man In The Moon wanted Jack to get pregnant for a reason, and getting rid of the baby will not induce him to
desist, even if you succeeded in your aim he would...».

Unfortunately she never managed to conclude her speech: blinded by rage only in hearing the name of his worst enemy the Boogeyman attacked, grabbing her by the arm and pulling her towards himself, then he hissed at her: «If only the Man in The Moon will try to pry into this matter or hinder me in any way I can assure you that I'll make him rue the day he was born, and I'll do the same with you pathetic Guardians. You don't want to help me? Go ahead: I never expected anything from you. But woe to you if you try to stop me. Now move away: you're in my way».

Without using the slightest grace he tossed her to the side, not even turning when he heard her hit a shelf and tumbling to the ground; walking heavily to cover with these rhythmic thumps the myriad of conflicting thoughts and concerns which crowded his mind he entered in the Globe's hall, calling with a snap of his fingers the Pureblood he had left there to spread terror and getting in its saddle; noticing only at this moment the staff still firmly fastened to its side he grabbed it, freeing it from the dark tentacles, then he threw it to the Guardian and said: «Here it is, your precious staff you sent me to retrieve to make me waste my time. Make clear to your dear little fairies that it's better for them to shift when I come into your kingdom, because I will not hesitate for a moment to kill them if they block my way».

Limping Toothiana came out of the passage, stretching out her hands towards him and shouting in a tone of despair: «Pitch, think, think before you act! Think about what Jack really wants!».

But Pitch, at that point, was already far away, his body bent over the horse's one in order not to resist the wind, and his conscience stifled by the priorities he had imposed to himself.

The candle, which now had shrunk in to a mere stub, blew out, leaving the room in complete darkness, but Pitch didn't almost notice it: with a little effort by his pupils he could read even in those conditions, so it made no sense wasting time by looking for new matches and everything he needed to lit the chamber.

As he ran his eyes over the book's lines he was analysing a small light appeared at the end of the corridor, shining faintly on the periphery of his vision, so he raised a hand to shield himself and not to get distracted; in a short time, however, this intensified more and more, casting long shadows in the room and coming to the point to bother his ears with its irregular sizzle, and a female voice whispered: «Pitch? Are you still here?».

«I'm not a ghost, if that's what you're asking me» replied the man, easily recognizing Toothiana.

«You look like one of them, though. Do you know how long you've been in here?» asked the other.

Raising his head with difficulty the man briefly examined the imposing pile of tomes on his right, then he answered: «I don't know. Maybe two days».

The fairy heaved a tired sigh, then she told him: «No, Pitch: eight. It's been eight days since you saw the light of the sun».

«As if I needed it» weakly joked Pitch; «I don't even need the light of the candles to read: I feel comfortable in my shadows».

«Yes, I noticed it: often, when I came to replace the candles, I saw that you kept reading even if you remained in the dark. You could not need the light of the sun, or of fire, Pitch, but you definitely need the light of Jack's eyes, and he needs yours: he's been waiting for you for a whole week». 
Choking back a sob the Boogeyman countered: «I cannot go back to him: I have not yet found the solution, not even a tiny clue to help us. I cannot disappoint him like this: wait a little longer. After all, except for the nostalgia, he's fine: if he had been sick my little Nightmares would have come here to tell me».

The woman sat on the table beside him, then, after taking a deep breath, she said: «Pitch, it pains me to say this, but this is not how things are. You've never received news from your little Nightmares because they fled more than five days ago, but Jack didn't feel good at all lately. He's had constant nausea, dizziness, cramps, and much more, and never once you've been at his side to help him and reassure him: he's suffering because of this situation».

«It's the first time you reveal me this» exclaimed, albeit with a faint voice, the man.

«No, Pitch» contradicted him the other, her expression pained despite the firm tone; «I told it to you yesterday, and the day before, and even the day before that, but you never listened to me: once you shooed me, because I tried to convince you to desist from your research, another one you silenced me because you had reached a paragraph talking about a pregnancy and another one you didn't even hear me».

Stunned by this revelation, but too stubborn to give up the very important mission he felt he had, Pitch murmured: «I'm sad to hear it, but soon I'll find a solution to all this: I just have to identify the right book and everything will be fine».

Letting out a small sob Toothiana hesitated, but finally she put a hand on his shoulder and whispered: «Pitch, I beg you: don't let him suffer like this. I'm not asking you to give up the research, since you don't want to, but only to put it aside for few hours: take a little break and come to visit Jack. It will do you good, believe me: detaching a little will help you to focus better, hugging him will make the tiredness disappear and, who knows?, maybe, while talking to him, you'll discover something new and that you wouldn't have expected at first. Will you come?».

Waiting to end the paragraph he was reading before reflecting the Boogeyman titled his head, weighing the pros and cons of the proposal he had been made, and eventually he stated: «Okay, I'll come for a few hours, but I'll take with me some tomes: I'm already late, and I don't want to delay the conclusion of this question further».

Although visibly disappointed the fairy refrained herself from uttering any comment, then she allowed: «Okay, Pitch: as you wish».

Pleased to have been indulged the man stood up, grabbed few books from the table, one from the ground and a couple from the chair next to himself, then, struggling to hold them in his arms, he said: «Well, I'm ready. Do you have a snowglobe? I'd rather not risk ruining these books by riding a Pureblood».

«Yes, I have it in the other room» answered the Guardian.

Guiding him through that ancient maze's meanders she led him into a new cave, completely bare and much wider than the former, then, grabbing a North's globe, she whispered it the destination and threw it in front of herself; settling his precious burden Pitch advanced, walking through the portal's tunnel of intense scents and bright colours with a slow pace and heading towards a dark area, then, when he reached it, he found himself in the room where he had left his lover.

He spotted him immediately, lying on his back on blankets while, the arms spread and the expression worn out, he breathed slowly, visibly upset, so he commented: «Jack is sleeping and, since he has felt sick in the past days, it's better for him to rest: will take advantage of this time to continue the
research».

Without waiting for an assent he put the books on a small table, retrieved the stool which stood in front of the fireplace and he got started, his forearms aching from all the pages they had turned and still had to turn, and his mind so exhausted it couldn't conceive any thoughts.

An hour had passed since Pitch had arrived in that room, and, if before his mind had seemed empty to him, in that moment he felt it completely off. Reading, between his eyes which continued to crisscross and the total inability to understand even the simplest words, had become almost impossible, holding his head with his hands in order not to fall asleep a titanic effort and breathing regularly a real torture, but he didn't give up and went on, line after line, paragraph after paragraph, jumping from one century to another in the Earth's history in search of a solution which did everything to hide itself from his gaze.

After an indeterminate time he felt something poking him, bothering him to the point he lost his place, but also partially restoring his worn out spirit, and he turned towards Voluptas, thinking the Nightmare had decided to give him a little fear to help him in the research; seeing it mildly crouched on the floor, with Toothiana lying on it, and remembering it was not able to fright, he said to himself that the little gift should have come from a Nightmare on patrol outside, so he settled the matter and continued to read.

As the seconds passed, however, that feeling of increasing power intensified, fortifying him so much it made him straighten his back bent under the weight of all the days he had been working for, and dispelled the opaque veil which had fallen over his eyes, and he smiled, pleased to be finally able to scroll through the chapters at a strong pace, but that happiness was soon cut short.

Stretching to pull herself together after her nap the fairy stood up, but she immediately jumped back frightened, pointing to a spot in front of herself and shouting: «Pitch, watch out!».

Faster than a lightning the Boogeyman turned, and what he saw filled him with horror: Jack's Pureblood, the most dangerous of all those which constituted his dark ranks, was in the room, bent over the defenceless and still asleep boy, its jaws open to show the razor-sharp teeth a hair's breadth away from his belly half uncovered and its neck arched to get ready to attack.

Screaming in despair the man stretched out his arm, freeing his power in one fell swoop and hitting the beast on the side with a crawling web of black sand tentacles: the creature, caught by surprise, swerved, whinnying in pain and bucking to free itself, while the boy woke up suddenly, raising his head and struggling to figure out what was going on; without hesitation Pitch evoked new curls of shadow, hurled them against the aggressor to destroy it, but it deftly dodged them, dissolving into a fickle fog and escaping through the chimney.


Immediately the fairy rushed to support him and demanded anxiously: «Jack! Are you fine? That Nightmare was about to attack you! It didn't harm you, did it?».

Although the woman had spoken with a tone of voice rather high the Boogeyman almost didn't hear her above the hum of the thoughts which crowded his mind and, more importantly, of the one which filled it to the point it overwhelmed it: he had failed. It didn't matter that he had worked strenuously, that he had acted always thinking about his sake, that he had managed many and many times to make him happy: his little snowflake had been in danger only and solely because of him, and he had been so negligent he hadn't even noticed it. The dreaded moment had arrived: the dark powers he
controlled have showed to be too devious, too treacherous, too incompatible with a carefree life, and even love turned out not to be enough to keep them at bay. He had failed, and he couldn't do anything to remedy; he had failed, and trying again would have just led him to fail again.

Trembling he stared at his lover, feeling himself drowning in those crystal clear irises he adore so much now widened, and suffocating under the weight of guilt, then he whispered: «I'm sorry for the Nightmare, Jack. I have to remedy».

He didn't wait for an answer, nor for a reproach, nor for an insult: without another single word he turned and ran into the corridor, fleeing toward a destiny he had hoped until the last could be spared to himself and barely holding back his tears, while angry calls pursued him.

Here's a new drawing by HeilyNeko!

http://it.tinypic.com/view.php?pic=35ch9a9&s=8#.U6v5jfl_ums

Chapter End Notes

I hope you liked this chapter. Feel free to leave a comment, if you want to. Next chapter will be published (hopefully) the next Friday; obviously I already translated it, and I'm waiting for my friend to check it.

NOTE: As you've probably guessed “my” Pitch doesn't remember much about his past, because the Man in the Moon has slowly erased his memories. Don't forget this detail in the next chapters ;)
Chapter 10

We don't have to be alone – Chapter 10

Walking stealthily Pitch came out from the shadows and stepped into the hallway of the house he had chosen. He advanced cautiously, sliding on the floor without producing the slightest noise and deftly avoiding every obstacle, then he reached two doors decorated with children's drawings, but he passed them without any hesitation: he wasn't aiming at them; going on he arrived at the end of the passageway, where a peeling wood hid the access to a third bedroom, and there he stood, reaching out his hand to open it. It took him a few seconds to turn the handle knob, open the door just enough to creep in and close it behind himself, and at that point he stopped, holding his breath as he turned his head towards his victim.

He had chosen them with great care, just like all those who had preceded them in the three days of big game just passed: he was making something special, something he had never done before, and to carry it out he needed special people, like her. She was a girl of Irish descent, the freckles clearly visible on her cheeks despite the bad light and the red hair untidily abandoned on the pillow; a girl with delicate features, the drawn face perfectly proportioned to the thin neck and the arms so slender to show every tendon; a girl lean and emaciated, too big for the bed in which she slept, and too small for the responsibilities she had decided to bear.

It was enough, for the Boogeyman, to briefly look around to recall the long months of agony she had experienced: although she had endeavoured in every way to cover the walls with the drawings her four brothers had made for her, on them there were still imprinted the small dents happened during the countless times when her father had shoved her, the blood stain he had made her lose after brutally beating her, and the hole which, in a fit of rage, he had opened with a punch. The man had witnessed several times the abusive parent's outbursts, shamelessly taking the opportunity to feed himself on fear fit to burst while he reflected on the human spirit's volubility, and he had never been worried about the submissive attitude of the colleen, who, instead of reacting, merely raised her arms to protect her face; it was precisely for this reason that, at her eighteenth birthday, he had been greatly surprised to see her taking the lead on that issue. Like every Mondays' night he had crept into the house, ready to enjoy the unemployed father's umpteenth outburst on his blameless daughter, but instead of finding her knelt on the floor, intent on taking all the punches and kicks without whining and doing anything in order to prevent that monster to torture also her little siblings, he had seen her shoving with decision the drunk parent, literally throwing him down the entry's steps and tossing a suitcase after him; albeit amazed, however, Pitch had waited her to fall asleep, keeping the usual Nightmare ready to ensure himself a restoring night, but with great disappointment he had verified that this no longer worked with her, and he had had to leave her empty-handed; too stubborn to give up he had then spied on her, making one of his servants heel her to study her every move, and in the end he had solved the mystery: she had done nothing but suffer her father's brutalization, attracting all his rage on herself and never contacting the authorities, just to avoid the risk her brothers could
end up in different foster families, being separated, and she had waited to rebel when she had been certain to have the legally required age to take care of them all. Obviously the situation, albeit better than before, had remained tense for the young woman, always busy in devising new ways to look after her siblings, to serve them nutritious meals and to meet all the expenses, and the Boogeyman hadn't taken much to modify the black sand he commanded, so as to adapt it to the changes in his victim: now he perfectly knew what chords to touch and what to avoid, and he was determined to take full advantage of that information.

With a soft gesture he opened a portal of darkness into the wide open cabinet's shade, shuddering at the current of cold air which it generated, then he turned, holding out his arms to welcome the one he had evoked; he didn't have to wait for long: after few seconds a shadow darker than the others stirred in the midst of that teeming tentacles, quivering and vibrating, as if it was settling down, and finally what turned out to be a beautiful Pureblood in full of its powers emerged.

With his irises shining with expectation the man watched it moving forward in a hesitant pace, slowly stepping back to leave it a better view of the room and, at the same time, induce it to enter, and he rejoiced when he noticed the absence of the mane and the double pointed beaks which adorned the corners of its lips: only a Haunter answer these two characteristics, and a Haunter was exactly what he needed in order not to fail.

Seeing that the creature still hesitated he bent his fingers to invite it and, trying to control his voice, he ordered: «Come».

Hearing the call the animal moved, finally coming out the portal and looking around to familiarize with its surroundings, and, as soon as it spotted the girl lying on the bed, he snorted, dilating his nostrils and opening his mouth in an eerie imitation of a smile; without further ado it stamped a hoof, clearly intending to crouch in order to pounce on her, but Pitch quickly stopped it, rising in front of it and drawing its neck in a lustful embrace.

«Hush, my beauty, hush» he whispered directly into its ear, stroking its jugular to calm it down; «I know you can't wait to pounce on that pathetic girl and devour her, but these matters need patience: if you attack her without thinking you'll go hungry. Let me give some advices to you: I studied her for months and months, and now I know perfectly what manages to scare her enough to get her out of his mind. Don't you think that something is missing in this house? Don't you feel the total absence of adults around? This is not a temporary situation: she's alone, the only guardian of four children. Her mother fled away years ago, chasing yet another lover she had been duped by, while his father has moved away a few months ago. He didn't left in a fit of madness: he did it out of exasperation. After more than a decade of loving care given to his children, in fact, he lost his job and they began to despise him, calling him “failure”, insulting him whenever he came home without having found a new employment and complaining about the pocket money cut which he had imposed to them for obvious reasons and which prevented them from buying all the toys they wanted. He has endured the situation for about five months, then he couldn't handle it any more and he decided to leave his ungrateful offspring: pretending he had found and accepted a job abroad which would have allowed them to live comfortably he took leave, promising to send them part of his salary, then he went away without ever looking back. At first the children believed him and lived it up behind him, but after some weeks passed without receiving from him neither news, nor, least of all, his money, they started to get scared. This girl, who's the eldest of the five, took-charge of her brothers in order not to risk seeing them being separated and sent to different families, but soon she realized she's not up to the task: the work she started is not profitable enough to sustain such a large family, and the account assigned to her where the parent had deposited a sum to allow her go to college has almost dried up. Among all them she's the one who most hopes that her father, sooner or later, will come back, and that he escaped only to prove them that, without his presence, they are not able to survive: you must play on this. Kill her hope, fling the truth at her, obsessively show her her father fleeing and
abandoning her until she beg you to stop, and then go on, rage on her, picture him elsewhere with a new family, intent on having fun while he forgets his past, and display her the sad future which awaits her and her brothers: make her cry and squirm from the pain of this truth she doesn't want to accept. Good luck, my beauty».

With an impatient snort the Pureblood bowed his head in front of Pitch, out of gratitude and respect, but when it saw his master opening his arm to allow it acting it didn't need to be asked twice: with a grim neigh it reared up, arching its neck in order not to lose sight of its goal, then it lunged at her, covering in a single bound the distance which separated it from the bed and landing on it with the forelegs. After it had settled down its hooves on the mattress and slightly bent its legs to have a better balance it crouched over the victim, sniffing her stomach, her breast and finally her neck, to begin to weaken her defences just with its mere presence, and seeing her shivering it opened its mouth, placing itself literally in front of her face and spreading its jaws even more to completely cover it, as if to devour it in one bite.

Well aware of what was happening Pitch hastened to support his creature, stroking its side while it was absorbing from the girl those few, very recent memories it needed to reconstruct her father's features and voice, then he rested his cheek on its shoulder and, closing his eyes, he immersed himself in its conscience, in order to better guide it in what it had to do and not to miss any scene of the show he had planned.

After a few seconds he saw again appearing in front of himself the bedroom, but with less details, less definition, few colours apart from black and grey, and less depth: it was not the real room, but the nightmare's embryo the beast was making, and still required several mendings. Moving his hands in sinuous gestures the Boogeyman began to fix it, adding details and nuances where necessary, correcting the errors, and even recreating the main corridor, then he stepped aside, leaving to his servant full liberty of action, but continuing to whisper advices to it in a low voice.

In less than a minute he heard heavy footsteps coming from the passage, and saw out of the corner of the eye the colleen waking up with a start, sit up and start looking around warily.

«Who's there?» she shouted in a firm voice.

No answer came to their ears, but after a few moments the father's figure appeared at the door, proud and almost solemn in his solemn stateliness, but with a sardonic smile on his face.

«You? You're back?» she asked, incredulous.

«Yes and no. I'm back, but not to stay. I forgot some important documents when I left, and now I need to recover them: once I've taken them back I'll forsake you again, and this time for good» said with satisfaction the parent.

«There is nothing yours left in this house, so you can immediately turn your heels and go» replied the young woman.

Clearly taken aback the father gasped, clutching the jamb, as if he needed a support to stand, and catching his breath; shortly after, however, he recovered, and with a cruel grin on his face he barked: «Sheridan, you live up to your name: you've always been wild, and wild you'll remain! I left you to punish your irreverent behaviour, but I see it was all for nothing: you have not learned to pay respect to me even after you've realized I'm indispensable. Do you think that, by continuing to walk all over me, you'll manage to entice me to reverse my decision, perhaps driven by some kind of guilt? No, it will not happen: I will leave you alone, and without me you'll end soon in the gutter».

«Indispensable?» demanded the colleen; «Indispensable? Is that how you like to call yourself now?
Was it indispensable for us seeing you coming home drunk every night? Was it indispensable for the babies hearing you screaming and smashing the furniture almost every evening? Was it indispensable for Phelan, who's already thin, watching you stealing the food from his plate at every meal? Was it indispensable for me to be beaten every day? No, none of this was indispensable. I'll admit it, I'm struggling to sustain the family without your salary, but, actually, it has been like that since you've lost your job, with the only difference that now, at least, I don't see the little money I gain disappearing in bottles of wine. I have to make many sacrifices to be able to buy the medicines for the twins, and I'm often forced to serve only rice and beans for dinner, but the babies are much more serene and happier than before and they help me as best as they can: now we are a real family. I'm sorry, father, but you are not indispensable: we live better without you. It pains me to say this, because, although you've always been severe, I know that you loved us, but now you've changed, and I can no longer let you harm me and the others. Get out of here, father. Get out of my life, and get out of my dream: I'm not afraid of you any more».

With a sharp sound Pitch was thrown back, expelled from the dream to return to reality, and he realized he was still beside the bed, gasping and bewildered by the sudden change of perspective; instinctively he clung to the Pureblood, looking for a firm support to rely on to recover, but, as soon as he touched its side, he heard it bucking and neighing in pain, and when he turned he found himself in front of a show as wonderful as terrible: the beast was dying.

Miserably defeat by its own victim it paid the mistake with its life, disintegrating in thin rivulets of fine sand which branched off from every spot of its body, stroking it gently before falling to the ground, but consuming it, slowly corroding every muscle and tendon like an acid erodes the metal; enchanted the Boogeyman stared at his servant in decline, letting the black sand now unusable cover himself, grasping the last spark of life burn out in those eyes of flame no more eternal, and hearing the desperate neighs being stifled by the creaking of the bones become as fragile as gypsum, and when these fell apart, rolling on the sheets and vanishing into the darkness, he couldn't endure any longer.

Feeling his strength failing he fell, slipping to the ground without a lament and collapsing sprawled against the dresser, careless of the awkward position he had taken, because the pain he felt in the chest was so stabbing he couldn't perceive anything else, then, panting with difficulty, he brought a hand to his heart, sinking his fingers into the shoulder just to relieve the aches, and he opened his mouth in a vain attempt to catch his breath.

After a few seconds he felt the girl stirring and sitting up, so he looked up and found her just turned toward him, but he noticed immediately that her eyes had something strange, and it didn't take long to him to figure out what's going on: she were no longer able to see him. The man was able to catch every single shade of those beautiful green irises veined with copper and gold, but these didn't linger on his dark figure, passing over, through his flesh to stare at the drawer's knob which was stabbing him and then sliding careless on other details of the room, to check that everything was in place: now Pitch had become invisible to the wild Sheridan, and he would have had to work hard and for long to hope to feed himself again on her fear.

An acute sob shook the Boogeyman's chest, making him start against the piece of furniture and jabbing even more those wooden sharp edges in his back, and his expression got deformed into a grimace of pure pain, but when his mouth opened what came out was a loud, sick and gurgling laughter: he had won. Oh, it had been so easy deceiving that Haunter, exploiting his own sensuality and authority to convince it to listen to him and flattering it with compliments and caresses to induce it to lower his guard, so simple rehashing the information in his possession, retaining the general characteristics in order not to be discovered, but making small changes to some details to distort them completely, so incredibly natural seeing it being consumed like a flash in the pan: now he had lost count of the Purebloods he had destroyed, driven to an involuntary suicide by the lies he had
whispered in their ears, and he didn't encounter the slightest difficulties in accomplishing this self-imposed task. He was perfectly able to control his own thoughts, closing those concerning his plans in the dark recesses of his own consciousness, out of the reach of anyone but himself, and he expertly manipulated his servants' minds and moves: he would have soon be able to eradicate this horrible species, recalling every adult individual to wipe it from the face of the Earth in a light breeze, and at that point Jack would have been safe from the Nightmares.

A pang took his breath away at the memory of what had happened to his little snowflake just three days before, assailed by the infernal beast just when he was completely helpless and defenceless, and just when he was in one of the safest places in the world, and Pitch couldn't help but feel himself drowning in guilt again: he had been the one who had created the monster, the one who had refined its technique, the one who had lost sight of it, the one who hadn't spotted the danger, the one who had failed in destroying it. He had been the one who had made a mistake, the one who had awkwardly remedied to it, the one who posed a threat for his mere presence: he should no longer allow himself to dare, to stay close to the boy with the risk that the shadows could attack him again, nor he could let his most fearsome servants free to roam everywhere.

While he confused brush up on the project he had conceived while fleeing away from North's Palace, a very slight hum reached his ears, piercing and more and more intense, and he gasped, looking around to find a hiding place; discarding the cabinet, which, albeit comfortable, was much too far from him, he opted for the bed and, leaving himself literally fall on the floor, he began to crawl, painfully dragging his tired body.

Driven by the strength born of desperation he managed to reach the dark refuge, burrowing himself as best as he could among the boxes, the books and the other objects crammed under there, and while he was still settling down Baby Tooth burst into the room, taking advantage of the air passage to get around the closed door.

Trying to keep self-control the man froze, concentrating on the sound produced by the unwanted visitor's wings to understand where she was and in which direction she was turned to, and only when he was certain she had reached the other side room he dared to withdraw the foot, the only limb still uncovered; holding his breath he patiently wait for her to summarily rummage in every corner, slowly opening the palm to release the little magic sand left and wrap it around himself as a protection, and he nearly fell into a panic when he perceived her grab the blanket and pull it to browse even under the bed, but luckily for him the fairy contented himself with a quick peek, after which she flew away faster than a hummingbird.

Heaving a deep sigh of relief Pitch relaxed, but he still didn't dare to come out of the hiding place: Toothiana's little helper had clearly entered in there to look for him, and it was possible that she was lurking somewhere to surprise him, or that, more simply, she was still studying other areas of the house. What brought him to this conclusion was not only the absence of a plausible reason, for a creature who collected milk teeth, to pay a visit to an eighteen years old girl, but also the certainty he was wanted by the Guardians: these, in fact, had been hot on his heels right away, chasing him relentlessly over the three days which had passed since his escape and exploiting all their powers to find him. Such obstinacy was more than understandable to the Boogeyman, considering that Jack had seriously risked to die because of the accident of which he and only he had been the cause, and he would have gladly given himself to them and let himself being punished for that terrible default, but he couldn't do it now, not when so many Purebloods still wandered free in the world: he had to be sure to kill them before paying for its own negligence.

After he had carefully kept an eye out and made sure that no living being, apart from Sheridan and his four brothers, had lingered in that house, the man groaned, shifting with his foot a small wooden chest behind which he had got stuck and starting to crawl out of that uncomfortable refuge; after a
tiring minute of pushing and puffing he finally managed to emerge and climb on the dresser, in order to avoid the risk of falling because of a lightheadedness, then he limped to the window to observe the neighbourhood, and what he saw astonished him.

Every street and house he could see had been literally invaded by swarms of chirping fairies, every field and garden was full of coloured eggs in motion, the night sky was lit by the innumerable creatures of golden sand's contrails, and in those few areas which seemed forgotten roamed patrols of Elves and even some lonely Yetis: evidently the Guardians were more hardened than he expected and they had decided to exploit their helpers to carry on the hunting.

Sighing heavily Pitch slumped against the shutter's frame: there was finally explained Voluptas' delay, that, despite being called more than two hours earlier, hadn't still showed up. As the intelligent creature it was it probably had not encountered difficulties in leaving the Palace, taking advantage of a little moment of distraction to slide away along secondary corridors, or exploiting the element of surprise and starting to gallop even before those present could realize what it was doing, but once outside it shouldn't have had it easy: simultaneously monitoring the sky and the ground was complex even for a beast as smart as it, and hiding its body, slender but equally impressive, had no doubt forced it to move with caution and significantly lengthen the path to get around the most dangerous areas. In the light of this the Boogeyman regretted not having stopped his transfers, finally realizing that he had confused his horse and compelled it to continuous double backs, but he dispelled his guilt in few seconds: continuing to search victims to destroy his Pureblood have the priority over everything, even on the welcoming of his favourite, and in the end having to mount the same Nightmares he wanted to kill had helped him to further improve his self-control.

At this point, however, he could no longer postpone the meeting, so he looked around to find a good place to wait for it; after a few minutes e spotted a tract of bushland particularly dark, which the group of hunters had already summarily combed, and he decided it was suitable for his purpose. Hobbling he reached the door, levered on the hinges to open it without letting it creak and he walked down the corridor, heading for the kitchen; manoeuvring among the chairs pushed aside and the children's schoolbags ready for the next morning he proceeded towards the exit, raising his robe in order not to get wet while he stepped over the dishwasher's open door and then flattening against the curtain to peek through its laces' holes; finally, sure the way was clear, he turned the handle and went out.

After cautiously descending the steps leading to the lawn he darted into the grass, dissolving himself only partially in order to glide more easily from shadow to shadow without getting tired, then, following at first a hedge and then a long fence, he managed to proceed smoothly up to the grove he was aiming to.

He stayed there, crouched between a rock and a wild boxwood, for an indefinite time, rather long, considering how the stars had moved through the sky, but as short as a blink of an eye for his mind completely blank, but in the end a faint patter woke him from the slumber into which he had fallen. Raising his head over the foliage behind which he was hidden he glimpsed Voluptas walking solemnly among the logs in all its majestic beauty, but he didn't linger to admire it: he was far too tired to indulge in ecstatic observations, but, above all, far too overburdened by more important tasks.

Crawling under the fronds he got next to it, clung to its mane and, staring into its wide, golden eyes without pupils, he whispered: «Good, Voluptas. Have you struggled to reach me, haven't you? There's no road, around here, which isn't full of the Guardians' servants: you have been very good to get there without being glimpsed by them. Now you'll have to bring me in a small village on the west coast, the one perched on the cliff and with the row of coloured stilts on the beach, do you remember it? Right there. Now bend your legs a little, honey: I'm too tired to climb on your back». 
Without rebelling or snorting the beast obeyed, bending its legs and pushing its nose on Pitch's backside to help him up, and this, albeit more awkwardly than usual, finally managed to get into the saddle. While he was still settling down, however, he heard heavy footsteps coming from a point behind him, and he exclaimed in a low voice: «We've been discovered! Let's get out of here!».

Without further ado he dug his heels into the horse's side, causing it to start at full gallop with a loud whinny, and this was the warning signal to all the hunters who were in the vicinity: the whole neighbourhood woke up, echoing with acute tweets grunts, bell trills and delicate ticks, and all these noises began to converge towards the woods. Spurring the Pureblood to a mad rush the Boogeyman guided it, deftly dodging every obstacle and log, and taking care to stay away from the hiss which announced the arrival of the Guardians' helpers, but soon he realized he had been surrounded and, unable to escape in the sky, where Sandman's golden sand was gathering more and more to floodlight the forest, he had to surrender and retreat.

Stretching out his arm he evoked a large amount of black sand, as much as he could recall in those few seconds which separated success from failure, then it threw it to a narrow fissure he had spotted among the rocks in front of himself and urged Voluptas to leap into it.

Not frightened at all the creature dashed into the crack, jumping to enter where it was larger, and when it landed it found itself in the main hall of Pitch's lair, on a narrow, raised platform well-hidden behind a giant stalactite.

Cautiously leaning out the Boogeyman saw that also that cave had been invaded, controlled on top by a small flock of fairies and on the bottom by very organized cohorts of eggs, but he didn't get worried: he had expected from the beginning a troop of guards, and, since he was in a place he was familiar with, he knew exactly how to evade the surveillance.

Before deciding what to do he tried to find the iron Globe, willing to study it in order to assess which part of the world visit, but when he saw a dozen Elves busy on climbing on it to play he had to admit defeat: those small creatures moved around continuously, preventing him from having a clear view of the lights which adorned it, and there was no way to shoo them without being noticed.

Feeling now exhausted the man decided to take a short break, just a few hours of rest to recover his strength and hope that Santa's helpers could find a diversion less annoying and hampering the mission he had imposed to himself, so, albeit reluctantly, he turned his horse and made it walk down a flight in ruins. Deftly avoiding any prying eyes he managed to reach a hidden entrance, proceed without problems through the maze of corridors which appeared in front of him and seal every opening with special spells, then he got into his bedroom, dismounted and collapsed on the mattress.

He remained in that position for some time, one arm hanging down and his face buried in the cold blanket which now didn't have any scent, trying not to think about anything except for rehearsing what were the most suitable houses to visit, but after a whole minute of continuous memory lapses he resigned and whispered: «I need to sleep, Voluptas. Stand guard for a few hours, then wake me: I don't want to risk losing too much time».

After making sure that the Pureblood had understood the command, nodded and taken position in front of the entrance, the man sighed, turning on a side to breathe more easily, then he closed his eyes and fell immediately into a deep sleep.

«Wake up!» shouted a loud voice.

Wincing with fear Pitch opened his eyes, instinctively trying to sit up to look around, but, as soon as
he raised his back, he felt something grab him by the neck and drag it back down; stunned he rolled his eyes, trying to familiarize with his surrounding, and what he saw left him speechless: he was in the centre of a large, circular room, the floor of stone adorned with runes arranged in concentric circles that which faded in the darkness, and heavy chains were tied to his limbs, considerably restricting his movements and forcing him into an uncomfortable crouching position.

While he was still trying to work it out he saw North, Sandman and Bunnymund emerging from the shadows and he exclaimed: «You!? You found me?».

«Don't you say?» scornfully asked the Pooka; «It took us a bit, but in the end we succeeded: we could have never allowed you to get away. Tooth, show him what he has missed, and make sure not to omit anything».

A vibrant wings' whirr announced the Boogeyman that Toothiana was behind him, but before he could even think to react he sensed her land next to his head and press her hands on his temples, and in that moment his sight went black.

While he arched to escape her grip he perceived also the other senses failing, leaving him in a state of absolute vulnerability and causing him to fall into a panic, but just when he feared he was about to go crazy a little light appeared in the distance, trembling a little, and then exploding in thousands of brilliant sparks. When he finally managed, a little by waiting and a little by blinking, to make the dazzling stain which had been impressed on the retina fade away, the man realized he was in his room at North's Palace, heated, as usual, by a crackling fire, and it took no time to him to find Jack lying sprawled on the blankets.

«Jack! Are you... how are you...?» he asked hesitantly.

The boy, however, ignored him, staring at the ceiling while hot tears run down his cheeks, and a few seconds later he had a spasm: pressing one hand on his stomach and one on his he mouth let out a heavy hiccups, then he leapt down the mattress, grabbing a metal basin and leaning on it to vomit, while violent tremors shook his bony shoulders; before Pitch could reach him, however, he stood up, his eyes still full of tears, but his mouth perfectly clean, and he began to limp towards his lover, holding a bump far more bulky than the one he had until few moments before.

While the Boogeyman stared at him, puzzled, trying to understand the reason of the sudden change, he saw Frost stumbling and lose his balance and he lunged towards him to catch him, but just when he was sure he had him in his arms he distinctly felt him passing through himself, piercing it as he was made of air and violently falling on the floor, and he understood: this was not the reality, but the memory of an event already happened, and he, who had not been present at that time, had no way to change it, nor to interact with the characters in it.

With a suffering grimace on his face he turned and looked at the boy standing up by leaning against the bed's frame, feeling a pang every time he lost his grip and slid again to the ground and holding back a moan when he saw him getting up and starting to crawl; after few feet, however, this slumped again, wrapping his arms around his belly shook by contractions while screaming all its pain, and Pitch almost fainted when he heard him desperately asking for assistance and not receiving any answer: he had never felt so guilty in his entire life.

Just when he was about to leap forward and try anyway to do something the scene faded, gliding into a new one set in the same place, but with two main characters: Jack sitting on a stool, and a small, faceless human being nestled on his lap.

«Where's Daddy?» asked the latter in a childish tone.
Pitch saw the boy's face clouding over, overwhelmed by sadness while he was probably looking for a plausible excuse to justify the absence of a figure so important, but just when his lips parted a violent tug brought him back into the room decorated with ancient symbols, and North blurted out: «Do not sweeten the pill, Tooth, he must know stained with guilt he is!».

After pushing away the fairy Santa Claus firmly grasped the chain tied around the Boogeyman's neck, pulling it up to tear it off the floor, then he did the same with those which trapped his wrists and ankles; without giving him time to recover he intertwined together the three connected to the upper part of his body, wrapping them around his forearm and dragging him on the ground, therefore, reached the outside, he threw them down and said: «Here, look at what you've done: look at your default's result».

Disentangling himself in that pile of metal rings and limbs bent in unnatural positions the man finally managed to turn around, and when he did he froze on the spot: in front of him loomed a small gravestone, and on it, under two little snowflakes, it was written: “Here lie forever Jack Frost and the child he has never been able to give birth to”.

Unable to keep his self-control in front of a scene so annihilating Pitch screamed with all the strength he had, expressing the pain and despair he felt in a lament so sharp and strident to hurt even his own eardrums, and so shattering it didn't stop even when he managed to wake up, sitting up and emerging suddenly from that terrible nightmare. As soon as he realized he was still in his room, stiff and shivering on the bed completely drenched in sticky cold sweat and with his chest shaken by sobs, Voluptas came to his aid, going next to him and lovingly licking his left cheek, and he took heart a little: all the terrible visions he had had were just a bad dream, and they had never happened, or, rather, they hadn't happened yet.

Fallen prey to a blind fear the Boogeyman grabbed the Pureblood's muzzle, forcing it to bend down to stare into its eyes, then he stammered: «Voluptas! Voluptas, you're here... Jack... Jack is... I've been an idiot, an idiot! How could I abandon him? For three days I haven't heard anything about him, I would have had to keep an eye on him, check him from afar to see how he was! I cannot leave him like this, I had promised to help him, to make that belly he never wanted disappear, and yet I still haven't done anything: I have to go back, I have to see in what state he is and retrieve new tomes to read! I'll observe him without showing up, and I'll continue to destroy my Purebloods to make sure they couldn't hurt him, but I have to keep my promise before disappearing forever from his life: I cannot risk to let him suffer because of me, neither with my presence, nor with my negligence. Let's not waste time: bring me to him».

After rubbing his sweaty hands on the blanket, in order to avoid the risk of slipping, the man hugged Voluptas' neck, accepting more than willingly the help which had been quietly offered to him to stand up, then he climbed onto the mattress and, not without difficulty, he slid his right leg over the animal's rump, clinging to his mane to pull himself into the saddle. Without farther ado he spurred the horse, making it advance at a trot along the corridor and gradually dissolving the various protection spells he had previously raised, but when, at a crossroads, he guided it to the right, this put its hooves down, snorting and pulling towards the other direction.

Struggling against its stubbornness Pitch exclaimed, his voice cracked: «Voluptas, please, it's not the right time to throw a tantrum, we must go, we must take the corridor to the exit without being discovered... Voluptas!».

The reproaches, the threats and the tugs served no purpose: the Pureblood didn't want to obey the commands, and in fact, blatantly ignoring its rider, he walked along the other passage; too tired to fight the Boogeyman gave up, consoling himself with the fact that, albeit decidedly more uncomfortable, even this second route was safe to leave the lair without being noticed, and he
dropped the reins, letting the rebel beast have its way.

After about a minute the two came out in a small cave, at the end of which, illuminated by the moon, was visible a narrow shaft leading to the surface, and the man blurted out: «Now tell me, how will we climb this? I was driving you in the opposite direction just to arrive at a most comfortable exit and avoid wasting my powers in unnecessary stunts!».

Visibly annoyed he dismounted, going right towards the duct to assess, in order to go up it, whether it was more convenient dematerializing themselves or evoke a platform of magic sand, and when he noticed a figure slumped on its bottom rolled his eyes and snorted: he had now lost count of the animals fallen down there, dying from their wounds or from starvation, and the mere idea of having to move yet another rotting corpse to clear a path filled him with disgust.

Praying it were an individual with horns or, at least, dead very recently, Pitch approached it, but soon, in the midst of the dry leaves which covered its body, he spotted a blue strip: a decidedly unnatural colour for a wild animal's fur. With anxiety growing in his chest he rushed towards that not identified pile, fell on his knees and started to dig, and in less than a second he found exactly what he feared most.

«Jack!» he shouted in a voice cracked with panic.

The boy, who had let himself being uncovered and embraced without a lament, turned the head dirty with mud and dust with difficulty, and he took a moment to allow his bloodshot eyes to focus on what was in front of himself, but when succeeded he brighten up and whispered: «Pitch... I knew you'd have come back...».

Trying to ignore the pain he felt the Boogeyman pulled him even closer to himself to observe him, checking with his irises if he had visible injuries and stroking him with the palm to see if he had suffered internal lesions, but when he arrived at his abdomen he stiffed: the little belly which had grown, much more swollen than it was when he had left him and always pleasantly warm, was as cold as ice.

Half closing his eyes to focus better the Man in the Moon leaned over the magic water's basin through which he could see everything, he moved his hand to recall the moonbeam he had used to illuminate Jack and then he whispered: «Oh, Pitch, Pitch, you've changed so much: I struggle to recognize you, and yet I find you more and more familiar».

Light footsteps accompanied by a slight metallic clang interrupted his trail of thoughts, inching closer along a secondary corridor, and when they got by his side a manly voice, but not particularly deep, said: «I've done what you ordered me, my lord: I moved Jack's staff on the top of a ridge which is visited only by small animals and I have instructed some moonbeams to guard him. If any child will dare to climb up there I will move it anywhere in no time. Do you need anything else?».

Without troubling himself to turn around the man smiled and murmured: «Very well. Come here and watch with me: the prodigal son is coming home».

Obeying without any hesitation the interlocutor reached him, placed a hand so white to seem shining in its own light on the base made of stone, in order not to lose balance, and leaned forward, peering closely at the liquid's surface; holding his breath to avoid rippling it, he stared at it for a long time, following with his eyes the image of Pitch wrapping Jack in a blanket, rushing up the shaft and then hastily jumping into Voluptas' saddle, and he commented: «He looks pretty worried». 
«Oh, he is» replied the master of the house; «Jack is very weak, he fell for seventy feets before landing at the bottom of that shaft, and his belly is as cold as a piece of ice: he has every reason to be worried».

Wincing the other asked: «Did something happen to the baby?».

«No, no» promptly reassured him the Man In The Moon; «I would never let them die, especially for a stupid reason. Actually Jack's belly it is as hot as ever inside: I just cooled a little his skin».

«It was you!?».

«Yes» simply replied the man.

Perceiving a turmoil in his subordinate he turned to look at him, briefly examining his armour of steel and white gold and the spear he always carried around, then he remarked: «You look worried: do you have something to ask me?».

The warrior hesitated a long time before speaking, the light grey irises restlessly roaming along the floral decorations which adorned the pedestal next to which he stood, but in the end he managed to gather the courage and asked: «My lord, don't you think you overdid it?».

Raising an eyebrow to show all his perplexity and hide the annoyance that that question had caused him the master of the house ordered: «Explain yourself».

Taking a deep breath the other explained: «You forced Jack to give birth to the new Guardian without giving him any choice, you tied him up and beat him, you made him fertile in an almost traumatic way, you've been aggravating the symptoms of pregnancy and obstructed his every action, you never stepped forward to help him or Pitch to deal with the situation, and now this... isn't it too much? Wouldn't it have been better explaining them clearly what the world needs, or at least avoid raging on two creatures who were already suffering?».

«Since when did you start to become compassionate towards Pitch, huh, Nightlight?» mocked him the Man in the Moon; «The last time you met him you haven't been very understanding with him, or maybe you've already forgotten the battle we fought centuries ago? It's not time for mercy, nor for patience or affectation: it's time for action, and in order to achieve what we need we must be determined and resolute».

Coming at attention Nightlight answered: «I beg your pardon, my lord: I've been a fool. It's obvious that you've been thinking long and hard about how to move, and that you've well weighed the decisions and actions to be taken: I will never doubt you any more. I take my leave: it's nearly the time to check out the pools to extract the new moonbeams. For any requests, do not hesitate to call me».

After a deep bow the boy walked away without waiting for an answer, but the man didn't scold him: he was well aware that it was better not to delay too much the release of the new moonbeams, and, anyway, he knew that the other felt towards him solely and exclusively respect.

When she saw him entering the corridor, however, a shade of sadness crossed his face and he called out: «Nightlight!».

The other quickly turned, stepping forward to better show himself to his sight, and asked: «Yes, my lord?».

Firmly staring into his eyes the master of the house said: «There is a reason behind my actions: a very important reason, which is not the personal entertainment. For now I haven't yet explained much,
because I've been busy growing the baby and keeping an eye on the situation, but soon I'll tell you everything and you'll finally understand. Do not betray me, Nightlight: stay close to me».

«I would never betray you, my lord, nor I would ever leave your side, for no reason at all» promptly assured the warrior.

After nodding the Man In The Moon dismissed him with a gesture, carefully following his light footsteps receding down the corridor, and when he was certain he had finally gone away he let out a deep and suffering sigh, turning with difficulty to peer the revealing water.

¹ In Italy the required age to officially gain the permission to take care of your young siblings is eighteen years old

Chapter End Notes

I hope you liked this chapter! Feel free to leave a comment, if you want to. Next chapter will be published on the next Friday. Have a nice evening
WE DON'T HAVE TO BE ALONE – CHAPTER 11

If only it had been someone else, Pitch, no doubt, would have split his sides laughing: it was exceedingly ridiculous how often misfortunes of every kind had come upon him, and enormously exhilarating the insistence with which he insisted on getting into trouble, as like as the ease with which he managed to create all sorts of problems. Oh, how much he would have sneered if in that situation he had found a pathetic human being, or better yet Bunnymund, bent over with laughter as he couldn't look away from the show of his slow decline, act by act until the epilogue, as in a splendid play... but though he tried to draw any other fulfilling fantasies, the reality in front of him did nothing but overwhelm it and destroy it: the unfortunate was not any character, but his little snowflake, every single fall and injury suffered was likely to be the last and the Boogeyman couldn't even laugh at the irony of fate, bent over with pain as he struggled to keep the boy's eyes opened.

Choking back with difficulty a sob he thickened the blanket of darkness in which he had enveloped his lover, fastening a corner over his shoulder to protect his face by the gusts of wind, then he leaned toward him and asked: «Jack, can you hear me? I know you're so tired, but you must not close your eyes, do you understand? Continue to look at me and do not close your eyes! Let's talk a little together: are you comfortable? Do you feel cold? I covered your head to protect you, but if that's not enough I can do more: you just need to ask».

In response the boy trembled, the irises which continually threatened to roll back, and eventually he turned his face toward him, sinking it in his triceps.

«No, Jack, no!» exclaimed the man, trying in every way not to show the panic he felt in order not scare him; «You must not close your eyes, do you remember? You don't want me to do the whole trip on my own while you sleep, huh, baby? You are the Guardian of Fun, I'm sure you wouldn't like to know that I got bored! Did you guess where we're going?».

With a groan Frost raised the eyelids again, clinging with the strength born of desperation to his partner's collar to stay awake, then he stammered: «Home?».

Moved by the other's efforts Pitch dropped the reins and passed also his right arm around his chest, trusting in Voluptas' intelligence and sensitivity to continue the ride while holding his lover's head, then he lifted him a little to spare him painful jerks and whispered: «I'm sorry, you got wrong. No home for now: you need heat and light, and in my lair there's neither of them. I'm taking you to North's baths: do you like it? The steam will help you breathe better, the hot water will warm you up and I'll give you everything you want: cuddles, massages, a nice scented bath, everything you're like receiving. Everything, Jack: just keep your eyes open for me. We're almost there: hold on, baby».

Compulsively stroking his left cheek and his hair, both to reassure him and to prevent him from dozing off, the Boogeyman dared to look up for a moment, sweeping the horizon with his eyes to
check it, and he felt his heart skip a beat when he recognized the mountain chain whose peaks North's Palace was hidden among: the Pureblood had been good at galloping, taking advantage of the faster currents and of all its power to move at breakneck speed while not tossing its riders, and now the destination wasn't that far. As if reading his thoughts the horse whinnied, turning slightly to the right and starting to descend, and the man, who had immediately noticed the faint cloud of steam which rooted at the foot of a glacier, exclaimed: «Here we are, Jack! Are you ready to land?».

No answer came to his ears, but he had no possibility to check whether this had never been uttered or if it had simply got lost in the wind: among the blinding glare of the snow, the blanket of fog and the chaos of warm currents ascendant alongside others, cold, descendants, it was not easy at all finding and following the right course, and he had to take the reins again, at least to keep himself firmly into the saddle.

Deftly guiding Voluptas among the rocky crags and the eddies of air Pitch managed to make it glide and then land, more or less softly, into the basin, avoiding by a hair's breadth the impact against a group of icy stalagmites which appeared in front him all of a sudden; not caring at all about his horse he dismounted, accidentally ripping some small strand of darkness from its fickle mane as he tried in every way to bring Jack down without hurting him; finally, after trudging among the clumps of moss up to the first pool available, he laid his light burden on the ground and took his face between his palms, giving it some delicate slap on the cheek to wake him up.

«Jack» he called him, with as much sweetness as much urgency; «Jack, baby? Don't close your eyes: we've arrived. After all the cold you've felt you'll definitely want to take a nice hot bath, won't you? I'll undress you, but you should give me a hand: you have to lift your hips to help me take your pants off, then to sat down to let me take off the hoodie, but most of all you have to stay awake, do you understand? Now I'm going to untie the ribbon and the string you fastened around your calves».

Without waiting for a nod he began to untie the tangle of laces, hurriedly unravelling them and throwing them away, then he quickly stripped him, slowing his movement only when he took off his hoodie and vest together, in order to better follow his dangling head's irregular swaying and avoid suffocating him; after briefly checking that his skin had not suffered superficial wounds and verified, unfortunately and for the second time, that his belly still remained as cold as an icicle, he decided what to do and slid his arms under his body, tightening the left around his shoulder and the right behind his knees.

«Keep your head up, Jack» he urged him in a thoughtful tone.

Without hesitation he lifted him up, holding him away from his chest for a few seconds to let his clothes fell down into dust, then he immediately returned to hug him tightly, murmuring reassuring sentences as he advanced cautiously along the slippery bank. Since he hadn't found an aided access to the first spring Pitch went straight to the second one, walking around it in the hope to be able to dive, if not easily, at least without risking to break his neck, but there the rocks were even more irregular and sharp than before; trying not to get discouraged he passed in sequence to a third and a fourth, cursing himself for having landed so far from the large pool in which North had guided him, but in the end his efforts were rewarded: a flight of steps, steep and chipped, but equally useful, appeared among the steam right in front of him, sloping down into a deep and narrow pool of water slightly pink.

Hurrying at first along a meandering path through the moss, then down those rough stairs, the Boogeyman plunged to the waist, but just when he was about to lay his lover in the healthy liquid a voice shouted: «No, Pitch, wait! A sudden heat will only harm him!».

Startling the man turned and, in the midst of the thick fog which surrounded him, he saw Toothiana,
her feathers and wings soaking wet in dew and her face flushed as she flew toward him with difficulty.

Not amused at all by the Guardian’s ruffled and ridiculously upset look Pitch countered: «His belly has been as cold as ice for more than twenty minutes, I must do it! What will happen if the child dies? He needs to warm up!».

«Even more so!» exclaimed the fairy, awkwardly landing next to him; «A thermal shock is the last thing Jack and the baby need! I have another solution in mind, but first bring him here: I want to check something».

Albeit reluctantly and trembling with anxiety the Boogeyman headed back, cupping his hand over his genitals to maintain at least a little decency and not to deprive him of all dignity, then he reached the knelt Guardian and lifted him slightly, so as to bring him nearly at her womb level. The woman didn't waste time and immediately bent over the boy, placing her hand on his swollen belly and her lips at the limit between this and the stomach; she remained in that position for a long time, groping her free hand on Jack's neck to check his pulse and feel his temperature, but in the end she stood up with a smile and said: «Superficially the belly is still cold, but inside it seems to be very hot, and globally, albeit weak, Jack is healthy. I know that, in the past, he has already come here at the baths, and that heat doesn't cause him permanent damages, but we don't know what effect it may have on the child, so it's better not to risk. Sit here, lay him on yourself and start to wet his legs; in the meanwhile I'll go to take the towels, so we can soak them with warm water and wrap them around him».

Not daring to contradict such a wise suggestion the man obeyed, mildly sitting in the hollow which had been indicated to him and resting his love on his thighs, then he took care of him as best as he could, settling him against his chest to prevent him from slipping, holding his head to ease the respiration, spraying tiny drops of thermal water to gradually accustom him to the heat and discretely caressing the small belly, no longer so small, which deformed his abdomen.

After minutes which seemed hours to him he glimpsed Toothiana reappear in the middle of the steam, now so soaked she couldn't even fly, and she followed her slow and hesitant steps with increasing anxiety, wincing every time he spotted her putting a foot wrong and choking back a scream when he saw her slipping into the pool. Torn between the need to rescue one of the few people able to help him and the duty to keep his partner safe Pitch hesitated, but in the end the fairy managed to recover by herself: coughing and shaking her head she allowed herself a moment, then she quickly retrieved the towels she had brought, wrapping them around an arm and waving the other to swim towards the lovers.

Accepting more than willingly the hand which was offered to her she climbed the stairs, stumbling several times and almost threatening to collapse on the two she wanted to help, but eventually she managed to settle down and exclaim: «Uh, here I am! Take these, Pitch: among them there's a smaller towel you can wrap around his waist; while you search for it I start to squeeze these larger two, so we'll be able to cover his legs and chest».

Turning to leave him a bit of intimacy the Guardian grabbed a big towel and began to twist it on itself, and the Boogeyman took the opportunity to move the forearms he had joined to cover his partner's groin, and, using a foot, pick a small towel from the pile; after brushing it on his chest and belly to warm them up and remove the water in excess he wrapped it around his hips and urged Toothiana so that she handed him new towels, which he readily draped over the rest of his limbs, folding the edges to make sure that no draft could penetrate and cool him down.

While he continued to work hard, rubbing his palms on the fabric to stimulate the blood flow in the
underlying muscles, the fairy pulled herself out of the pool, shook her feathers and swelled them in a vain attempt to dry them, then she grabbed him by the wrists and, staring at him with an encouraging look, she whispered: «Pitch! Don't be afraid: everything is fine now. Jack haven't been harmed, he's safe and soon we will give him some medicine to help him recover: you have nothing to fear».

In a voice broken by despair the man interrupted her: «It is not true, you can't know this! And what if the child died? Jack is not a woman, his belly would end up becoming gangrenous and he would die within few hours!».

«Trust me» insisted the Guardian; «The Man in the Moon has troubled himself so much to make sure he got pregnant, he would never allow him to die, not for a reason so silly as a frostbite beginning! I'm sure he's been watching over him and protecting him until you found him, and that he did the same with the child: it's all right, I can feel it, and I'm sure that, if you could just calm down a little, you would feel it, too. Try not to panic: even though Jack is unconscious he senses your presence, and, no doubt, he will get upset if he perceives you trembling and gasping as you're doing now. Yes, very well, hug him tightly: he will be happy to know you love him so much. Listen to me, massaging his muscles is a good idea and I'm glad you had it, but these towels are too rough for his skin, and moreover he's covered in mud: I'm going to take a bar of soap, okay? Do you know where I can find it?».

After hugging Jack and starting to rock him gently, Pitch took a deep breath and explained: «Go back in the small dry cave near the entrance, where you got the towels, then turn toward the west: few feet far from you you'll find a gibbous rock, vaguely resembling a Yeti, and behind it a low-rise ridge full of pendulous lichens. Follow it until it bends sharply, and at that point continue straight for about twenty steps, until you get to a semi-circular basin covered with falls of pure water: next to the one which splits into three floods you'll find a recess, and in it the soap. Six months ago I found it there, and I don't think that North moved it. Be careful when you'll run along the rock wall: there the path is very slippery».

«Don't worry, I'll be careful and I'll be back as quickly as possible» reassured him Toothiana.

After giving him a small pat of encouragement on his shoulder she began to run, dripping drops and drenched feathers everywhere while trying to keep the tails raised and away from her legs, and the Boogeyman prayed in his hearts she didn't slip: he didn't have the strength to carry both her and the boy to the Palace, and he needed all possible assistance to cure the partner.

As if he had read his mind this moved weakly, moaning something unintelligible and stirring beneath the cloths, and the man came quickly to his aid, throwing his arm around his shoulders to look into his irises and murmuring: «Good morning, Jack! How do you feel? No, no, do not tire yourself: just nod. Is it alright, huh? You don't feel any pain, do you? Perfect. Now we'll have a nice scented bath, so I will sweep away all this mud from your skin and I'll massage your sore muscles: do you like the idea? If you cannot keep your eyes open do not trouble yourself: close them, and sleep if you feel the need to».

Reassured by his words and the calm tone with which they had been uttered Frost brightened up, bending the corners of his mouth in a hint of a smile and finally closing the eyelids over his eyes rolled back; touched and, at the same time, hurt by the weak reaction Pitch smiled back and, after placing his lover's head against his triceps to spare him the fatigue of keeping it raised by himself, he grabbed the two larger towels and put them aside, leaving only the one wrapped around his waist and starting to wet his skin to prepare it for the bath and remove the biggest fragments of mud and leaves.

Just when he had finished combing his ruffled hair a figure appeared on his right and exclaimed:
«Found it! I'll leave it to you, okay? Your room is ready, but I should add some wood in the fire to heat it up better and, above all, take all the necessary from the infirmary. Do you feel like handling the situation by yourself?».

Hit right where he felt weaker the Boogeyman gasped, protectively leaning over the boy and looking at her like a hunted prey, then he whispered with difficulty: «Yes... yes, I can do it».

«I have no doubt that you can do it, Pitch» intervened Toothiana; «In fact I asked you a different question, but the answer is now clear. Jack's clothes are in a pitiful state, so leave them here: we will retrieve them later. In order to cover him you can use one of the towels left: there are a few in the cave near the access tunnel, and you will not have trouble finding a suitable one. See you later».

Continuing to hug Jack tightly the man followed the fairy with his eyes, exploiting all his willpower in order not to think about anything and, thereby, avoid being overwhelmed by the situation, and when he saw her disappear he succeeded: an opaque veil fell over his eyes, considerably clouding the sight, but inhibiting any reflection which was ever born in his mind, and for the first time in almost half an hour he successfully stopped trembling. Confused by the blurred vision he tried to focus on a detail at a time, proceeding first with removing the last towel which still covered the boy, then grabbing the bar of soap which had been left on a rocky outcrop: holding it firmly in his fingers he rubbed it on the lover's body, insisting particularly on the legs, the arms and the chest and daring only later to brush it gently on his belly, for fear that an excessive pressure could bother him, then, using the lather created, he began to cleanse his rebel hair.

He couldn't say when he lost his grip on the soap, whether immediately or only just before he realized his hand was empty, but when he noticed it he didn't give weight to it: Frost's skin was now clean and scented, and there was no reason for him to lose time retrieving an object which has become useless. After briefly rinsing his partner he picked him up, lifting him carefully while he stood up, then he concentrated to dissipate at least in part the fuzzy blanket which had dropped on his irises, and he walked along the path; relying more on the touch and on his innate sense of direction rather than on his fallacious sight he managed to reach the small raised cave on the basin's borders, to dry himself and the boy and wrap him in a large towel, then he turned to the exit and headed there.

He could never remember anything about that short walk, either the suffocating tightness of the long access tunnel he had inevitably taken, nor the cold and the whiteness of the snow through which he had necessarily trudged, nor the friendly shadows in the Palace's corridors he had obviously traversed: nothing, not even the smallest detail. He seemed to have slid into a dream without shape or volume, without colour, without feelings, a sort of trance, inexplicable and apparently impossible, from which, however, and fortunately, he awoke unharmed, dressed with the tunic with rips he had invented months before and with Jack softly lying on a bed.

Shaking his head weakly he looked around to familiarize with his surroundings and it took only a few seconds to him to identify the round window facing north and the large hearth: that was definitely the room Santa Claus had generously donated to him. Glad to have reached the desired destination despite the unexpected dizziness Pitch sat on the mattress and started to undo the towel to release the boy and then be able to settle him under the sheets, but, as soon as he uncovered his feet, he got appalled: wounds of all kinds disfigured them, some open, other sharp, some large and superficial and others so deep to show the tendons, and scabs and dirt blocked them, thickening them and clearly hiding several active infection.

Pressing a hand over his mouth to stifle a sob the Boogeyman stood up and walked toward the entrance: Frost was now officially out of danger and leaving him alone for a couple of minutes was not risky, so it was better to take the opportunity to rush to the infirmary, retrieve disinfectant and bandages and remedy the mess.
With his mind completely focused on the new mission he reached the door, opened it and got into the hallway, but he didn't even have the time to walk a few steps that something struck him: something hard, lumpy, strong, something cruel, which hit him on the left cheekbone and upended him in a blink of an eye.

With a mental alertness he didn't think to still possess he clung to a trunk which furnished the corridor, avoiding by a hair's breadth the impact against the pointy studs which decorated its front, but due to the momentum he tumbled over it, coming almost to get stuck between the cover and the back wall and finally glimpsing his assailant's green irises.

«We had a deal, Pitch» menacingly whispered Bunnymund, bending the legs for a new attack; «But, as the lousy maggot you are, you have forgotten it, and, as I promised, I'll make you pay dearly for this».

That single, bare sentence was enough to crash the house of cards: every wall, every block, every defence Pitch had been able to raise in his mind to stem the thoughts which had threatened to drown him collapsed, unleashing that river in flood which swept over him suddenly and with all its power. Oh, no, Pitch had never forgotten the deal the Pooka had imposed to him, nor the threats he had sent him: he perfectly remembered the words he had uttered in his warren before reopening the tunnel and bring him back to North, he remembered the dozens of implications hidden in them, he had thought about them thousands and thousands of times in the recent months, and yet he had been able to fail. He had done it in good faith, sure he was acting for a greater good, moving away only and solely to preserve his little snowflake, but those were excuses which didn't stand in the face of reality: Jack laid lifeless in the other room, wounded only because of his mistakes, weakened only because of his escape, umpteenth and more evident emblem of his failures. He had failed, failed, failed. He had failed, and he had done it with the thing he cared about most in the world. He had failed, and there was nothing he could do to remedy.

It was for this reason that, when the Easter Bunny approached him and grabbed him by the collar, he had no reaction: whatever he was about to do he deserved it, as much as Frost had deserved a far better partner than him, and he had no right to kick against the punishment he was about to receive. He didn't lift a finger when the opponent kneed him in the abdomen, levering on his legs in order not to fall and to better offer himself to his anger; he didn't let out groan when, with a snarl, he threw him a hook a hair's breadth away his right eye, tossing him to the end of the corridor; he didn't try to run away when he heard him running towards him, moving his contracted limbs away from his stomach to expose it to his furious kicks; finally, when the sensed him lift a paw over his skull to crash it, he didn't raise up his arms to defend himself, but he merely prayed his lover could recover from the pain of his inexcusable defaults and return to live peaceful and happy.

A second before the other slammed the foot, however, a voice shouted: «Stop! Stop it!».

Confused sounds of a fight echoed in the passage, followed by heavy footsteps and sharp orders, and eventually something pounced again on the Boogeyman, grabbing him by the shoulders and forcing him to sit up; when this, however, struggling against the dizziness and the fatigue, managed to reopen the eyes, he found himself not in front of Bunnymund's green irises, but Toothiana's fuchsia ones.

«Pitch! How do you feel? Did he hurt you? Did he injure you?» anxiously asked the fairy.

«Whatever I did to him it's nothing in comparison to what he deserves!» shouted the Pooka.

«You're just a fool!» retorted the woman; «You're preaching from a pulpit on which you are not worthy to stand, and on the base of assumptions you're not able to do! Only Jack has the right to judge him for what he did, and you're no one to act for him! Be happy that he came back and that he
saved Jack from certain death, and don't add more pain to what all of us already suffered».

«All of us except him! We've been after Jack, cured him, consoled him, we racked our brain to find a way to soothe the symptoms of pregnancy, we bent over backwards to make him happy and despaired when he escaped, and he, this vile beast, what did he do? He fled away from the problem, pretending he was working to resolve it, he came back just for a few hours, then he decided he didn't like the situation and ran with his tail between his legs, hiding in any hole in the world to celebrate the newfound freedom while we were losing sleep to find him! Life is beautiful, isn't it, Pitch? Life is beautiful when you only think about yourself! Maggot! You disgust me, and it disgust me the idea that you were lounging about in your beloved darkness while Jack almost killed himself just to run after you!».

During that series of insults and offences the Easter Bunny, who had promptly been tackled by North, managed to free himself at least partially, getting few feet far from Pitch's face and casting him a look overflowing with contempt, but the Boogeyman could only glance back at him with an expression full of sadness: almost nothing he had been accused of was true, but defending himself was useless, because the greatest sin had actually been committed by him, and eclipsed by far everything else.

Pressing a hand on the man's neck to make him slightly raise his head Toothiana ordered his interlocutor: «Look, Bunnymund: look at him straight in the eyes. Does he look like a person who enjoyed doing what he did? I dare you to have the courage to say he never suffered».

Deforming his face into a disgusted grimace Bunnymund blurted out: «Even the evil ones shed crocodile tears, but only the righteouses feel pain. On one point Toothiana is right: I cannot know what you did while you were away. Have you remained holed up in some unreachable corner of your den? Have you taken refuge in some secret bases scattered around the world? Did you go out to scare children? Come on, satisfy my curiosity: I want to hear from your mouth word by word the description of how low you have stooped while the rest of us was suffering».

If only the man had been more himself, or less tired, he would have thought twice about telling the truth, and, no doubt, he would have invented in a jiffy a lie as dreadful as credible, making sure not to arouse the slightest pity in the listener and, indeed, to flare him up and make him feel even more justified to attack: it was not his thing seeking comfort or compassion, nor trying to make his guilt milder by revealing what was actually behind it. At that moment, however, his mind was not sufficiently lucid to make such an effort, so he simply opened his cut lips and confessed: «I was destroying my Purebloods. I couldn't kill them by myself, not all of them, at least, because they are too strong when they're all together, so I accompanied them to the special children, those who doesn't feel fear, and I made them fail and dissolve. I went on for three days, but in the end I was too tired and I had to go back to my lair to rest. I stayed there for a few hours, but the Nightmares didn't give me a moment's peace, therefore I woke up and got ready to go back to watch Jack from afar; when I arrived at the exit, however, I found him semi-unconscious on a pile of leaves and with the belly as cold as a piece of ice, so I decided to bring him here, to warm him up, medicate all his wounds and keep him safe. You know the rest».

A look of pure wonder appeared on the Pooka's muzzle at that statement, his eyes wide with astonishment and his ears lowered, as if they were not able to withstand the unexpected truth, and he asked: «You, you were... committing suicide? Why?».

Holding back the tears with difficulty the fairy whispered: «I told you not to add more pain to what all of us already suffered, Bunnymund. North, bring him away: the last thing Jack needs is hearing his shouts. Sandman, please, take the Himalayan absinthe North has just picked up and give it to the Yetis, so they can make the infusion: ask them to prepare two glasses, then bring them to me here». 
Without offering the slightest resistance the Easter Bunny let himself be dragged away, his gaze still shocked by the revelation and looking like he didn't know neither what to say, nor what to do, and a faint rustle announced that Sandy, probably hidden behind the imposing figure of North, was ready to leave: in a few seconds the trio walked down the corridor, silent as it had ever been in that late morning, then it opened a door and disappeared in the distance, leaving Pitch and the woman alone.

Lowering her glistening eyes on the man's half closed ones she stroked his cheek and said: «Fool, you're nothing but a fool: you've been living for almost a year closely with Jack without anything bad happening to him, how could you believe that your Purebloods could turn against him? They know him well, now».

Coughing with difficulty the Boogeyman replied: «Are you kidding me? You saw the Pureblood who was about to pounce on him, too».

«No, Pitch» countered the other; «What I saw was a master too tired and upset to even be able to perceive his servants beside himself. Your mood and your conditions have an impact on your creatures: at that moment I was scared to death, but in hindsight I have to admit that the Pureblood's expression was more confused than aggressive. I don't know how Nightmares works, and probably I will never know it, but one thing is certain: as long as you don't let yourself be overwhelmed by fear they are under your control, and they would never dare to disobey you».

«No, they're evil beasts, ready to strike out on their own as soon as I have my back on them, and I cannot let them live: I have to eliminate the most dangerous ones» insisted the man.

«And what are the most dangerous ones, huh, Pitch?» urged him Toothiana; «Where is the dividing line between the acceptable and the unacceptable when talking about personal safety? You would never stop: if you managed to eliminate all your Purebloods, you'd get on to the medium sized Nightmares, no doubt, then to the smaller ones, and eventually you wouldn't even dare to summon your black sand. Bunnymund exaggerated when he said you were committing suicide, but not too much: you'd end up letting yourself wither, and it is wrong from any point of view».

«It would probably be the only way for me not to make any more mistakes» stated Pitch.

«No, Pitch, it would be a good way to make a huge one. You shouldn't condemn yourself: to err is human, and you are much more human than you think. Don't get stranded on the mistakes you made, look beyond. Think about all the wonderful things you've done: all the times you made Jack smile, all the times you made him happy and feel special, all the rides you shared and all the stories you read together, all the wonderful places you showed to him. Think about the fact that, even though you fled, you then decided to come back, and don't you dare even for a moment to contradict me by saying you did it too late, or similar nonsense: you changed your mind long before something irreparable happened, and, however, you run away convinced you were pursuing Jack's sake, not out of selfishness. Stop destroying yourself, Pitch: you're perfect just as you are for him» hushed him the fairy.

Hearing her nipping in the bud the reasonings he was ready to bring about to reiterate his inadequacy and feeling himself blush for the compliments which had been addressed to him, the Boogeyman gave up arguing and tried to deflect the conversation, pointing out: «Jack's feet are covered in lesions: I must absolutely retrieve bandages and disinfectant and medicate them».

«It was one of the first things I noticed when I found you at the thermal baths, and I've already carried the wherewithal in the room, so you don't need to go to the infirmary: the bandages and disinfectant are already on the table. No, don't stir, you cannot enter now: your face is bruised and you're barely able to stand up, how do you think Jack would react? Be patient for a few minutes: the cuts are already healing, the dizziness will fade and the glass of medicine that I've asked for will
definitely put you back on your feet. Rest a little and try to calm down, so soon you'll recover» reassured him the woman.

After kissing his forehead to calm him, she began to rock him gently, clearly hampered by the difference in size, but not embarrassed at all, and the man, albeit not convinced he deserved forgiveness and such a privileged treatment, didn't have the heart to escape those fingers light as feathers: now he understood well that fleeing was not the solution. Remembering the loving care he had received from her few months before right in this Palace he let her, allowing her to briefly comb him, to check every little wound and even to cuddle him a little, and he sighed softly, absentmindedly caressing her long tail quills to thank her and struggling to hold back his guilt, in order to avoid letting slip other pathetic comments about himself and his behaviour.

After a few minutes' wait full of tenderness Sandman reappeared, sporting a beaming smile and holding in hands two cups of wood, and Pitch gladly the one which he offered to him, then he straightened his back and drank it all in one gulp; shaking his shoulders to dispel a chill he started to get up, but a sudden realization hit him and he exclaimed: «I can't believe I drank the medicine, now I'll collapse because of the cold and I won't be able to help Jack!».

«No, no, do not worry» hastened to reassure him Toothiana; «In the recent months North and the Yetis have been extensively studying the plant, and they discovered a subspecies whose side effects are much less intense than the most common variety's ones: you will probably shiver a little, but you won't risk to freeze».

Bucked up by these news the Boogeyman ran a hand over his face, both to dispel any trace of panic and to check that all the wounds had healed, then he pulled himself up and, swapping his glass with the Bringer of Dreams', he stated: «I'm going to give the medicine to Jack and medicate his feet. Feel free to come with me, if you want to: he's always enjoyed the company».

Laying a hand on his shoulder the fairy whispered: «We'll come, but not now: we have some things to settle, and, most importantly, we want to leave you a bit of intimacy. Don't cure only his body: it's not there where he's most hurt».

Puckering his lips to hide the pain this confirmation caused him he nodded, staring at a knot in the wood panel which covered the wall to prevent a tear rolling down his cheek, then he waited for the Guardians to say him goodbye and disappear in a secondary passage, and only at that point he managed to rise and turn his gaze to the door beyond which Jack rested. He stared at it for a long time, following the Christmas meander engraved on the jambs back and forth and losing himself while counting the edelweiss which composed it, as if trying to gather the courage to face what laid beyond that threshold, but in the end, remembering the words Toothiana had told him, he moved: running aground on the mistakes made was a childish and limiting gesture, which would have only lead him to err again and again and postponing the solution to the problem, and it was not the time to delay yet, since a long, long time.

Raising the best smile he could put together he entered the room and got next to the boy, feeling a slight pang in realizing he was so upset he couldn't even completely close his eyes while gasping during the sleep, and he preferred to let him rest a little longer, taking advantage of his unconscious state to medicate his feet and spare him, at least in part, the stabbing burning sensation which removing the scabs and cleaning the wounds would have caused him.

After placing a towel under his heels to avoid tarnishing the blankets he started to work at a good pace, using a rounded iron to remove the blood clots softened by the thermal waters, brushing a gauze soaked in disinfectant on the wounds so open and then removing all the traces of soil and dirt; he went on for long, proceeding very slowly so as not to cause him unnecessary sufferance and
dedicating whole minutes to the deeper cuts, and when he concluded he begin afresh, giving a
second wipe at both the soles to make sure he hadn't missed anything; finally, when he was certain
he had cured all the infections, he bandaged the injured extremities, taking care not to tighten too
much to let the blood flow and facilitate the healing.

Once he had finished his work he tidied up, throwing the pieces of fabric too soiled to be cleaned
into the fire and wrapping the other in the towel, then, after placing all of this far away from Frost, he
sat down beside him and shook him lightly to wake him.

«Jack? Jack, can you hear me? I know you're very tired, but you should take the medicine: are you
able to stay awake for a few minutes, so I can give it to you?» he asked in a gentle tone.

Stirring a little under the towel the boy moaned, opening his eyes with difficulty and immediately
staring into Pitch's ones, and this commented with a proud smile: «Good, Jack, very good, I knew
you'd have managed to. Come on, lean on me: I do not want you to tire yourself too much. Now I'll
bring the glass to your lips and slowly tilt it, okay? You'll just have to swallow, and, if you don't
manage to, you'll only have to pull my robe and I'll stop. Are you ready? If you need anything, give
me a sign».

In response Jack continued to look at him, not letting out neither a cry, nor a gesture, and the
Boogeyman decided to take it as a consent: passing his left arm around his shoulders he lifted him
up, straightening his back and supporting his head with his hand, then he grabbed the wooden cup
from the bedside table and brought it to his lips. Noticing that these didn't contact he was about to
give up and look for a spoon to feed him, but eventually he decided to make at least one attempt, and
it was with an expression of pure joy that he sensed his Adam's apple move to accompany the first
sip swallowed; kissing his forehead to reward him he encouraged him to continue, giving him a
cuddle for each inch of medicine he drank and continuing to repeat him how proud he was of him
and of his strength, and when the glass was completely emptied he whispered: «Perfect, Jack: you
drank it all. How about we go back to sleep? Do you need anything before, by any chance?».

Groaning imperceptibly the boy arched, squirming until he made the strip of towel which covered his
shoulders fall, and the man, realizing the cloth bothered him, hastened to loosen it and lower it to take
it away; as soon as he discovered the belly, however, Frost rested his palms on it, letting out a moan
almost hissing and casting him an expression quizzical and, at the same time, worried.

«Does it hurt, Jack?» ventured Pitch; «Or maybe you're you worried about the child? Don't worry,
everything should be fine: you don't have bruises or cuts, and the belly is warm again. If it makes
you feel more comfortable I can watch over you while you rest and check if it becomes livid. Don't
fear, baby: I will take care of you and make you feel good again».

The boy's eyes lit up with a new light, so full of happiness and gratitude to shine, and a subtle hint of
a smile appeared on his lips, bending their corners slightly up; touched by his reaction the
Boogeyman leaned over him, placing a gentle kiss on his swollen belly to reassure him further, and
when he sensed his hand resting on his neck he went on, caressing that taut skin with his mouth to
try to put him at ease as much as possible.

When he felt him perfectly relaxed and he got ready to straighten his back and pet his head to
facilitate sleep, however, he heard him start to stammer: «K-ke... e... p...».

Confused by that seemingly meaningless gibberish the man frowned and asked: «Keep? Did you
said “keep”, Jack?».

Jack faltered, trembling a little as he addressed him a look which seemed almost desperate and
begging for forgiveness, and Pitch suddenly realized what the other had tried to tell him.
«You want... you want to keep the baby? Is it this what you're trying to tell me?» he demanded, his irises already wide with amazement, and the boy did exactly what he expected: he snuggled against him, as if in search of comfort, and, albeit slowly and hesitantly, he nodded.

Chapter End Notes

I hope the chapter was worth the wait, feel free to leave me a comment, if you want to. Next chapter will be published on Friday. Have a nice evening!
As soon as she saw him nod Pitch winced, not ready at all to receive that positive response although, considering Jack's pleading expression, he had expected it, and he instinctively withdrew a little, not out of fear or distrust, but simply in wonderment: since the boy had discovered he was pregnant he had an attitude of complete rejection towards the unplanned belly, naming only to reaffirm his desire to get rid of it and touching it just to check it hadn't suffered any damage, so hearing him mentioning it lovingly and gently caressing it was an event shocking, to say the least.

After stepping back, as if, by observing the scene from a rearward position, he could be able to understand it better, the Boogeyman stood still, shivering a bit while still trying to digest the news, and he didn't noticed the other's reaction at all, too busy to stare at his bump to pay attention to his face; soon, however, he realized that the jolts which shook his swollen abdomen were too strong to be caused simply by breathing, and in fact, as he looked up, he found himself in front of his lover's shiny eyes, widened in vain to hold back the tears which had already reached the collarbones.

Taken aback the man opened his palms, raising them between himself and his partner as he was used to do when he calmed him while minimizing or clarifying a question, and he stammered: «No, no, Jack, don't do that, I didn't say no, I'm not refusing, I'm just... surprised, do you understand? You've always wanted to get rid of the baby and now you want to keep them, it's strange for me, I didn't...».

Soon he had to stop that rambling speech he had tried to set up as an explanation, the words dying in his throat in seeing that, for each new observation, the tears Frost shed and the tremors which shook him increased more and more, and he never dared to finish it: it was now clear that that uncontrollable crying was yet another symptom of the current pregnancy, and trying to reason with the boy, forcing his worn out mind to comprehend what, at that time, was not within its reach, was useless and, in the long run, it would have turned out deleterious.

Abandoning the futile phrases he had elaborated Pitch took Jack in his arms and began to rock him to tranquillise him, and he was not surprised to hear him weeping loudly, rather hastening to give light pats on the back, in order to quell, at least a little, those violent sobs, and little kisses on the temple, to remind him that he still loved him, as always and forever. Unfortunately all those caring attentions served no purpose, maybe too mild to be able to cancel a sufferance brooded for days, but in the end, where they failed, the fatigue won: although the lover's irises betrayed all the panic he still felt his eyelids descended slowly to cover them, his breath, albeit still rattling, gradually slowed almost to normal, and, finally, despite occasional chills persisted in running over him from time to time, his body stopped wincing, limiting the shivers only to the wrists and the jaw.

Sensing that his partner had partially calmed down the Boogeyman hugged him, taking care, however, to press his chest only against his right side, so as not to crush his belly and leave him room to catch his breath, then he whispered: «Good, Jack, breath slow, as you always do when you curl
up against me. Do you remember all the times you did it? You liked it, don't you? Today is not
different from any other day: you can lean against me and ask me for any cuddle, and I'll give it to
you you, as always. Let yourself go, Jack: listen to the beat of my heart and close your eyes».

Although with difficulty and teeth-chattering the boy followed every word of that little pep talk and
obeyed, tilting his head to the right and resting his forehead against his lover's sternum; touched by
his strength of will the man smiled, sliding his arm around his rib cage to support him, but when he
felt him slithering towards him to place his ear under the left collarbone he regretted the proposal he
had done: unlike the usual his heart was throbbing so fast and loud to make vibrate his every artery,
and there was absolutely no way to control it.

A few seconds before Frost reached him the sight of his wet cheeks gave Pitch an idea and he
quickly turned the torso, tearing off a cloth from his robe and bringing it to his face to dry it: the
perfect excuse to combine the useful with the pleasurable and, above all, to mask his own turmoil. As
he expected the boy responded meekly, allowing him to gently rub the fabric from the cheekbones
down to the base of the neck and arching his cervix to expose the soft flesh of the throat, and the
Bookeyman made sure to use all the delicacy which belonged to him, dabbing his skin in order not to
redden it further and insisting particularly on the hollows among his sinews and protruding bones.

Once he was sure he had removed any trace of moisture he wrapped the dark shred around his left
wrist, hoping that the tears now cold could give him relief, and it was at the same time with joy and
tension that he greeted his relaxation, happy to have put him at ease, but still concerned about the
uncontrollable palpitations which had caught his heart. In an effort to continue to keep the fact
hidden he slowly lifted his forearm, bending over its inside and smothering it with kisses to cover
with the smacks the pulse's deafening sound, which was now increased to the point it seemed to echo
not only in his chest, but even in the whole room, and yet this little trick managed to make him feel at
ease only for short: over time the anxiety and the nervousness which had gripped him since the boy
had revealed to him his shocking decision grew, fuelled by fears and confused thoughts and not
soothed at all by the cuddles he was giving, nor by the words of encouragement he was uttering, and
now he could clearly perceive the self-control abandoning him, slipping through his fingers like
wind, escaping from his body like the water which slowly evaporated from the cloth he was still
clutching.

Several times he was about to give up, stand up, hold his head in his hands, shout his dismay,
desperately ask “Why?”, not to Jack, but to himself, who had not been able to see that, behind those
little thoughtful gestures the partner devoted to his belly, there was more love than he had expressed
in words, who had not been able to guess his real desire, who had not been able to openly and
thoroughly discuss with him about such an important issue. Oh, he would have needed nothing to
resolve, just taking some days to reflect and a few hours to talk, and everything could have worked
out for the best right away, but he had not allowed: he had let fear grip him, not only preventing the
matter to come to a happy conclusion, which, however, was hard even in that moment in his opinion,
but also generating endless and needless suffering, and he had preferred to deduce what most pleased
him from a cursory observation, immediately throwing himself headlong into a wearing mission and
avoiding to face the situation. Now the words Toothiana had shouted him as he ran in his library
were clear: he would have had to think about what his snowflake really wanted, to ask him several
times, to explain in detail what the various options involved, not to take as true the few, short screams
he had shouted, moreover caused by the desperation of the moment and the emotional upheaval due
to pregnancy. He should have done this, but he hadn't, and it was too late to remedy, as much as
useless mulling endlessly over it: he had to proceed to the next problem, but the prospect of thinking
about that child never wished which rooted in his partner's belly frightened him maybe even more
than a full day spent regretting his own wrong choices.

While the man was trying to digest the news by now received more than five minutes before, to
silence his own mind on the brink of madness and not to let the internal conflict which wracked him appear in any way a crackling hiss came to his ears, making him wince and turn his eyes, and he found himself in front of the boy's crystal clear ones, the lower eyelids raised for the effort to open his mouth.

Sensing he was about to speak he forestalled him: «Jack, do you need something? Tell me what you need with a simple gesture: I'll take care to interpret it and give you what you want».

In that sentence, which was halfway between an order and a suggestion, Frost responded shaking his head, then he placed his hands on his bump, cupping them and trying again, and again unsuccessfully, to utter understandable words.

Grief-stricken by the difficulty his lover have just to put together a sentence Pitch guessed: «You want to talk about the baby, Jack? About you and them, maybe about the fact you want to keep them?».

After hearing him the boy nodded vigorously, and the Boogeyman, with equal determination, sharply replied: «No».

He immediately regretted the harshness he had used, excessive, cruel, too sincere in showing how little he was ready to deal with the topic, but he didn't reverse his choice: the main reason which had led him to postpone was not the bewilderment and the sense of inadequacy he felt, but Jack's evident exhaustion, and he was not going to wear him out further by starting a complex and draining discussion.

Before wonder and dismay could seize the boy the man hastened to explain: «I'm not refusing forever, Jack: I'm willing to discuss about this with you openly and in detail, but not now. You're exhausted, wounded, you can barely sit up with my help, how could you think you'd be able to bear a conversation, moreover so heavy? No, it's out of the question: now you'll get a good night's sleep».

A whine of protest broke from Frost's lips, so sharp and strident to hurt his throat and cause him to cough, but not to desist from his resistance: clinging at his lover's collar with the strength born of despair he drew him towards himself, opening his mouth in the mute request of the answer he hadn't received yet, and the man, now put on the spot, did the only thing he could think of and which he would have never be proud of.

«Close your eyes, baby» he warned him.

Then, with a quick wave of his hand, he disentangled the piece of cloth he had wrapped around his wrist, hanging it over his face and then letting the dark weave dissolve, disintegrating into fine grains of sand which, running among his fingers, slid on the boy's eyelids to definitely seal them in a deep sleep. Not even for a moment he feared he had caused him a nightmare, well aware of how the other had become so accustomed to the magic sand to suffer almost no effect, and to assure him a quiet rest he sent him an image of himself, rejoicing at the weak laugh he gave him: he had acted as a coward, although motivated by good intentions, but at least he had made him happy.

Making sure to proceed with caution so as not to wake him he plumped up the pillows, placing them against the headboard, then he picked him up and laid him against them, his back resting on the soft fabric and his head supported by a small cushion; after putting aside the towel in which he had carried him and tucking the sheet around his waist, he noticed that this was too short to cover him and he created a thin blanket of darkness, which draped on his chest to remedy the problem, therefore, checking a last time that his lover had received all the possible care, he allowed himself to think about himself.
First he stood up and repaired his robe, vaguely intending to ponder with calm and lucidity about what had happened in those brief but intense minutes, but soon the agitation gained the upper hand: before he could reflect he needed information, at least hints about what Jack had lived, said and thought while he was absent, and Toothiana was the only one who could help him. He had no intention to subject her to an insistent questioning, nor, least of all, to let her guess the research he had decided to start, so he couldn't go and look for her, appearing out of breath in front of her and with his mouth full of questions: he would have to wait for her to show up by herself, greeting her only for ostensible education, answering hesitantly to the questions about the boy's health she would have surely made and then gradually diverting the conversation to those eleven days he had missed. He should have given the impression of wanting to simply become aware of any illnesses he could have had, and not of the thoughts he might have shared, interpreting on her gestures the ideas he had matured and the reasonings by which we had come to them: it was the only way to begin to extricate himself in that jungle of shouted madnesses and unspoken truths.

With this plan of action in mind the Boogeyman began to pace the room, walking up and down in order to keep himself awake and not to be overwhelmed by the thousands of concerns which had gripped him, but soon a slight moan from Frost and a cramp in his right calf made him change strategy: the partner needed physical contact to stay calm, and anyway he had worn himself out too much in the previous week to be able to stand for long.

Limping with difficulty towards the bed he laid in it, sitting next to the boy and sliding an arm around his waist to make him feel his presence, but he made sure to twist his torso until he felt a dull pain in the spine, and to rest the neck on the headboard's hard knob: a small respite for his limbs was acceptable and, at that point, dutiful, but sleep was something he didn't want to and he couldn't afford, and he would have never allowed it to himself for any reason at all.

With a heavy sigh Toothiana closed the infirmary's last vase still open, making sure to align the cover's notch with the edge's one, so that the herbs contained in it could be kept completely dry, then she put it back on the lower shelf, leaving it handy for the other medicaments which, no doubt, she should have had to prepare.

After taking a deep breath she turned to Sandy, casting a wide smile to let him know she had finished her work, but the truth was that her heart was dripping with sadness: in the days before she had felt more pain and sense of helplessness than throughout her whole existence. How many times she had cried, going away with any excuse to avoid being seen by anyone, and especially in order not to see: not to see Pitch consumed in a useless search, not to see Jack slowly wither in sheets he wasn't even able to move, not to see the relationship between the two fading, stifled by horror and fear, because, though she had always been a strong woman, there were things she couldn't bear. She had tried to remedy, talking with the boy to soothe at least his loneliness and help him take the best decision, starting more than a conversation with the man to induce him open his eyes, but nothing had really worked: although she was caring and loving she couldn't hope to mend a relationship which she was involved into, simple messenger between two parties who had now closed themselves each in his own world, but this awareness hadn't made the failure less painful. She had felt the bottom fell out of her world when the Boogeyman had fled, blaming herself countless times for not having spoken more clearly and openly with him, for not having watched over him while he persisted to study on North's desk, for not having forced him to abandon those damn books which he thought to devour, but which actually devoured him, and to finally take the break he deserved and needed in order to face the issue with a clear mind, but when, two days and a half later, she had woken up and not found Frost in his bed, she had felt herself dying: he would have never imagined the situation could escalate to that point. Now useless nurse for a patient no longer present she had threw herself into his search, urging her fairies to redouble their efforts to find the old fugitive and the new one, and she
had completely stopped thinking, blinded by panic and completely lost in the chase, but now that the worst was over it was time to go back to dominate herself and use the head: behaving like a hunted animal was exactly what had brought everybody to ruin, therefore she should not allow it neither to herself, nor to the others, and she was more than willing to get tougher, if these had turned out to be the only possible way.

A discreet rustle suddenly came to her ears, buzzing first to her right, then to her left, and when she looked up she found herself in front of a small hummingbird of golden sand, its tiny head tilted as it watched her and its body perfectly still even though he was flapping its wings at a speeds so high to make them look like a simple halo of blurred light.

«I stood her daydreaming for long, huh, Sandy?» asked Toothiana to her silent partner, who had to wait for who knows how long; «I'm sorry: I got lost in my own thoughts. Come on, let's go visit Pitch and Jack».

With a quick leap she jumped down from the cabinet on which she had gradually landed, darting fast towards the door, but Sandman stepped between her and it, casting her a worried look and offering her a shimmering sphere of magic sand he had just shaped.

Touched by that gesture the fairy commented: «Oh, Sandy, you're really sweet, as always. Yes, I would really like to rest and make a nice dream, but first I'd like to check how the two lovebirds are: considering the ease with which they get in trouble I wouldn't be surprised to discover they have made another mess. May you save it for later?».

Raising his thumb the Bringer of Dreams pocketed the ball, flattening it a little to be able to slip it easily into a hidden fold of his garment, then he pulled away, opening an arm to give way to her; flashing a wide smile the woman accepted the invitation, dedicating him a quick bow before leaping into the corridor, then, waiting for him to fly next to her, she asked him: «What do you say, Jack has already told Pitch he wants to keep the baby?».

At that question Sandy began to scratch his chin, pondering deeply on the answer, then he turned and, slyly glancing at her, he nodded.

Chuckling Toothiana replied: «Yes, I think so, too! Since he finally decided a few days ago he has always been so eager to talk to him... I hope he had the strength not to only tell him, but also to explain the reasons which led him to change his mind, because the naked news themselves are pretty shocking».

While she was talking, extricating herself among the passages of the maze she had already roamed countless times, she turned the corner and found North and Bunnymund, the first serious and thoughtful, the second still clearly upset, so she exclaimed: «Oh, here you are. Did you put yourself together, Bunnymund? If you hadn't burst out like that you could have found out the truth in a less traumatic way: I hope this has been a lesson for you for the future. Come on, let's go visit them, but let's stay quiet: we should not disturb them until they have finished talking».

Once everybody had consented she headed back, turned into the passage leading to the bedroom she was looking for and then landed in order not to betray herself with the hum of the wings; proceeding with caution on the parquet she came to the door, keeping her ears open to grasp what was going on inside, but no sound reached her; after waiting for few seconds she braced up, unclosing the door slowly just enough to creep her head into the gap, and when she did that she couldn't hold back a touched smile.

The two lovers were on the bed together, one gently settled into the other's arms, and they had fallen into a deep sleep; however, while Jack was lying softly on the pillows and his lips were bent into a
hint of a smile, Pitch was sitting in a position so awkward to reduce his breathing to a hiss, and he had a furrowed brow: it was more than obvious that the agitation he felt had not died down, and that he had struggled in any way to stay awake.

It didn't take long to Toothiana to put two and two together, concluding that the Boogeyman had received the news, but no explanations, and that he had decided to discover them for themselves, and for a moment she was tempted to shake him, at least to spare him the pain in his back he was certainly experimenting, but in the end she didn't call him: the fact he had fallen asleep against his will was a symptom rather evident of the fatigue which weighted down his limbs and mind, and only when this had faded he would have been ready to understand.

Giving a quick nod to the other Guardians she invited them in, pressing her index finger on her mouth to reiterate not to make noise, then she walked towards the closet to retrieve blankets and pillows and get ready to sleep.

A few hours later Pitch woke, fairly rested, but strangely numb: unlike the usual his mind had been fast to get active again, while the body still stubbornly refused to respond properly to his commands. It didn't take long to him to understand why: he just needed to open his eyes and turn his head to realize that he had slept the whole time with his legs laying on the left side and the torso twisted to the right, while the neck, judging by the pang which had seized him, should have remained twisted in a somewhat unnatural position.

Biting his lower lip to stifle a groan he levered on the palms, finally resting his back against the pillows and giving some relief to his creaking spine, then, while waiting to recover, he looked around, immediately widening his eyes in astonishment: the Guardians had literally surrounded him, settling themselves in the most absurd places and ways, and the scene, albeit sweet and somewhat hilarious, managed to cause him only a great embarrassment.

North, the only one who had maintained a minimum of demeanour, had settled down in the armchair, draping a colourful wool blanket on his legs, a serious expression while snoring loudly; Toothiana, instead, had sat on a pile of pillows placed on the floor and then rested her crossed arms and her head on the mattress, as she had done months ago to watch over her first patient's sleep; Sandman, finally, had comfortably laid down on the end of the bed, his arms spread and a wide smile on his face as he was dreaming, and looking like he hadn't minded pushing away the Boogeyman's heels to make himself room. The only one who seemed to be missing was Bunnymund, and actually his absence would have been more than justified, but it took little to the man to find him, crouched on the floor right next to the bed: they were really all there.

Relieved by the fact that, at least, they were all deeply sleeping, Pitch sighed and lowered his irises on the first person he was supposed to look at: his little snowflake. He hadn't forgotten the news this had told him, and the only idea still caused confusion and bewilderment in him, but now the fear and the anxiety which had seized him on the moment had faded: the few hours of rest he had involuntarily allowed to himself had been a real blessing for his shattered consciousness, and now he felt he had the lucidity he needed to face the issue in an appropriate manner.

Just as he got ready to reflect on it, however, his gaze fell inevitably on his partner's bump, which had been half uncovered during the sleep, and it was only thanks to his strong self-control that he managed not to scream: his beautiful skin, always hyaline and so smooth to look like pure silk, was red and rough as sandpaper, and in some areas it had cracked up to the point it had formed light bruises. It took no time to the Boogeyman to realize that this sudden change was due to the stretching it had undergone due to the belly's rapid growth and the elements it had been exposed to during falls
and runs not suiting his lover's pregnant state, and even less to decide what to do: he couldn’t possibly leave the other in that condition.

With a stifled grunt he stood up, holding up the two flaps of his robe to overstep Bunnymund without waking him up, then he crawled out of the room and went in haste to the infirmary; once there he examined all the jars crammed on the shelves, quickly reading the labels which described them and growling in disappointment when he realized that there was no oil; just when he was about to leave and look elsewhere, however, he noticed a bunch of dried chamomile flowers and several fresh aloe leaves, so he took heart and gathered all the necessary items to prepare a soothing compress. He worked for long, cutting and squeezing as much as he could the long aloe leaves to extract the transparent gel hid inside them and mashing the chamomile flower heads to release their beneficial properties, then he mixed the two ingredients, blending them with energy to make them merge perfectly; despite the efforts he didn't manage to obtain a uniform mixture, but only a semi-liquid and rather lumpy cream, and albeit not satisfied he had to give up and content himself: he couldn’t risk to oxidise the medicine only to make it look nicer.

After quickly dampening a towel he brought this and the bowl he had used in the room, walking down backwards the corridors and the path he had followed to avoid tripping in the Pooka's legs, then he gently sat on the mattress and began to medicate his lover: first of all he took small amounts of poultice with his fingers, pouring them on the swollen bump and preparing the skin to the massage; then, wetting the entire palm, he began to stroke, alternating large circular movements to more circumscribed rubs, in order to soothe the widespread redness and to insist particularly on the areas most injured; finally, after cleaning himself up in the towel, he draped it on his belly, to prevent the gel from drying and to prolong its beneficial effects.

During the whole operation Jack continued to sleep, letting out only few, little moans at the beginning and several satisfied sighs as he was pampered, and Pitch was glad to hear he was serene: it has been such a long time since he had seen a real smile blossoming on his beautiful face, to the point that its memory had almost begun to fade, replaced by the eyes of a hunted prey he widened with increasing frequency, and that little hint of happiness for him was not only a relief, but also a spur to work hard to make sure that this were just the first of a long series.

It was with this thought in mind that he took a decision apparently absurd and inconsistent, but actually perfectly compliant with the new, albeit old, purpose he had set for himself: he would have left North's Palace. The compress he had prepared for Frost was a mere stopgap, a way to soothe the pain and help the healing, not to tackle the problem at its roots: in order to prevent further damage he needed an oil, which would have help the skin to rehydrate and remain elastic, and he knew exactly what to use and where to take it.

Without hesitation he hurried toward the exit, determined to rush to take the shortest time possible and not to let his absence be noticed, but at the last a doubt occurred to him: what if someone had woken up before he returned? What would have happened? They would have put faith in him, patiently waiting to see how the situation would have evolved, or they would have immediately thought about a coward escape, making Frost have a useless and dangerous conniption? No, the risk that something could go wrong was far too high to allow him go away with a light heart: it was better taking precautions and leaving a brief note of explanation, so as not to alarm anyone.

Tiptoeing he reached the desk, tore in half a Christmas card to use the sheet not covered by the drawing and, dipping the quill in the inkwell, he wrote: “I went out to take you a little gift. I’ll be back soon”.

He didn't said anything more, neither promises, nor greeting, nor declarations of love: it was not his style letting himself go into affectations, especially on paper, where words remains forever, and, what
was even worse, on a message that could be read by everyone, so he trusted in the boy's intelligence, sure that he would have been able to go beyond these two meagre sentences and understand the innumerable ones which had been conceived and not reported. In order to help and ease him he copied the text immediately below, using capital letters and taking care to draw each of them with precision, even though the other was now able to read fluently his elegant script, then he signed and summoned the bunny which had been donated to him months ago, letting him bring the ticket: stretching his neck to follow its movements he watched him place its light burden in Jack's open hand, then he left not looking back.

Leaving North's Palace and proceeding up to the Europe's southern borders had been perhaps too easy for Pitch: the Yetis and the elves hadn't recovered yet from the big hunt they had conducted during the three days before and they had cast him only a quick glance, letting him go on his way without protesting, thick and dark clouds had protected his eyes, allowing him to orient himself perfectly and refraining, however, from wetting, and favourable winds had accelerated his flight. The difficulties, however, hadn't taken long to appear: he had simply needed to reach the Caucasus' desert territories to start having problems.

Floods of people had begun to crowd roads and paths, thick, dense, long, too long: endless queues of people with dark skin and light clothes, squads of men, lines of women, swarms of children, armies of desperates marching toward unknown destinations. At first, the Boogeyman had thought it was a gathering of merchants, rare in those areas, in truth, but still possible, but for him it had been enough to watch more closely to see that this wasn't the case: few of them owned wagons, none was carrying valuable goods, many didn't even have a luggage, and all had broken shoes and wounded feet. No, those were not merchants, nor nomads: those were human beings who, now, had little human left.

It hadn't been long before he had started to spot the corpses, at first sparse and scattered, probably belonging to people collapsed with exhaustion on the roadside, then more and more numerous, crammed in squares, buildings, wells, mass graves: any place seemed good to pile the bodies become too many, to get rid of people inconvenient either alive or dead, and the chorus of the scavenger bird's squeaks was the only funeral wake which had been allowed to them.

It was only thanks to his great willpower that Pitch managed to fly over that land of horrors, turning away from the unfortunates covered with soil who hadn't received the mercy of a shot, but when they finally reached the city he realized he had simply jumped out of a folly into another: hordes of armed men patrolled it, shooting anyone they surprised out in the open, digging out those who were hiding in houses with bombs and mortars and descending to the underground shelters to massacre the few fugitives, small groups of people apparently innocent took advantage of the confusion to plunder and rage on isolated individuals, and chaos and violence seemed to have become the only law and the only purpose.

Fleeing away from that collective madness, in which he often couldn't distinguish the abuser from the abused, the Boogeyman swerved towards the western suburbs, heading to the side of a hill where rose the richest houses in the area, and it was with a sigh of relief that he managed to locate the palace he was looking for: partially bombed and clearly deserted, however, it seemed to have weathered the ongoing war, still protected by the palm trees which surrounded it, and there were high hopes that the oil had endured.

After making Voluptas land in the central courtyard he dismounted, leaving the beast free to browse around, and he headed toward the porch, taking without any hesitation a door apparently identical to the others, but which he knew it brought in the wing reserved to the women. With the exception of some large cabinets overturned and small piles of rubble he found no obstacle in its path, the rooms
emptied of all furnishings and precious fabrics, but intact, and the hope grew in his heart, but as soon as he turned the corner to enter the make-up room he froze: that area had been completely destroyed by a bomb.

Running through the debris of the fallen walls and the collapsed ceiling he lunged at the dressing table, frantically fumbling among the bottles scattered on its surface to check if something had escaped the explosion, but his expectations were soon disappointed: he remembered perfectly the twisted ampule in which was kept the argan oil, a little masterpiece of glass which mimicked a stem and whose cap had been shaped to form a rosebud just bloomed, and the tiny, sticky fragments of glass green and blue could be nothing but its last remains.

With an angry growl he swept away all the coloured vials, shouting his frustration at the distorted reflection the cracked mirror gave him back: that silly mishap was just the last thing he needed. He could search in other houses, of course, and certainly he would have done it, but how long would have it taken to him to accomplish the mission? He didn't know the other villas' exact maps, nor the habits of those who lived there, so he would have had to sift through almost every single room to guess where the oil was stored, and the possibility to find himself again in front of a shattered bottle were high: he would have needed ages to succeed.

While he tried in vain to calm down and think about a quicker and more effective way to get what he wanted the sound of hurried footsteps and indistinct voices echoed in the corridor, drawing his attention, and Pitch, curious, decided to check the cause: a brief exploration would have, no doubt, helped him to relax and, who knows, maybe even to discover some hidden vials to steal.

Striding down the passage he came to the wing used to rest, trying not to be charmed by the mosaics and the doors and windows' arabesques in order to not get distracted, and when he entered the bedroom he faced an unexpected scene.

On the large bed, the only one in the house which still had a mattress worthy of the name, laid a woman, surrounded by blankets and pillows and softly leaning against the headboard, and she was holding a baby in her arms. Judging by the mother's exhausted expression, the umbilical cord still attached to the child's belly and the smell of blood which wafted into the air the young woman should have given birth to them only a few hours before, and yet she already showed a boundless affection towards the little creature come out of her womb: despite her sleepy eyelids kept closing she continued to sing softly to him, rocking and cuddling him with such delicacy as to seem she feared she could break them, and not even for a moment she averted her touched gaze from their little, frowning face.

Just when Pitch began to wonder if she had given birth to the child all alone and without any help a third person entered the room, announcing himself with a beaming smile and a whispered greeting: a man, dressed in clothes simple, but clean, holding a basket full of figs and dates.

Although it was quite unusual, in those areas, seeing a man serving a woman, this didn't look embarrassed at all as he reached his wife and took care of her, plumping up the pillows on which she was resting, tucking the blanket which warmed her legs and settling the silky veil which covered her hair: gestures undoubtedly dictated by necessity, because she was far too weak to be self sufficient, but also by a deep love which went beyond the millennia-old traditions which characterized that as beautiful as strange corner of the world.

Shaking his head to dispel the thoughts far too mushy which had caught him Pitch turned, glancing at the door from which her husband had come, and then, noticing that the room which it gave access to was crammed with all sorts of objects, he headed there. For a few minutes he quietly rummaged among the piles of goods and supplies, making sure to resettle everything in the same position he had
found in order not to arouse the suspicion of the couple, and eventually he succeeded: hidden between a sack of flour and a kohl pot he found an argan oil bottle, banal in its conical shape and in the simple clear glass it was made of, but capacious and filled to the brim—exactly what he needed to help Jack’s skin heal not only that day, but also the next ones, perhaps even for weeks.

With a triumphant grin he took possession of the loot, lifting it into the air to observe it backlit and check if it contained impurities, and he almost rejoiced when he realized that the liquid was perfectly crystal clear, but eventually he refrained himself and put it in a bag of magic sand he tied behind his back and secured against his chest. Spotted a window whose lattice of masonry was partially collapsed, creating an opening large enough to allow him to crawl out and drop himself directly in the courtyard where he had left Voluptas, the Boogeyman walked towards it, but at the last he stopped and headed back towards the door, looking in the bedroom.

He stood there for a long time, hidden behind the jamb, spying the small family full of joy, more touching than a Renaissance painting, which, in the midst of that land of hatred, had been able to pursue its love, and which from the death had given birth to life, then, silent as a shadow, he went away.

Striding along the corridor leading to Jack’s room Pitch went towards the muffled chatters escaping from the door slightly ajar and, as soon as he opened it, he was struck by a shocked voice which shouted: «Where the heck have you been!?».

Recognizing Bunnymund he turned to him and replied: «To get a gift for Jack, exactly as I wrote in the note I left».

Lowering his ears in a threatening attitude the Pooka asked: «Since when you've become such a softie?».

Although hit where he felt weak the Boogeyman maintained his self-control and replied: «I'm not become a “softie”, I just retrieved an oil to spread it on Jack's belly: in case you haven't noticed it's red and chapped. What is the real problem? Did the fact you woke up and saw I was gone again bother you, even though I had left a clear explanation for my absence?».

Puffing his chest the Easter Bunny declared: «That's right: I still don't trust you».

Unperturbed the man concluded: «No problem, I'm not interested into gain your trust».

Then, without deeming him worthy of a glance, he circumvented him and went at his lover's bedside. As he expected he found him awake, still covered with the towel soaked in aloe and chamomile and busy to pet the rabbit of magic sand which had curled up against his side, and when he locked eyes with him he saw him tired, but also infinitely happy, to the point that a wide smile had spontaneously arisen on his lips.

Blatantly ignoring the crowd present Pitch sat down on the mattress next to him and asked: «Good morning, Jack. Did you fear that I had run away again? That I would have never come back?».

Flashing a serious expression the boy denied, shaking his head several times to be sure to be understood, therefore the Boogeyman commented: «Good, Jack, I had no doubt about it: you've always been very brave. I brought you the gift and also a small souvenir: are you happy? Do you want to see them? Alright. The gift is a bottle of argan oil: it's a precious liquid, which is extracted from a plant that grows in the desert, and it helps to keep the skin hydrated, elastic and bright. It will be perfect for your chapped bump, moreover it also has a great scent. The souvenir, instead, it's this
sprig of jasmine: as soon as I saw it it immediately made me think of you, and I guessed you might like to receive it».

As he spoke he showed him the two objects, placing the bottle on the bedside table and bringing the spig in front of his face, so that the partner could smell the scent that, actually, resembled a lot his skin's new one, then, seeing he has difficulties, he got closer, waiting a few seconds to let him enjoy the intense aroma and finally wedging the short twig above his right ear.

After few moments spent gazing at his lover crowned with flowers he heard Toothiana murmuring: «Come on, let's go back to work. North, Bunnymund, you should definitely go and retrieve Jack's staff. My fairies had spotted it in Finland, stuck on a root on top of a slope: follow them and they'll bring you there. Sandy and I will stay here and give a hand to Pitch».

Trying to mask the embarrassment he felt in knowing he was literally surrounded by the Guardians Pitch shrugged, then, without turning to say goodbye to the two leaving, he immediately devoted himself to the boy: first he took off the towel, exploiting the clear side to remove the last remnants of poultice and leave his skin almost dry; then, putting it aside, he picked up the bottle he had retrieved, gently uncorking it and studying the broad mouth to figure out the best method to extract the necessary amount of oil without wasting a single drop; finally, after closing it with his palm and overturning it several times, he placed his greasy hand on Jack's bump and began to massage it.

He went on for long, drawing new liquid whenever he deemed it was necessary and making sure to be as gentle as possible, and he averted his eyes from the boy's crystal clear ones only for the few seconds it took to him to recall his rabbit, too starved for that happiness and serenity which had been so slow to come back and too eager to show him the love he felt for him: he wanted to make up for every moment lost in tremendous fear and unnecessary misunderstandings, and drowning into his bright irises was the perfect way to start.

After few minutes, without any warning and without addressing to anyone in particular, he said aloud: «Jack has decided to keep the baby».

Toothiana, who, along with Sandy, had remained in the room to tidy up and put the pillows and the blankets back into the closet, flew beside him and replied: «Yes, we know, Pitch. He decided about a week ago: this was the big news I mentioned when I came in the library to drag you away from the books. I wanted to tell you, but it didn't seem fair to me to pass over Jack and deny him the right to reveal it to you by himself, and then I was afraid you would have not believed me».

«Do not blame yourself, Toothiana: I would have laughed in your face if you'd told me, and, if you had insisted, I would have pushed you away. I was not in the condition to believe anything or anyone» confessed the Boogeyman.

Laying a hand on his shoulder the fairy commented: «Do not blame yourself, too, Pitch: it's understandable you were upset. Let's look to the future, not brood over the past: would you like to know why he took this decision? If Jack agrees and you feel like listening I can explain it to you. I would prefer not to intrude, but, as you can see, Jack is not able to speak, and you have the right to receive more complete answers».

The man and the boy nodded at the same time, lost in each other's eyes, therefore the woman, secured their permission, started: «Let us be clear, it's not fair at all that the Man In The Moon has forced him to get pregnant, and Jack is still angry and disgusted by the way he did that, but it's undeniable that the world needs a new Guardian, and he doesn't want to condemn everybody to destruction just out of fear: the sacrifice he was asked to make, albeit burdensome, it's nothing in comparison to the salvation of all spirits and of mankind, and he's willing to make it. In addition to this forced reason, however, there is one much more personal: he has no way to get rid of the baby
without killing them, and he doesn't want to do that for any reason at all. It's true, he never wanted
them and carrying them caused him physical and psychological pain, but, actually, what's got to do
with the fetus? They didn't ask to be conceived and grow in Jack's belly: among everybody this
creature has by far the least fault».

«I don't agree at all with the first reason» immediately stated Pitch; «It does not matter what the world
needs, if Jack can't bring himself to continue the pregnancy he's not forced to do so: he can't abase
himself for the sake of creatures who wouldn't even be grateful for his sacrifice. The second reason is
much more understandable: it's not easy to decide to have an abortion, because, actually, in doing so
you kill an innocent creature who might live happily. Anyway, does Jack love the baby? Is he
willing to endure months of fatigue, pain and problems to giving birth to them? Is he ready to bear
this burden? Only if the answer to all these questions is “yes” I'll breath easy: although abortion is a
horrible experience it's far preferable to an unwanted pregnancy».

«You made very intelligent observations, Pitch» commented Toothiana; «I'm glad to see how
seriously you are taking the issue: it's very important for you not to underestimate anything.
However, yes, Jack has become pretty attached to the child and, now that the symptoms of
pregnancy are slowly subsiding, he's learning to appreciate the positive aspects of this unplanned
event».

Nodding Pitch picked up a few drops of oil from the bottle, unable to erase from his mind the image
of the little family caught cuddling in the abandoned villa and the serenity which pervaded every
member of it, and he almost gasped when he felt Frost's fingers intertwining in his own, creating a
small cup which perfectly protected his swollen bump: he didn't expect an initiative so sudden and
sweet.

Noticing he had opened his mouth he bent over him, in order to spare him the fatigue of raising his
voice to be heard, and, following the movement of his lips, he saw him spelling with difficulty the
words “can I”.

«“Can I?”» he guessed; «Did you say “can I”? Are you asking me if you can keep the child?».

When the boy nodded the Boogeyman smiled and replied: «Oh, baby, you silly boy: you don't need
to ask me for permission. It's something that concerns you and you only: you're the only one who has
the right to decide. Do not misunderstand, I'm not going to abandon you and I will always stay close
to you, doing anything to help you, but I couldn't replace you: you will always carry the greatest
burden, and, above all, the child is yours, not mine».

Suddenly Jack's expression, from shy and pleading it was, turned puzzled, his lips wrinkled and his
head slightly tilted, as if he were amazed by what he had just been said, and the fairy, albeit
hesitantly, interrupted him, pointing out: «But Pitch, actually the child is also yours».

New fanart by agito87!

http://agito87.tumblr.com/post/95639086488/may-i-ask-for-pregnant-jack-frost-from-a-scene-of

Chapter End Notes
I hope you liked this chapter. Feel free to leave a comment, if you want to, I always like receiving my readers' opinion about the story. Next chapter will be published on the next Friday! I wish you a nice evening
Chapter 13

WE DON'T HAVE TO BE ALONE – CHAPTER 13

«But Pitch, actually the child is also yours».

In that statement Pitch struggled to hold back a laugh, managing to stifle it at the last only for the love of Jack, who would have certainly suffered in sensing the deep bitterness which would have permeated it, and forcing himself to keep a neutral tone he replied: «No, they aren't, but it's quite irrelevant for me».

«Of course they are, Pitch, you and Jack are together, whose else should they be?» insisted Toothiana.

Rolling his irises the Boogeyman sarcastically answered: «You know, holding hands is not enough to have a baby».

«What kind of answer is that?» snapped the fairy, pricking up the feathers on her head; «You know that I'm aware of how conception works, and you know very well that I've caught you several times doing exactly what it's required to make it happen, then I don't see the sense of your irreverent remark».

Wincing for the sharp reproach and for the ease with which the other had candidly stated, moreover in front of Frost and Sandman, that she was aware of the intercourses he had with his lover, the man struggled a little to recover, but eventually he protested: «Don't be silly, obviously I wasn't denying what we do together! I was just saying that, on its own, is not enough: Jack's body has never been fit to carry on a pregnancy, he got pregnant because someone changed him, and who did that is not me».

Suddenly lowering her feathers the Guardian looked at him and asked: «Pitch, do you believe that the father is the Man In The Moon?».

Snorting slightly Pitch commented: «No, Don't you say? It seems pretty self-evident».

Clasping her arms around herself Toothiana swung a little, then she whispered: «Well, it doesn't seem self-evident at all, you know that the Man In The Moon didn't... well...».

Hearing her hesitating the Boogeyman narrowed his eyes and completed: «“Raped him”? Is this what you meant? He just had to dare, that beast, maggot, nothing but a miserable creature! If he had done it there wouldn't have existed neither prayers, nor chains able to restrain me: I would have
flown on his pathetic satellite and I would have decapitated him with my bare hands! If he had done
that no protection would have been enough to save him from my wrath!».

Delicate fingers touched him with infinite tenderness, caressing the back of his right hand, still resting
on the boy's swollen belly, but no more busy on massaging it, and when he lowered his eyes he met
Jack's, shiny with tears for the effort to remain focused and, at the same time, full of affection and
concern.

Regretting having vented in that way in front of his partner the man hastened to add: «But I promised
that, if the Man In The Moon behaves, I won't take any revenge, and I'll keep my word. Returning to
what we were talking about, since he's been able to make his abdomen fertile just by touching it, it's
clear that he owns immense powers and knowledge, so he's not forced to obey the laws of nature: it
doesn't matter if he hasn't had an intercourse with him, he surely just needed to press his hand on his
belly to fecundate him».

Letting out a small sigh the fairy countered: «What you're saying is certainly sensible, but not
necessarily probable: the fact that the Man In The Moon owns enormous powers and perhaps even
one which allows him to make Jack pregnant just by touching him doesn't mean that he has done it».

Shrugging to shake the bother that speech caused him Pitch asked: «What are you getting at, exactly?
Your speech has no beginning or end: why should he not use such a power?».

«Probably to let you be the baby's father and transmit them a part of yourself» answered the woman.

At that statement the Boogeyman's strong self control could nothing but fail: he didn't even have the
time to think about restraining himself, and in less than a second he found himself almost doubled
over with laughter, shaken by a hilarity so uncontrollable to hinder his breathing and causing him
hiccups, and animated by such an incredulity to prevent him from formulating a sensible comeback.

Blatantly ignoring the look of reproach that the other gave him he focused on the window, counting
the tiny snowflakes which had begun to fall a few minutes before to calm down, and reflecting on his
little snowflake's pitiful conditions to return serious and to find motivation again, then pointed out:
«Toothiana, seriously, are you okay? You've been raving for two minutes, getting worse and worse,
and you're starting to worry me. To let me be the baby's father, you say? To let me transmit them a
part of myself? What, exactly? The scary one, the violent one or the cruel one? Come on, stop
babbling nonsense! I'm the Man in the Moon's worst enemy, not his favourite: the only thing he
wants from me is submission, and he will never have it».

Crossing her arms Toothiana pouted and contradicted him: «Actually, as the great strategist you are,
you should know that it's better to keep your friends close and your enemies even closer, anyway...».

«Oh, then I should conclude that you've welcomed me into your circle only to control me?»
insinuated the man in a venomous tone.

«Pitch!» rebuked him the fairy, stamping her foot.

After closing her eyes and clenching fists for a few seconds, clearly busy digesting the anger, she
finally managed to relax, and she declared: «I'll never repeat it enough: sometimes you're really a
child. I'll pretend not to hear and go on with my speech. I was saying, have you ever wondered why,
among all the spirits, the Man In The Moon chose Jack to give life to the new Guardian?».

Taken aback both by the reprimand, decidedly too similar to the ones the parents yell at their
children, and by the question, Pitch took a moment to ponder, then, holding back himself from
making yet another sharp comment, he replied: «I wondered it, but I didn't find any plausible
Casting a quick glance at Frost, as to make sure if he was able to bear the rest of the discussion, the woman said: «Let's be sincere, among all of us Jack was certainly the least suitable to deal with a pregnancy. He's the least ancient, therefore his powers haven't well stabilized yet, nor grown, his body is young, his mind, no matter how mature, not ready to accept such a sudden change, his role incompatible with such a responsibility: from this point of view he was the worst choice possible. Anyone else would have had fewer problems: Sandy, Bunnymund, you, even North, and not to mention me! Why didn't he choose me, Pitch? I'm a woman, I have a strong and clear maternal instinct, I love taking care of others and I've always wanted to have children to look after: I would have been the perfect candidate, and Manny would have just needed to trouble himself to make me conceive. I would have no doubt reacted with surprise when I'd realized I were pregnant, because I don't have a partner and I wouldn't have expected such a novelty, but then I'd have pulled myself together in no time, rejoicing at the idea I had fulfilled one of my dreams, appreciating every moment of the pregnancy and taking care of myself and the unborn baby in the best way: the exact opposite of Jack's panic and involuntary self-destruction. Why, Pitch? Why struggling so much to change a person not suitable, and risking losing both him and the foetus, when it would have been enough choosing another spirit to achieve the desired result without firing a shot? It's obvious that Jack has something special which drew Manny's attention: a deep sweetness, no doubt, a great ability to love his neighbour, it's undeniable, but, in the end, the thing that really makes him different from us is you. Do not misunderstand, he's special on his own and for thousands of reasons we both know: I'm just talking about this new matter. Jack has changed a lot for you, really a lot: he has learned to love, to express his feelings, to become altruist, even to sacrifice himself, and whatever he does he can always be sure to have your constant and loving support».

«So, in other words, Jack is suitable because he has a self-sacrifice spirit and a person willing to assist him continually. Well, I must admit that I can't imagine a better environment to give birth to a child» intervened the Boogeyman in a sarcastic tone.

«I punched you in the past, and will not hesitate to do it again, if there's the need to!» snapped Toothiana, on the brink of exasperation; «This time I won't overlook: is this really your plan for the coming months? Assisting Jack with undisguised impatience, praying that the pregnancy will end as soon as possible and completely ignoring the baby who will born?».

«No, of course not!» immediately denied the man, albeit upset at the idea of having to accept a new person in his circle of acquaintances, moreover an infant; «I do not... no matter how the situation will evolve it's undeniable it started in the worst way possible».

«Yes, it's true» admitted the fairy; «But that doesn't mean it can't improve. You've already understood what mistakes you made, you'll remedy together, getting even closer than before and live happily, and you'll participate to the child's education as you'd have never done, if they had been carried by someone else. You are unique, Pitch, just like all of us, and along with Jack you've created something special which has never existed before: this made you the best possible choice».

«You're really harassing!» blurted out Pitch.

Looking away from the woman, who he had struggled to stare back at since the very beginning of the conversation, he settled himself better on the mattress, massaging the base of his back to pretend a cramp and justify his sudden darkening, and he started to reflect: he had wholly realized only in that moment that, by accepting the pregnancy, in fact he accepted the baby, too, and therefore not only their presence, but also the responsibility of raising and educating him. How could he have properly taken care of them if, until now, he had paid attention to infants only to despise them? How could he have guaranteed them a serene life if terrorizing brats was his work and main source of fun? How
could he have even thought about standing next to them if the mere sight of a couple of kids aroused his hatred? He would have had to fight against his own nature all the time, probably failed miserably, but, actually, should it have gone this way? Had he really had to bear also this huge burden? Wasn't it better that, once born, the infant were taken elsewhere, bred in a safe place by trustworthy people, kept in dark about the existence of the black beast which had looked after them until they had even opened their eyes to the world?

Although fearing that his lover could sense the anxiety he felt and, therefore, get upset in turn, the Boogeyman lowered the irises, determined to observe the other to try to understand how much he had become affectionate to the creature unborn and how much participation he was asking to him, but, as soon as he spotted his face, he realized he had fallen asleep: his eyelids, albeit trembling, were closed, his breath, albeit hissing and troubled, deep, and his tired expression too relaxed not to betray the torpor which had caught him. Suddenly feeling guilty for having taken a step back, even if only in his mind, in a matter of such importance, the man decided to temporarily put aside his uncertainties, justified, given the exceptional nature of the situation, but far too early, considered that the birth would have been months and months later, and he mentally left himself some time to process everything and draw his own conclusions: in that moment he had other pressing issues to think about.

It was for this reason that, with absolute sincerity, he stated: «Toothiana, I don't believe you, but, as I said from the beginning, it doesn't matter for me if the baby is mine: they're no doubt Jack's child, he got affectionate to them and decided to keep them, and I will support his choice, helping him whenever he needs me. For his sake I can promise I'll force myself to try to love them, but I can't know how it'll go, and, frankly, for now I don't care: I have more pressing issues to think about. Look at Jack, he's exhausted, and that's not normal: we must prepare a new dose of absinthe».

Unexpectedly Toothiana smiled and replied: «No, Pitch, do not force yourself: you cannot impose yourself to love someone. Behave naturally, take care to make Jack happy and to be happy, and you'll see that, within the birth, you'll know better what you want. Returning to the issue, yes, I noticed that Jack is exhausted. Surely the pregnancy and the strains he made have worn him a lot, but, in my opinion, also reflecting on how his condition has evolved over the past week, the problem is different: have you noticed his arms? They've always been skinny, this is undeniable, but not so thin! And the chest, then, do we have to talk about it? We can count the ribs one by one, and on the left side we can even see the skin pulsating! It's useless giving him the medicine, because he doesn't have large wounds to cure: in my opinion, in order to recover and regain his energies, he simply has to eat».

Frowning Pitch pointed out: «Indeed your idea makes sense. The baby was born thanks to magic, and I suppose they draw a large part of their strength from magic, like all the rest of us, but they need raw material to grow: it's much easier creating flesh from other flesh rather than power in its purest state. It's likely that, until now, he has simply stolen it from Jack, and actually this doesn't surprise me at all: a child is in all respects a parasite. Medically speaking, of course».

The hasty clarification which he had added at the end, fortuitous illumination occurred to him as soon as he had seen the interlocutor flaring up at the word “parasite”, probably saved him from a sharp slap, but not from the rebuke: staring at him with her eyes narrowed and her hands clasped around her knees the fairy curled her lips, then she hissed, gritting her teeth: «You managed to save yourself from me by a hair's breadth, but I remind you that Jack has a very limited scientific knowledge».

«Ah, you're so annoying, I'm taking care to teach him and give him a culture, I know much better than you how wide his knowledge is! Don't waste our time with obviousnesses, stay focused on the serious matters: what should we feed Jack on? He needs something that can give a lot of energies, easy to digest, worm and, if possible, liquid, in order to spare him the trouble of chewing» asserted
the Boogeyman, deftly averting the discussion.

Thoughtfully flattening the feathers on her head the woman suggested: «A soup? I mean a velvet sauce, of course. Um, but vegetables are certainly not a substantial food... maybe we could add some meat? A well-cooked braised beef should be fine, we just need to boil it until it falls apart and Jack will manage to swallow it without any problem».

«It would take hours to cook it, and, if there weren't the right meat in the ice-house, half a day to slaughter an animal: no, we need something more available and easy to prepare» countered the man.

Rejected that suggestion the two began to reflect in silence, the first scratching his neck and the second sticking out her chin, but, just when both seemed to have reached a dead end in their short list of ideas, Sandman, who had stood by all the time enjoying the warmth of the fire, intervened, blowing a thin curl of sand towards the bed and compacting it to form a thin tile decorated with small rectangles.

«Chocolate?» guessed Pitch, who had always been inclined to understand the sign language used by the Bringer of Dreams; «Yes, this is indeed a good solution! It takes a few minutes to be prepared, and I'm sure that North has all the ingredients: considered how many sweets he eats his kitchen can't certainly lack cocoa, milk and starch. May you prepare it, Toothiana? Use honey instead of sugar: it melts better and it'll help Jack's sore throat to heal».

«Sure, I'll be back in no time!» promptly exclaimed Toothiana, flying away with a leap and disappearing as fast as an arrow in the hallway.

Confused by the sudden movement and the flutter of the feathers the Boogeyman realized only after a few seconds that the other had already left to prepare the drink, then, since he had nothing else to do, he took again the bottle of argan oil, determined to spread a second layer on the boy's skin, which had already dried up; as soon as he uncorked it, however, he saw Sandy growing sad and turning ruefully to the fireplace, and almost without realizing it he said: «You don't have to stand by, if you want to you can come here».

He was only partially surprised to have called him, well aware that now he had learnt to appreciate the Guardians' company and, in particular, the smallest and most powerful of them: his silent presence had become reassuring for him, so sunny, so serene, never obtrusive, never too much, always incredibly capable of doing the right thing at the right time to make everyone feel at ease, and the man couldn't have done nothing but rejoicing at this discovery, effective help to soothe the agitation caused by the long and friendly conversations which he had participated to. He perfectly remembered the lazy hours spent beside him, passed drinking tea or warming up in the light of the hearth, each on his own armchair, but not thereby alone, each in silence, but not embarrassed, he would have never forgotten his silky magic sand, come pitiful in the worst moments of the previous months to give him a little rest, and it was for this that he didn't widen his eyes when he saw him close his cupped hands and offer a small, fickle golden ball.

«No, thank you» he politely refused; «I don't want to sleep, and, anyway, I've already rested, but I'm sure Jack will appreciate this gift when he'll finish eating».

After straightening his back and nodding, in order to make clear that, in truth, what the other had proposed had been his intention from the beginning, Sandman moves his forearms in sinuous waves and evoked new sand, letting it thicken by itself in bizarre shapes and carefully selecting those to be added to the sphere of sleep already produced, and Pitch, accompanied by that faintest rustle, picked up where he had left off, carefully massaging every inch of reddened skin he could spot.

Just when he was satisfied with the result and he decided to close the bottle a vibrant hum went up
the corridor, penetrating into the room and announcing the arrival of the fairy, but it was only after several seconds that this came to the door, her palms open to hold a small tray and her eyes firmly locked on it.

«Forgive me for the wait» she justified herself in a low voice; «Usually I have no problem to pass through doors, because I just close my wings for a while and lunge, but this time, of course, I couldn't do that, or I would have spilled everything. However, every cloud has a silver lining: the chocolate cooled down during the trip, so it should be warm enough to be drunk right now».

Standing up the Boogeyman came to meet her, both to free her from the load and to speed up the operations, and he carefully placed the tray on the night table, moving the dirty towel which still covered it; then, taking care to move carefully in order not to burn himself, he slid his fingers on the large cup and grabbed it, blending the drink with a spoon and daring to taste a sip; finally, made sure the liquid had reached the optimal temperature, he momentarily put it aside, preparing to awaken his lover.

«Jack? Jack, can you hear me? It's time to wake up» he whispered, caressing his cheek and gently shaking his shoulder.

Unlike he expected he didn't have to wait long before seeing the other stirring and opening his eyes, and when his pupils still veiled by sleep managed to focus him he said: «Good, Jack: you pulled yourself together quickly this time. You're very tired, aren't you? We have all noticed it, and Toothiana thought that eating could help you recover and regain your energies. Do you feel like trying? Here's a hot chocolate just for you».

Although still disoriented the boy showed interest and tried to collaborate, turning his head to look at his partner's outstretched hand and levering on his arms to get up, but his strength failed almost immediately and the man and Sandy came to his aid, the first holding him and lifting his thorax, the second plumping up and piling the pillows behind his back. Once he had properly settled him Pitch covered his chest with a soft beige blanket, perhaps the same one that, months earlier, he had wrapped around his waist to venture out of the bed during his convalescence, then he picked up the cup and asked: «Ready to drink?».

Received a positive response which sounded more like a sob he leaned forward, dipped the spoon into the chocolate to fill it and blew on it to waste heat, then, moving with delicacy, he placed it in the partner's mouth, slowly tilting it in order not to choke him.

Seeing him swallow without difficulty and even clean up the piece of cutlery with this tongue was a real relief, the assurance that, though not soon, the due cures hadn't arrived either too late, and a spontaneous smile rose on his lips, reward for Jack and liberation for himself after days of useless and consuming agony. It was almost without noticing the passage of time that the improvised nurse went on, constantly blending the drink and patiently feeding the wounded, oblivious of the other two guests present and completely lost in his lover's misty eyes, and it was only after a grimace of disappointment from this that he realized he had offered him several times a spoon now empty, the bottom of that creamy liquid too shallow to be drawn.

«Oh, I'm sorry, Jack» he apologized; «I hadn't realized that it was over. Did you like it? You licked your lips all the time, if I noticed well. It's been a long time since you drank a little, huh?».

Blushing slightly the boy shook his head, eyeing the bowl several times and rubbing the sheet with his hands as if he felt embarrassed, and the man, puzzled, asked: «Wait... you've never eaten chocolate before now? Is this what are you trying to tell me?».

He almost couldn't believe his own eyes when he saw the other nodding, and immediately
exclaimed: «Never? Seriously? I cannot believe it! When you were born, chocolate was expensive not widespread and yet very raw and bitter, so I'm not surprised that you haven't tasted it, but later? Didn't you ever got curious? That's incredible. I would have bet you did, seeing how nosy you're, but apparently you're only interested in getting into trouble».

At that provocation Frost pouted and, offended, he turned his face away, stubbornly staring at the window and raising a chorus of laughers; after soothing the hilarity, however, Pitch put aside the spoon and, caressing his partner's cheek to make him turn, he murmured: «The bottom remainder is the tastiest, and you don't want to leave it, right? If you keep pouting after I'll have scraped it away for you I'll be forced to eat it all alone».

With a jerk sudden and unexpectedly rapid, considering his weakness, the boy turned his head again, looking alternately his lover and the cup and sticking his tongue out from his parted lips to show his impatience, and the Boogeyman purposely protracted as much as possible the scraping, obviously also to collect every drop of the chocolate left, but above all to tease the other and keep him on his toes.

After nearly more than a minute Jack couldn't resist any more and, gurgling a raspy and clearly annoyed groan, he called him to order, welcoming with a satisfied smile the last spoonful of the sweet drink and emitting a vibrating, approving moan; glad to see him so happy the man smiled back, allowing himself a small moment of suspension and absentely stroking his hair, then he whispered: «You did good, Jack, very good: now you can finally rest. Close your eyes and relax: Sandy has prepared a golden dream just for you.».

Sliding his hand over his face the lowered his eyelids, touching his lips in a final farewell and wincing when he felt them contracting to give him a light kiss; then stepped aside, leaving the field open to Sandman and nodding to allow him to begin; finally, following with a charmed gaze the sinuous swirls of golden sand, he watched him slip into a deep and peaceful sleep, and he let out a sigh.

It had been almost two hours since Jack had fallen asleep, and Pitch had exploited them for many activities, involuntarily taking part in the Palace's life. At first he had come back in the infirmary, in order to prepare a new dose of aloe and chamomile compress and tidy up what the previous time he hadn't put away, then he had returned into the bedroom, applied the compress on his lover's bump and unrolled the bandages wrapped around his feet, now become unnecessary protections for a skin almost completely healed; then, determined to plan also his partner's future meals, he had visited the kitchen, dodging bungling elves and grim Yetis to browse into every corner and cupboard, and with great pleasure he had seen that the variety of foods available was sufficiently broad to allow the preparation of different dishes, both sweet and savoury; finally, fulfilled all his duties, he had retired in their room, watching over the sleeping lover and reading few pages from an ancient Toothiana's tome to kill time.

A comings and goings of visitors had travelled along the corridor, some silent, others more noisy, but the Boogeyman had never let himself being distracted, interrupting the reading only to answer to the direct questions which were made to him and raising his eyes only towards the boy; at the end of the third hour, however, something happened, too striking to be ignored, and he had to finally give up the quiet break he had carved out for himself.

It all started with a simple buzz: a faint vibration, almost imperceptible, which crept down the hallway and went up from the floor through the man's legs, bothering and massaging his muscles at the same time; then the noise became louder and louder, echoing in the air and fading into two
different tones, one shrill and sometimes acute, the other much more deep; finally, with a sharp crack, the ceiling collapsed, creating a hole which sucked all the rubble, instead of letting them fall to the ground, and from it sprang out Bunnymund.

«I brought you the staff, Jack!» shouted the newcomer.

The man, who had jumped up in fright and tamed with difficulty the instinct to throw the book against the intruder and summon the army of Nightmares in full force, glared at him and hissed: «Are you crazy!? Do you think that this is the proper way to enter a convalescent's room? I was about to kill you, and I assure you that you would have deserved it!».

The Pooka, who, meanwhile, had realized he had busted in the midst of a nap and had silently closed the tunnel, faintly countered: «Even if you had tried you would have never managed to hurt me: I'm too strong and too fast for you. Either way, I burst into the room in this way because I needed to enter here before North».

Placing the book on the night table Pitch provoked him: «Oh, before North, in order to take all the credit for the staff's recovery, right? Tell me, «Since when you've become such a softie?».

When he heard the man dedicating him the same sarcastic joke he had addressed him half day before, the Easter Bunny frowned, menacingly lowering his ears and narrowing his eyes to better express his outrage, but he didn't open his mouth, nor flinch when North pounced on the front door and stomped in.

«I heard that Jack began to eat, so I brought a slice of fruitcake!» he boomed, exhibiting a wooden plate and a small fork.

Astonished by that entrance, which lacked just a fanfare to create more confusion, the Boogeyman motioned them to be quiet, bringing the index to his mouth, but when he saw Frost stirring and opening his eyes with difficulty he gave up and blurted out: «Congratulations, you've woken him up!».

Rubbing his eyelids to shake himself the boy cleared his throat, then he whispered: «No, don't worry, you didn't disturbed me: I was half awake when you entered here. Thank you for the staff, Bunnymund, and thank you for the fruitcake, North: to be sincere I craved a piece of cake. I'll come to pick them up».

The tone in which he had talked was a bit rasping, but perfectly understandable, and his lips had never trembled, so the man could do nothing but rejoice to hear him speak, but, as soon as he heard the last sentence, he stated: «You're going nowhere: sit down, stay quiet and leave it to us. Do you want to check the staff or may I directly place it against the wall?».

Meekly obeying the order Jack laid back against the pillows and answered: «No, thank you: it's not damaged, I'm sure, so it's useless for me to hold it. Can I eat?».

At this request the master of the house hastened to offer him the dish and the piece of cutlery, making him gestures of encouragement with his hands until Jack cut a morsel and brought it to his mouth and blatantly ignoring the exasperated glares addressed to him by Bunnymund, who, meanwhile, had placed the staff in the corner of the room farthest from the fireplace, then, after beaming at seeing his guest enjoying the food, he concluded: «Good, very good! I would say that you don't lack anything, do you? If it is so I and Bunnymund will go: we have something very important to discuss about».

Without waiting for a reply he clapped his hands once, then he turned and walked toward the door, grabbing the Pooka along the way and starting to praise in a loud voice his sled's magnificent
qualities, while the unfortunate party strove in every way to move the short legs fast enough not to get dragged and, at the same time, to defend his tunnels' sublime values.

Looking up to the ceiling Pitch waited for the duo to go away, extremely annoyed by those silly debates, but glad to hear the boy laughing at the funniest exclamations he could grasp, and when he could no longer distinguish the accusation of the first from the attacks of the second he commented: «I do not know why, but I have the slight sensation that those two spent more time to discuss about what means to use rather than to search your staff. Ah, let's just forget this! How do you feel? Did you recover? I was surprised to hear you starting to talk again so fast».

«I'm fine, thanks» promptly replied Frost; «In truth I've never really found hard speaking, or, rather, doing it quietly and slowly never tired me too much, but every time I opened my mouth I felt my throat burn so terribly, so I gave up. I'm sorry I forced you to interpret my signs, but I couldn't do better. Now, however, it doesn't burn any more: the honey you asked to put in the chocolate was good for me».

The Boogeyman, who in the meantime had sat down next to his lover, was surprised by that statement and asked: «Honey? Did you recognize it while you were drinking? What a fine palate you have!».

«No, to be honest no» admitted the boy; «I heard you mentioning it and saying that it would have helped to cure my sore throat. I wasn't really sleeping while you were discussing about what dish to prepare, I was just too tired to keep my eyes open and breathe normally».

Displeased, but at the same time touched, in knowing that the lover had done anything to follow the conversation to the end, the man said nothing, merely caressing his right thigh through the thin blanket draped over it and waiting for him finish the meal; after several seconds of silence, however, he felt obliged to raise his head and see what was going on, and when he found himself in front of the other's bewildered and almost forlorn expression he got worried.

«Jack, is there something wrong?» he hastened to ask; «Maybe you don't feel good? Are you sick or something?».

Jack hesitated for a long time, making his gaze rove around the room so as not to cross his partner's ones, but in the end he gave up and, keeping them lowered, he replied: «No, I... you... can you feed me, Pitch? Like you did with the chocolate?».

Letting out a chuckle Pitch demanded: «Is that all? There was no need for you to worry so much about asking: I'm glad to give you a hand».

Without hesitation he took the plate and the fork, cut a small morsel and offered it to him, but the boy turned his face and confessed: «I didn't ask you because I need a hand: I can hold the plate and cut the cake without problems. I asked you because I enjoyed being fed by you».

The Boogeyman winced at that admission, as unexpected as sweet, but he recovered quickly and, smiling, he replied: «I'm glad to hear it. Did it make you feel special? Did it make you feel loved, baby? We can do this as many times as you want, even at every meal: I love feeding you».

A new light appeared in Frost's eyes, lighting them up with immeasurable joy and gratitude, and he instinctively placed his right hand on his heart, blushing at such a privilege; he stared at him for long, sometimes trying to talk, sometimes to nod, perhaps too excited to be able to decide what was the best thanksgiving, but in the end he just opened his mouth, taking the piece of dessert with his teeth and swallowing it.
Slightly loosening his grip on the fork, to avoid the risk of inadvertently stinging the partner, the man cut off another morsel from the fruitcake and handed it to the boy again, tilting the prongs to follow the movement of his mouth and pulling them back he began to chew, and he took advantage of the wait to tuck the blanket; the other, in turn, responded meekly to his every move, patiently waiting for him to offer him the cake, licking his lips to gather the compote which had dirtied them and relaxing the shoulders to allow him drape the blanket better. They went on for a long time, lost in each other's eyes, the first feeding, the second being fed, the first happy to help, the second happy to be helped, the first proud to be a point of reference for his lover, the second appreciative to have such a valid support: it was a mutual exchange, selfish and altruistic, the mixed pleasure of giving and receiving, the oxymoronic combination of right and wrong between which there was not a clear boundary, and they both appreciated that unique and precious moment of intimacy, not sensing anything amiss in that share and simply feeling satisfied, useful for themselves and for the other.

Having some difficulties in piercing the last piece of cake Pitch gave up, taking it between thumb and forefinger and gently sliding it into the partner's open mouth, then he caressed his lips and asked: «Are you satisfied, baby? I noticed you struggled to swallow the last bites».

Jack didn't answer immediately, too busy to chew and swallow piece by piece a mouthful to relieve the fatigue, but when he succeeded he immediately declared: «Neither yes, nor no. I struggled to swallow because the fruitcake was very dry, not because I was full, but, to be honest, I'm not accustomed yet to the feeling of hunger, then, who knows?, maybe I'm already full? I really don't know. However, can I have something to drink?».

Not surprised at all by that statement the Boogeyman replied: «Don't worry, it's understandable that you feel disoriented: you haven't been eating for more than three centuries, moreover you're expecting a child, then the sense of hunger is yet to normalize. Since you're not sure about what you feel it's better for you to stop here, okay? If you ate too much you’d just end up feeling sick and frustrating all the efforts you did. If the fruitcake was dry, and I don't find hard to believe it, it's better for you to drink something, then sure, gladly: would you like a bit of milk? Here I have a dairy glass that I brought from the kitchen just for you, but if you prefer something different just ask».

«No, milk is fine, I used to like it so much!» exclaimed the boy, already excited at the idea of tasting again the white drink after a long time.

Without further ado the man stood up, walked around the bed and went to the bedside table, then he left the plate on it and lifted the napkin which covered the full glass; after making his lover cup his hands he handed it to him, waiting for him, at least in that case, to deal with it by himself, drinking at his own pace the amount he wanted and not risking to suffocate him for too much solicitude; finally, eager to reward him for the great progresses made, he stretched out his arm to wipe his lips with the cloth, but at the last he changed his mind and leaned forward, licking away the milk moustache and giving him a quick kiss.

Frost winced instinctively at that gesture, twisting his mouth when he felt his tongue tickle it and then remedying with a late kiss which smacked in the air, but then he burst out laughing immediately, soon imitated by the partner that, to amuse him even more, slid a hand under the smaller blanket and pinched his side. After some vain attempts to break free the boy grabbed him by the wrist, pulling him away with difficulty between a sob and a chuckle, but in the end he managed to soothe the hilarity and, in serious tone, he said: «Pitch, I need to ask you something important: I'd want you to call my Nightmare».

Pitch, who was still grinning for the double joke he had conceived, absently asked: «Voluptas? Sure, I'll call it right now». 
"No, not Voluptas" immediately stopped him Jack; "I meant the Nightmare I helped to grow during your convalescence, the very special one, capable both to lure and scare".

Dumbfounded the Boogeyman frowned and demanded: "That Nightmare? I suppose you want to see it destroyed, since it attempted to attack you, but I don't think it's the case to kill it here, nor in front of you: the death of such a beast is a show too strong for you, and I'm not willing to upset you, nor to scare you. I could ask Sandy to destroy it instead of me, to spare you the most excruciating part, but I'd rather spare you everything: you're pregnant, I don't want you to feel bad. Are you so eager to see it with your own eyes? Maybe you could watch from afar and cover your ears in order not to hear".

"No, Pitch, I don't want you to kill him: I want to let it approach me and see what it'll do" replied the boy with a resolute expression.

"You're crazy, right?" exclaimed the man, shocked; "Less than four days ago it crept into this room and tried to attack you, to bite the precious child you've decided to keep, and now, what do you do?, you voluntarily make it enter here and leave him free rein! Not even in your wildest dreams!".

"No, it's not true, it didn't try to bite my belly, it had only leant forward its muzzle!" promptly countered Frost.

"To bite you!" insisted Pitch.

"Maybe just to watch closely!" defended it the boy.

"It's a Nightmare, Jack, not a pet, it's born to kill, and it lives only of that".

"Not necessarily, not always! Let me at least try, please?".

"No!".

"What the hell is going on here?" intervened a female voice, interrupting the fight just when it was becoming more heated.

The Boogeyman, who already in the second sentence had jumped up on his feet in order to better express his indignation and to reaffirm more explicitly he would have never, ever satisfied the partner's insane desire, snapped: "Jack is crazy. Maybe he hit his head, maybe it's because of his pregnancy, I have no idea, I just know that he needs to be cured, because he has a problem, a rather serious one".

"Stop calling me crazy!" cried Jack, angrily pulling down the blanket to uncover the chest and shout better.

"Guys, stop it! You're just hurting yourself by screaming and arguing in this way! Calm down. Now, may I know what's going on? And woe to the one who restarts bickering!" silenced them Toothiana, leaving the pile of clothes she was holding on the dresser and approaching the two litigants.

Without hesitation the man took the floor and insisted: "I told you, Jack has gone crazy. Do you remember the Pureblood which crept in here four days ago and which almost tore him to pieces? He doesn't only want me not to destroy it, but he even pretends that I call it back and allow it to approach him! Would you believe it? It's a madness".

"It's not a madness, you keep saying it was going to attack me, but actually you can't know that at all! According to me he came close just out of curiosity" reiterated the boy.
«Okay, okay, I understood the point» interrupted them the fairy, hushing them with a wave of the hand; «Pitch, I already told you my opinion about the Pureblood: in hindsight its expression seemed confused and suspicious, not aggressive, so it's probable it got closer just to browse. Have a go, give Jack a chance: now you're well rested and much more concentrated than a week ago, so there is no danger that the Nightmare could escape your control».

«But how is it possible that you always agree with him and support him!?» shouted Pitch.

Too shocked to be able to soothe the anger simply by exercising all the self-control he had he growled, opening his hands like claws to create four small Nightmares and therefore driving them out with a loud whip, then he turned and barked: «Have you forgotten what happened seven months ago? Have you forgotten how that same Nightmare attacked you, even though I was present and aware and you had lowered your guard just for a few moments? It's a machine devoted to destruction, it cannot be tamed, and he recognizes me as its master only as long as I go along with its murderous wishes!».

«No, Pitch, I perfectly remember» quietly replied the woman; «I remember a creature young and immature, still too disoriented to behave properly, I remember a master attentive, but still too weak to assert his authority with his mere presence, and I remember a touching meeting between two beings which barely knew each other and which, yet, managed to understand and respect each other whole hog. You're going down with me: I am the Guardian of Memory, you cannot hope I can forget something, moreover if it's an event so unique. You're afraid, and it's understandable, but you should not pander it: you should have more confidence in your abilities and in Jack's intuition».

Taken aback by her answer the Boogeyman realized that stubbornness would have achieved any result, so he changed his strategy and, in a venomous tone, he insinuated: «And how are you going to welcome the Nightmare, huh, Jack? Lying on the bed, naked, maybe even with your arms and legs spread to be more vulnerable?».

Blushing intensely Frost countered: «I can put on some clothes, of course!».

«What a pity you don't have clothes to wear now» pointed out the man, looking smugly at him.

«Oh, don't worry, I came here just to bring them to you. They're your usual clothes, Jack, washed and perfumed: I'll pick them up from the pile of towels and sheets» stated Toothiana.

Growling the man followed her with his eyes, his arms crossed, his mouth distorted into an angry sneer and his hands clenched into fists to hold back the magic sand which roared through his veins, pulsing just to break free and tie her up, and when he saw her coming back he hissed: «You can wear all the clothes you want, even an iron diving suit, but that won't make me change my mind about the Nightmare».

«Independently of what you'll decide to do with the Nightmare Jack needs to get dressed, don't you agree? He cannot stay in bed for months, and certainly he cannot go around naked. Give him a hand, come on: when he's ready you could have a walk around here and clear your minds» suggested the fairy.

«He can stay in bed a little longer, and he should do so» retorted Pitch.

«If you don't help me I'll do it myself» concluded the boy.

Calmly and with his brow furrowed in a concentrated expression he took the clothes which had been brought to him, waited for the woman to turn and it uncovered his legs, kicking away the blanket in order not to have it in the way; rummaging in the pile of garments he retrieved at first the pants,
which he wore without any difficulty, then his trousers, which, instead, required him greater efforts and contortions, and which he immediately gave up to fasten; finally, he unfolded the shirt, first sliding in it the arms, then the head, but when he tried to lower it he realized that it was too tight to cover his swollen belly.

«Oh-oh, it seems there's a problem here» commented with a triumphant smile the Boogeyman.

Jack stood motionless for a few seconds, his eyes wide in front of that discovery and his expression incredulous and vexed, but then he reacted in a completely unexpected way.

Chapter End Notes

I hope you liked this chapter. Feel free to leave a comment, if you want to, I always like receiving my readers' opinion about the story. Next chapter will be published on the 7th of November (on Friday, as usual), because the next week I'll be at the Lucca Comics! If you're interested in my cosplays you can check my tumblr blog. I wish you a nice evening
Chapter 14

Chapter Notes

I'm sorry I'm publishing now, as I wrote on tumblr I unfortunately finished the translation only on the last Friday evening and my friend didn't manage to check it even in the weekend, so I had to delay. I hope the chapter will be worth the wait.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

WE DON'T HAVE TO BE ALONE – CHAPTER 14

Jack stared at the belly for a long time, trying again to lower the shirt and then rolling it up to expose it completely, then he whispered in a faltering tone: «I'm... I'm already so big...».

Pitch, whose cruel and satisfied grin had grown more and more in seeing the second attempt failed and the final surrender, winced at the comment so unexpected, and he instinctively replied: «Well, Jack, what did you expect?».

Unable to shift both his widened eyes and his open palms away from his swollen bump the boy went on, as if in a trance: «I've got fat so fast, I would have never imagined, I didn't realize it...».

Toothiana, who, in the meantime, had turned again, cast the Boogeyman a withering look, then she sat on the bed, slid her left arm around Frost's shoulders and said: «Jack, you didn't get fat, that's only the child growing: aren't you happy for them? If they're already become so big think about how strong they will be when they'll be born!».

The boy, however, seemed to barely hear that encouraging statement, and, moving the fingertips on the seam between the stomach and the abdomen, he murmured: «No, it isn't only the child, where they are the belly is hard, here instead it's soft, too soft, it's never been like this before».

Realized what was happening the man followed the fairy, settling on the mattress and embracing Jack's waist, then he intertwined his fingers in his and explained: «Jack, this is perfectly normal. All children need a little fat in order to grow well and safe, and the same goes for you: do you manage to think about how painful would be having a protruding belly without something to soften it? The skin would be forced to make sharp bends and it wouldn't be sufficiently hydrated, then you'll end up feeling sore everywhere and all the time, and not to mention the energies: have you looked at your arms? They're much thinner than usual, because the child has stolen you the flesh to made their own, and it's something that shouldn't happen: that's why we made you eat, and we will continue to prepare you new meals until the end of the pregnancy. Trust me, Jack, you must have a reserve, or you're going to feel bad again, and then, you've always been so skinny, so why are you worried about this?».

«So earlier I was too skinny?» asked the boy with a hint of panic in his voice.
At that question Pitch stiffened, pursing his lips and blinking his right eyelid a few times to dispose of the exasperation, then he gritted his teeth and answered: «No. No, you weren't too skinny. And now you're not too fat. You're always perfect, Jack, it doesn't matter if you change weight, if you're pregnant or anything else you've ever imagined: you will always be perfect. Understood?».

Frost, however, was too upset to be able to pull himself together, so, despite the reassurances from the others and a considerable effort from his own part he couldn't help it: he trembled for a few seconds, emitting weak, acute moans, then he brought the hands to his face and he burst into a tears.

Letting out a sigh faintly amused the Boogeyman pulled him even closer to himself, rocking him gently and leaving him all the time and the room to let him vent, never daring to question him or scold him for his behaviour, and so did the woman, caressing his hair and giving him some slight pat on the back to help him relax.

As the crisis, after intensifying and reaching its peak, finally began to subside, a discreet rustle came from the hallway and Sandman appeared on the doorway, holding a glass in his hand and nodding his head to the beat of a music he only could hear; as soon as he saw the scene he stopped, raising his eyebrows to show astonishment, but he recovered almost immediately and, after resting the cup on the table, he rubbed his hands together and slightly bent his legs.

Guessing what the other was going to do the man bared his teeth and snapped: «Woe to you if you dare!».

The Bringer of Dreams, however, blatantly ignored him, taking a short run-up and then throwing himself on the bed, right at Frost's feet, so as to dissipate the momentum in the last few steps and land softly against his chest, then he hugged him, pressing his belly against his and succeeding, in spite of the face covered by all the presents' arms, to stick out the tongue at Pitch.

Outraged by the irreverent gesture the Boogeyman did his best to dodge the newcomer, but he had no way to avoid him without leaving his lover, therefore he was run over, getting trapped in that tangle of limbs and clearly feeling his robe's left sleeve beginning to be contaminated by his nemesis' golden sands. In a vain attempt to preserve his dignity he boomed: «You're both ridiculous, get out! What got in your mind? You're only stealing air to Jack, and space to me! Disappear immediately!».

Obviously neither of them listened to him, and indeed they both tightened the grip, definitely making him impossible to escape and causing him a cramp in the shoulder for the awkward position in which he had been forced to; now lost his temper the man growled, getting ready to elbow and punch the Guardian to free himself, but just when he was about to shake them off he heard a giggle and he froze.

«You're tickling me!» exclaimed the boy with difficulty, arching his back to get away from the effusive display of affection.

Glad to finally see a serene expression on Jack's face still wet with tears Pitch smiled at him, then he pushed the two Guardians and insisted: «Have you heard him? Shoo!».

Prompted by the boy's exclamations and the man's curses Sandy and Toothiana parted, but they remained sit on the mattress, far enough to allow the first to catch his breath easily, but close enough to tease the second, one shaping little hearts of bright sand and the other indulging in dreamy sighs and fluttering her eyelashes; annoyed by the continuous and excessive liberties they kept taking the Boogeyman turned towards them with a growl, ready to pour on them venomous words and, if necessary, also some Nightmares to force them to leave him alone, but before he could even think about acting a voice asked: «What's going on here?».
Glancing towards the door Pitch spotted Bunnymund, his paws curled up and his ears pricked while trying he tried to figure out the unexpected situation, and without hesitation he explained: «Nothing, of course. Rather, Jack needs a new shirt: this is too tight for him now».

«Why does he look like he just stopped crying?» demanded the Pooka, suspicious.

«Because I've just finished washing his face to fresh him up» shamelessly lied the Boogeyman; «Jack, do you feel like wearing a new shirt or do you prefer to keep this? If you're very fond of it we can sew two side inserts, in order to make it larger».

After hastily wiping his cheeks with the back of his hand Frost replied: «No, you don't have to. I'm fond of it, but not to the point to pretend to wear it at all costs. Maybe it's better taking a new one, huh?».

«Yes, taking a new one is definitely better» approved the man; «The belly will surely grow more and more as the months pass, and it would make little sense periodically changing the same cloth: better taking a new one whenever you need it. Well, have you heard? Go find a shirt for Jack».

Hearing such a peremptory order suddenly addressed to himself the Easter bunny startled, then he sarcastically snapped: «Do you need anything else, your majesty?».

Unable to hold back the smug grin that had spontaneously arisen on his lips at that epithet Pitch replied: «I see that you've finally learned to pay respect to and address me with an appropriate epithet, rabbit: it took you a while, but better late than never. No, for now only think about retrieving me a new shirt: I would never want to cause problems to you by giving you more than one task at a time».

Bunnymund took the blow, shuddering and narrowing his eyes, but refraining himself from most blatant reactions, then he shrugged and stated: «Well, what should I say?, I see that you've finally learned to recognize your own limitations and give way to those who are better than you, scarecrow: it took you a while, but better late than never. Don't worry, we'll retrieve for Jack a shirt ten thousand times better than that which you would have chosen, considering how you usually dress».

Struck unexpectedly in what he believed to be one of his strong points the Boogeyman didn't wait and retorted: «Said the one who goes around naked, right? Your digs don't concern me the least: my style is unique and fascinating, perfect for me and perfect at all, to the point that it would be impossible conceiving a better one».

Completely ignoring the fairy, who, in the meantime, had flown to him and tried to convince him to calm down by glaring at him and pulling him by the arm, the Pooka commented: «Actually I must admit it: albeit slowly you're improving. Should I consider the insert on the sleeve as the first step towards a new wardrobe?».

Dumbfounded the man stared at him, unable to make sense of that question come out of the blue, but it did not take long to him to understand: it was enough for him following his emerald irises to lower his own, and, at that point, finally, he noticed his left sleeve, now forgotten, but still corrupted by dense and fine coils of golden sand.

A red veil fell over his eyes and a high-pitched hum deafened his ears, filling him with an uncontrollable rage and, at the same time, preventing him from venting it as he wished, but nevertheless he managed to hear Toothiana exclaiming: «We're going out to look for a new shirt for Jack!».

Seething he watched her shoving the Easter Bunny, jumping forward to retrieve Sandman and then
saying goodbye with a smile, the fists clenched to hold back the tentacles of shadow and the teeth gritted in order not to let out venomous sentences, which would have done nothing but worsen the situation and prolong the agony, then, when the trio had left the room, he strode to the door and slammed it after them. He used all his strength to make that gesture, not worrying about the splinters he dug in his palm, nor about the push of the shoulder which, almost involuntarily, he had given and which had undoubtedly caused him a bruise, and yet he felt that that wasn't enough, that the wood's crash and the hinges' screechings had been too weak, too empty relative to the scream he wanted to cry out, so futilely ephemeral in comparison to the infinite anger which pervaded him: he couldn't stand this any more. To be honest, until that moment he had borne very little, just a few hours of company, a couple of ridiculous scenes and a handful of jokes, but he was well aware that this was only the beginning, only the surface of the abyss into which he was sinking: not even for a moment, in fact, he had never deceived himself by believing he could bring Jack out of there. Making this move was too dangerous, too complex, too tiring for his pregnant state: a horseback travel, the only conceivable one to transport him quickly and efficiently over long distances, would have exposed him to a thousand dangers, from accidental falls to blows to the belly, from the icy winds to unpredictable attacks by the enemy, not to mention the destination. Even if he had managed to defend him all the way, in fact, where could he have brought him? In his lair, where he would have seen him withering day by day because of boredom and lack of cures? In an abandoned human house, where retrieving everything he could need would have been slightly easier, but only provided that he periodically moved away, leaving him alone? And Frost, what would he have done in the meantime? Would he have patiently waited for him, or would he have tried to follow him, eventually tumbling for the second time down the stairs? No, none of these plans was conceivable: the best solution was staying in North's Palace, well hidden and protected, well stocked with any food, medicine and furnishings, and yet the very idea nauseated him and threw him into a panic. How much longer would he have had to bear the Guardians and their sadistic game? During the previous months he had learned to get used to them, but meeting them from time to time was one thing, living in very close contact with them for weeks was another: he could already picture them, nosy as only they knew to be while bothering him with any kind of comment out of place and joke, offering advices and personal opinions not required, even touching him, was it for a friendly shove or for a comprehensive caress, and the simple imagining this caused him disgust and physical pain. No, it was useless, he would have undoubtedly had to make huge efforts to keep them as far from him as possible, and to carve out small spaces to let off steam, or he would have blown up within less than a couple of days, but everything always well away from the boy: his little snowflake counted on him to confront and overcome his pregnancy, and he should not give in, nor, least of all, stress him with continuous and repeated outbursts.

It was precisely for this reason that, after standing with his forehead resting on the wood for nearly a minute, he shook himself, took on the more relaxed expression he managed to put together and, turning, simply commented: «Well, now we are alone, at least for a while. How do you feel?».

At that question Jack lowered his eyes, his gaze forlorn as he crouched his legs to make himself smaller, and answered: «I'm sorry for your sleeve, Pitch».

Letting out a tired chuckle Pitch replied: «Oh, nothing irreparable».

With a soft gesture he rubbed his palm on the sleeve, wiping out in the twinkling of an eye the lace of shimmering sand and letting it fall to the ground; the boy stared at it spellbound, making the irises wander to follow every grain and blinking when it dissolved, but eventually he put himself together and said: «The Guardians, however, seem to be a bit “irreparable”».

Surprised by such an observation the Boogeyman asked: «What do you mean, Jack?».

Frost hesitated for a moment, then answered: «They've made you feel uncomfortable again, right? It's
useless, it doesn't matter if they make an effort or not, they end up failing almost every time. The problem is that often they don't have a middle way: they either insult you, how does Bunnymund, or they're too expansive, as Toothiana. In one way or another they always try to provoke you, and actually I admit that it's a funny thing, but it's not difficult to realize that it's not so for you».

The man, who, in the meantime, had covered the distance which separated him from the bed and sat next to his lover, put an arm around his shoulders and admitted: «Yes, it's true, they do it very often and I don't I find it funny at all, but it's not a drama: if they remain within bounds I can stand them, and when they exceed I'll find a way to silence them».

The boy chuckled, finally daring to lock eyes with him, and demanded: «Does this way include Nightmares and strings of black sand?».

Rolling his eyes Pitch declared: «Well, who knows, maybe yes, maybe no...».

Jack smiled at the sentence, but he had no fit of hilarity; after a while, indeed, he visibly clouded over, sadly staring at the blankets, and he whispered: «I'm sorry, it's all my fault. I'll ask them to stop».

Annoyed the Boogeyman contradicted him: «No, Jack, it's absolutely not your fault, why do you say such a thing? You are not responsible for other people's behaviour».

Letting out a small sigh the boy countered: «No, it's my fault, if I hadn't insisted in flying in Toothiana's realm I would have never fallen and you would have never had to bring me here, if I had taken care of myself a bit better I would have not needed also their assistance, not to mention the scene I made a little while ago: I was so pathetic, I even started crying, and moreover for such a stupid thing and about which, actually, I don't care at all! I feel so ashamed, I'd want to bury myself, I wonder what you'll think about me now...».

Foreseeing a second crisis the man immediately hurried to prevent it, taking his partner's face in his hands and wiping with his thumbs the first tears he had already started to shed, then he murmured: «Stop, stop, stop: you're getting into a vicious circle. You had a crisis and you felt ashamed of yourself, in the effort to apologize you got upset and you're about to have a second one, and when this will be over you will feel ashamed even more and you'll fall even more into a panic, right? Don't be a dog chasing its tail: you have nothing to be ashamed of. The reason of your anxiety may seem silly, but in truth it is not: you've been used to have the same lean body for over three hundred years and the change you've suffered has been fast and considerable, it's quite normal being shocked. Beyond this, however, in pregnancy it's common having mood swings and overly emotional reactions, often uncontrollable, so don't make a drama out of it, neither now, nor in the future: they won't be up to you, and they won't make you pathetic».

Frost raised a faint smile, caressing up his wrists as he tried to control the trembles, then he explained: «You know, it was so weird! I was lucid, I knew that there was nothing to be afraid of, but I couldn't hold back the tears! I strove a lot, but in the end I was tired and I had to give up. I'm not worried about the belly and I'm not bothered about gaining weight, especially if it's good for the baby. What about you?».

«Me?» instinctively asked Pitch, caught by surprise by the unexpected question; «Are you asking me if I'm bothered by you gaining weight? No, not at all. You would suffer if you stayed skinny, and then, you're so soft...».

Half closing his eyes he hugged him better, resting his cheek against his forehead and starting to stroke with his fingertips that small and soft cushion which, despite the malnutrition, had managed to grow between the boy's swollen bump and the lower abdomen, but this jerked, twisting and
shouting: «No, not like that, you tickle me!».

Bending the lips in a sly smile the Boogeyman commented: «I have the feeling that, in this period, you're more ticklish than usual».

He left him in peace for a few seconds, enjoying his expression puzzled and a little suspicious as he returned his look, then launched the attack, pinching both his sides and gently biting his throat; Jack, for his part, was too slow to react and couldn't avoid neither of the two trickeries, soon finding himself immobilized and prey of an uncontrollable laughter, and nothing could his feeble attempts to escape, nor his prayers and rambling threats: seeing him cheerful and carefree was a real joy for the man, and he wasn't going to deny this to himself for no reason at all.

After about a minute the poor victim began to give some sign of surrender and Pitch chose not to further push his luck, well aware of the fact that the other had not fully recovered yet and, above all, that he had just eaten: after biting for a last time his soft skin he grabbed him by the shoulders, helped him to sit up and placed him against the pillows, then he stepped back and waited for him to pull himself together at his own pace.

The boy, who, at first, perhaps fearing a new joke, had tried to drive him out, laid sprawled on the cushions, spreading his arms to catch his breath better while a persistent hilarity kept shaking his chest with continuous laughs, but in the end he managed to compose himself and state: «You're a real idiot».

Not offended at all the Boogeyman sneered, satisfied with the result and amused by his tired look, and he decided to take off his shirt, useless ornament now become a crumpled rag, but, when he tried to stretch out his arm toward him he heard him blurting out: «Don't you dare to do it again, this time I'm ready to defend myself!».

«Silly boy, I'm just trying to take off your shirt» he promptly reassured him.

Pursing his mouth and squinting Frost murmured warily: «Mh, I don't trust you».

Looking up at the sky the man snorted and concluded: «Then take it off by yourself!».

The boy hesitated for a long time before reacting, looking him up and down from head to toe while staying well curled to protect himself, but in the end the desire for cuddles won, so, sporting a pleading look, he raised his arms, both to surrender and to quietly demand to be stripped.

Glad to see him Pitch didn't need to be asked twice, carefully taking off the garment and smoothing it a little before folding it neatly, then he said: «Well, I'm going to put it in the closet. Meanwhile, what new shirt would you like to wear? You need one not too tight, of course, but it would be better avoiding a too wide one, too, otherwise you'll end up catching a cold. What colour would you prefer?».

Scratching his head to ponder better Jack replied: «Yes, indeed you are right, better not to take it too wide: I'll be careful to choose a suitable one. Do you think I'll manage to find it? Uhm, I don't know what colour, white as the old one would be fine, but also blue, or dark green: it's enough for it to be not too bright, about the rest I have no preference. Anyway, shouldn't we have had this discussion before asking others to look for a new shirt?».

The Boogeyman, who, in the meantime, having found the closet occupied by blankets and pillows, had diverted to the dresser and put the shirt in a free corner, closed the drawer, and then answered: «Yes, it would have made more sense, but in this way the Guardians would have found immediately what you're looking for». 
«Pitch, you're terrible!» scolded him the boy, crossing his arms in order to better show his indignation, but visibly struggling to hold back a laugh.

A knock at the door interrupted their conversation, discreetly intruding into the room immersed in warmth and silence, and shortly after the wood was opened with a slight creak, revealing the four Guardians.

«I heard that Jack's belly wants to compete with mine, but it should give up, because it has no chance!» cheerfully boomed North; «I brought some new shirt to remedy the problem: there are not many, because it's been centuries since I had your same size, but I'm sure that you'll find a suitable one».

After stepping aside to let his friends in he closed the door, then he strode to the bed, dropped the bundle he was holding onto the mattress and began to explain what he had found: «This red shirt was my favourite one when I was young! I've worn it so many times, in fact it's a bit bleached out, but the fabric is strong, so it's not ruined. This yellow jersey, instead, is almost new: I used to wear it only on special occasions, but soon it became too tight for me, so I had to put it aside. This colourful one, then...».

He went on to explaining for long, showing to the presents a total of seven different garments, some clear, other dark, some heavy, some light, some embroidered, other simple, but all rather large; perplexed in front of that assortment, so vast, and yet so poor, Frost hesitated, biting his lip as he tried to take a decision, and finally he stated: «Okay, I'll try the green and the dark red ones».

Without waiting for Santa to hand it to him he retrieved the red shirt, shook it off a little to unfold it properly and then put his head in it, contorting himself to find the sleeves, but when he succeeded he didn't need to do anything else: the thick fabric fell by itself, unrolling far beyond his wrists and piling up on the blankets around his waist, and its weight was enough to drag him on the sheets and stretch the neckline to uncover him a shoulder.

«This is not good even as a nightshirt» commented Pitch, who had wrinkled his nose at the mere sight of that patchy wardrobe.

«I'll try the green one, it looks smaller» confidently replied the boy.

Ably disentangling himself from the folds of cloth he undressed, then he grabbed the green shirt and wore it: unlike the first time he had some difficulty, since the tighter cut and the large amount of decorations didn't ease its eased it sliding down the skin, but after some attempts he managed to lower it on the swollen belly, and, looking at himself, he observed: «I think this suits better, don't you say?».

The Guardians, who had carefully studied every single step of the dressing up, didn't answer, merely raising their eyebrows and asking opinions to each other, but the Boogeyman, who didn't need any advice in terms of clothing, literally threw up his hands: he would have hardly been able to imagine a garment worse than that.

«Déjà vu» he intervened, remembering the purple velvet robe which Santa Claus had tried to lend him only a few months before; «No, North, it's not good: it's too large around the chest, too tight around the belly, the sleeves are long and hanging, and the fabric is too thick and rough. Don't you have anything else in the closet?».

«No, unfortunately I don't» confessed the master of the house; «But I can ask the Yetis to sew a new shirt: they've dressed thousands of dolls, now they're very skilled with needle and thread. What colour do you want, Jack? I have a load of wool ready to be carded, and I can dye it if you want». 
Jack lit up at that suggestion and was about to answer, but before he could open his mouth the man asked: «Cashmere wool, of course, right?».

«Sheep wool: I don't keep goats in my Palace» corrected him North.

«Sheep wool is not good» stated Pitch; «It's rough and it chafes the skin. Use silk».

Taken aback Santa protested: «But I don't have silk in my laboratory!».

«Are you kidding me?» exclaimed the Boogeyman, shocked; «And how do you make dolls' clothes if you don't have silk? Don't tell me that you use wool!».

«Of course!» confirmed the master of the house; «I use wool to make coats, and satin and chenille for dresses and petticoats».

At that statement that the man rolled his eyes and muttered in a low voice: «For all the Nightmares, the chenille, no fabric worse than this was ever invented...».

«Tell me, Pitch, are you sure you're not pregnant, too?» interfered Toothiana.

Flaring up Pitch barked: «These are not cravings, fools! Jack's skin needs a soft and delicate fabric».

«But his old shirt is made of raw cotton, satin will be fine to replace it!» snapped Bunnymund.

«His old shirt is made of linen, idiot, and I remind you that, anyway, it chafed Jack's belly to the point it almost made it bleed! Ah, but why am I wasting time with you? You are a bunch of incompetents! Stand aside, I'll solve this problem by myself».

Although clearly amused by his outburst the master of the house, the fairy and the Bringer of Dreams refrained themselves from any critic and stepped back to let him pass, but the Pooka, who resented the insults, provoked him: «And what are you going to do to solve it? Will you leave again, this time to a mystical and fascinating journey to the China' most remote valleys, to get the silk once used for the Emperor and coming back after who knows how long, carrying a lotus flower to make us forgive you?».

«I have something better than silk, rabbit» retorted the Boogeyman, giving him a push with his shoulder to pass.

«Pitch, if only you listened to me, I was trying to tell you that any fabric would be...» began the boy, who, since his very first protests, had tried to intervene.

«Shhh» hushed him the man, pressing his index on his lips; «Don't worry, Jack: I promise you you will be totally satisfied with the result».

Frost sighed heavily at that statement, clearly annoyed by the fact that he couldn't express his own opinion, but eventually he gave in and, after taking off the dark green shirt, stared at him, waiting for instructions.

Encouraging him with a gesture Pitch made him stand up, offering him his forearm to give him a firm support while he settled on his feet recently healed, then he took off his robe and dressed him with it, but before he could even think about modifying it the Easter Bunny commented flatly: «Oh, damn, what an ingenious solution, I really can't understand how we couldn't conceive it before».

«Let me work in peace, for once!» retorted the Boogeyman.
Disdainfully turning to have his back on him he knelt down and got started to repair the defects more evident, first of all closing as far as he could the front, then cutting the fabric at the wrists and pelvis, then he sat better and prepared himself to focus on single areas: at first he worked on the part which covered the chest, too large and saggy considered how different their body type were, and he removed two strips of fabric, sewing up each tear with a single gesture and reshaping the darkness so that it perfectly wrapped the rib cage, from the shoulders to the sternum on the front, and to the mid-back on the reverse side; then, after measuring him up by eye, he inserted the two patch torn in the gap which had been left open on the belly, sealing it permanently and creating soft folds which perfectly embraced the swollen bump, thicker in the middle, more sparse on the sides, just like his lover's new shape required; finally, straightening his back, he went to the arms, rubbing his palms on the triceps several times to make the weave tight and move the excess of black sand down, ending it just above the elbow and creating a bell-shaped sleeve, which went down softly and stopped just before the tip of the ulna.

As soon as he finished he arched the spine, trying to gain a better view without moving and to identify what, in the new garment, didn't convince him, and in the end he succeeded: the v neckline, albeit not deep, didn't suit his partner, too serious and provocative, and, above all, too narrow, and it was appropriate to opt for a more simple and airy one. Without hesitation the man touched it with his fingertips, drawing a circular shape which exposed the collarbone, but which covered already part of the second rib, and anyway he left a central cut, in order to allow the boy to bend over and breathe without feeling compelled, and to enliven a little that shirt which, albeit unique in its kind, appeared a little anonymous, since it had no decorations; he allowed himself a moment to gaze at the result, then, after closing the neck with a small bow, he asked: «So, Jack, do you like it? If you want to see better you can open the closet: there is a mirror inside the shutter».

Slightly limping Frost covered the few steps which separated him from the cabinet, slowly opened it guiding the door and then craned his head, peering at his reflection like a child, and only at a second moment in time advancing timidly in front of the mirror to see himself in full; enchanted Pitch followed him with his eyes, touched by the ability with which this managed to be sweet even in the simplest gestures, but the idyll was soon broken by a well-known voice which hissed: «What a fuss over all this, and you ended up making him a women's blouse».

North immediately turned to Bunnymund, glaring at him and trying to scold him in a low voice, but the boy, who, albeit far from him, had heard the comment and seen the scene, intervened and said: «No, stop, don't get angry with Bunnymund at every occasion: he's not very polite, I admit it, but he's always sincere. He's right, this shirt is feminine, but I don't care, and then, frankly, I cannot imagine anything more feminine than a bump».

Pleased to know the partner hadn't got upset by that remark as sincere as inappropriate the Boogeyman stood up, then he reassured him: «Good, Jack, do not care about this nonsense: think only about making sure that it's comfortable and warm, because this outfit is perfect on you. In the end, you would look beautiful as in a military uniform as in a dress».

Blushing at the compliment Jack eluded the compliment, making the gesture to dismiss him with the left hand, but continuing to caress the garment with the right, looking almost in a trance while he followed every fold and, inevitably, redrew his own body's new forms, but, for the second time in less than a minute, the Pooka interjected them, demanding: «Wait a minute, are you saying that, if it were up to you, Jack would wear a dress!?».

Exhibiting a sly grin the man turned, looking up and down at his interlocutor from head to toe and, after casting him an allusive glance, he replied: «If it were up to me Jack would wear only transparent veils, or, better yet, lace lingerie and thigh highs». 
Turning his expression from incredulous to upset the Easter Bunny let out a disgusted cry, then he exclaimed: «You're disgusting, he would look awful, I couldn't even be able to look at him!».

«No, you should not look at him, which is very different!» countered Pitch, already feeling the jealousy growing at the idea that other people could enjoyed the vision of his lover in such provocative clothes.

Strangely Bunnymund didn't reply, perhaps because he had realized that the question should not concern him, perhaps, more likely, because he had been shocked by his last statement, but the Boogeyman didn't have time to marvel at his reaction: a few seconds later he felt something adhering to his chest and hugging him tightly, and when he lowered his eyes he saw the partner and heard him whispering: «Thank you, Pitch: it's beautiful».

Taken aback by the unexpected surge of affection the man almost risked to step back, but he soon pulled himself together and, gently stroking his head, he murmured: «You're welcome, Jack. Are you happy we've solved this problem?»

«Yes, a lot» enthusiastically replied the other, raising two irises full of joy to him and caressing his naked back; almost immediately, however, he became serious and went on: «We have solved a problem, and this has been a great relief for me, so now I would like to solve another one: you have to call my Nightmare».

They had argued for hours on the issue, talking quietly, expressing their own reasons, arguing and even insulting each other, but for a long time they've been far from reaching an agreement: Pitch continued to believe that the Nightmare was too dangerous, Jack that it was innocent, both of them had not surrendered, and neither of them had been able to find a solution acceptable to himself and the other. The Guardians, of course, had soon intervened, at first to demand explanations, then to calm them, and they hadn't taken long to side with: North and Toothiana had given support to the boy, insisting that, after months passed in close contact, it was very improbable that the Pureblood had rebelled and decided to attack the very one who had grown up it and who it had always respected; Bunnymund, instead, making a virtue out of necessity, had backed up the Boogeyman, arguing that that demon was unpredictable and uncontrollable and that it shouldn't be absolutely allowed to come close to Frost, especially considering his pregnancy; Sandy, finally, who, among all of them, was the most reflective and who, unable to speak, had more difficulty in asserting himself in the high pitched discussions, had abstained, standing aside and watching the contestants thoughtfully. Fuelled by additional opinions, the quarrel had been further extended, enriched with new points of view, but also with new reasons to fight, and slowly new suggestions had emerged, that finally tried to mediate between the conflicting ideas, but another half hour had passed before they could find a compromise: only when the man had stared at the boy in the eye and realized how deep were the sadness and the disappointment which clouded them, in fact, he had understood how important the question was for him, and he had decided to take a step forward and hold out his hand.

At first, of course, he had made him lay, massaged a bit his temples and prepared him a tea, doing everything he could to ease the fatigue that, in the rush to defend his ideas, he had accumulated, and to loosen and dispel the stress which the wearing bickering had caused him; then, consulting the master of the house, who, for obvious reasons, had a voice on the coming and going of guests in the Palace, he had decided to organize the meeting in that same bedroom, calling four big Yetis to guard it and allowing all the presents to arrange themselves as they wanted and to keep their weapons ready; finally, after sitting on the mattress and settling Jack on his lap, he had hugged him tightly, and summoned Voluptas to assist them closely, some medium-sized Nightmare in line from the door to the bed and several tentacles of shadow to fill up, more or less, any remaining space.
«Pitch, don't you think you overdid it? It's impossible to breathe in here» commented the boy when the other had finished.

«Frankly, if I was completely sure I could control it, I would draw here even Behemoth to give a hand» stated Pitch.

Snorting Frost raised his eyes to the sky, then he said: «I won't comment just because I know you would never do it, but know that you didn't make me laugh at all. Seriously, I struggle breathing and I'm sweltering, can't you remove something?».

«And in fact you shouldn't have laughed, my statement was not a joke» retorted the Boogeyman.

He stood still for a while, reluctant to grant the request he had been asked and unable to choose what, among the irreplaceable defences he had raised, was less necessary than the others; he pondered for a few seconds, then, proceeding by exclusion, he decided to sacrifice a couple of beasts bringer of bad dreams, halve the spirals of darkness and recall all those left around the bed's head, to create a sort of crown which, since it was out of the boy's sight, could not annoy or scare him, but which, looming directly over him, would have had an intimidating effect on the awaited guest.

«Thank you, Pitch» whispered Jack, twisting his neck to cast him a smile; «I'm ready. When you feel like doing it call the Nightmare».

Muttering to himself the man leaned back against the pillows, then, feeling himself too tense, he straightened up, he tried to bend his legs and then to stretch them, to smooth the folds on his robe and therefore to drape it better on the blankets, contriving any expedient in order to gain time, but in the end, run out of ideas and finding himself more agitated than before, he decided to throw in the towel and get it over once and for all. Taking a deep breath he closed his eyes, focusing to sink into the darker side of his own conscience and get in contact with all his servants, then, once made a rough selection, he immediately spotted what he was looking for. He was no little surprised to find it so quickly and easily, considering how he had driven it out the last time he had met it, but the beast, indeed, seemed neither diffident, nor frightened: it had showed itself in his mind, forcefully imposing its disturbing and mischievous presence, and, judging by the energy with which it had done this, it seemed it had been waited for this moment for days and days. The final confirmation of this feeling, however, came when he sharply ordered it to appear before him: he almost didn't have the time to mentally shout “Come here, I'm waiting for you” that the horse whinnied and started to gallop, reaching in a blink of an eye the circular opening of North's Palace and thus revealing that it had remained hidden all the time in the surrounding caves of ice, in silent wait.

Albeit annoyed both by the creature's affront and by his inability to notice it until it had decided to show up, Pitch tried not to give it too much weight, staying focused in order not be caught by surprise a second time, and when he felt that the being had reached the door he swallowed, holding his breath and keeping his powers ready.

Announcing itself with a slight chilly breeze the Pureblood crossed the threshold, emerging gradually in the light of the fire in all its tantalizing beauty, the body lean and slender, as always, the mane even wilder than usual, and the tips of hooves, legs and neck adorned with a thin cap of frost, which made it look even more beautiful and deadly; after pausing for a moment to let everyone gaze at itself it moved slowly among the present, not even glancing at them and even lashing its tail when Bunnymund crouched to get ready to attack, its fiery eyes well locked on the boy; finally, after passing the footboard, it went along the side and leaned over Frost.

As soon as he saw it getting closer the Boogeyman stiffened, bending the tentacles of darkness to create a looming and menacing dome and holding his lover even tighter, but this said: «No, Pitch:
Albeit not convinced the man slightly loosened the grip, wrapping his right arm around the partner’s chest and resting his left hand on his belly, but when he felt him moving it away and lifting the shirt he hissed at him: «Are you crazy by any chance!?».

Pressing his index and middle finger’s back on his lips to hush him the boy whispered: «Shhh, trust me».

Sweating blood Pitch watched Jack uncovering himself, opening his legs a little and resting his forehead against his neck, exposing himself without fear and without shame to the Nightmare which, less than a week before, had tried to tear him to pieces, and then the Nightmare itself, who immediately took advantage of the concession; almost trembling he saw it craning the muzzle, breathing heavily against that swollen belly so unusual for a male body and almost touching it with his dilated nostrils, the tension which almost killed him while the animal slowly opened its mouth to show its sharp teeth, and he missed a beat when he heard Jack moaning softly, anyway refraining himself from intervening; in the end, though, just when fatigue began to take over and make him lower his guard, he saw the Pureblood snorting and straightening with a jerk, and he was certain he had failed. Startled by the sudden movement he couldn't avoid to jump, but he also took care to drag the boy with himself, hugging him with arms and legs to protect him as much as possible and releasing his shadows to punish the unruly servant, but this didn't bat an eye: with a buck it shooed the swirls of black sand, tilting its head he effortlessly dodged the boomerang the Pooka had promptly thrown at it, then, after turning solemnly, it walked away at a trot.

Dumbfounded the Boogeyman raised his head, looking in amazement the elegant shape of the creature disappearing swaying over the threshold, and he couldn't do anything, neither composing himself, nor speaking, nor thinking: what had just happened was incredible and had no explanation.

«What did we tell you, Pitch?» commented Toothiana, waiting for the Nightmares left to disperse and then closing the door.

«It didn't... it didn't attack» murmured the man.

«It had no reason to attack» simply explained North.

Sitting up again and holding Frost, who, in the meantime, and half closed his eyes to recover, like a child, Pitch focused, maintaining the mental contact between himself and the animal to figure out where it had headed, and when he felt it stopping everything become clear.

«It's a stallion» he explained to the Guardians; «He took position on a spur above the Palace, drew the Nightmares which were gathered here and sent them in the surrounding caves: he's ready to defend ourselves, or, rather, to defend Jack, in case of attack».

This discovery, of course, responded only to some of the thousands of questions which had arisen spontaneously in his mind, and no doubt not to the most important one, but soon the fairy intervened to solve it, saying: «I would say that this is yet another demonstration that the child is yours, Pitch: for what other reason would your Nightmare have troubled himself to come here to study them and then guard them?».

Despite the reasoning was perfectly sensible the Boogeyman refused to believe it, too shocked and too closed to the idea, and without hesitation he retorted: «I would say that this is yet another demonstration that my Nightmares are unpredictable creatures and must be kept far away from Jack».

«Make at least an exception for the poor lady Voluptas!» exclaimed the Guardian with a laugh.
Not amused at all by the joke the man clouded over, still confused by what had happened, but then, made suspicious by a detail in the sentence uttered by his interlocutor, he instinctively demanded: «Lady?».

Toothiana, who had already flown up to the window to open it and refresh the room now become sweltering, answered: «Yes? What did I say wrong? Maybe you hadn't realized she's a mare?».

Struck by that revelation Pitch was finally able to explain the reason of Voluptas' loving attitude, from the affection she showed to the boy to the attentions she dedicated to him, including the infinite and tender licks she never forgot to give him, especially on the belly, and which he had tried not to give much weight to in order to better focus on more important issues, but feigning nonchalance he replied: «No, I had realized it, I was just amazed to see you had noticed it, too. Jack, how do you feel?».

The partner, who, in the meantime, had curled up with a faint groan against the Boogeyman's chest, stirred a little, as if he was reluctant to wake up, but eventually he opened the irises and, displaying an angelic look, asked: «Can I have some chocolate?».

¹ In Italy we inflect most of the adjectives, which, therefore, sound and are written differently according to the gender and number of the noun they're referred to. In this case the neuter gender (which works like the masculine) would have required the word “povero”, but Toothiana used “povera”, which is a feminine adjective, so Pitch could immediately notice this and understand she was considering Voluptas a female; in English, unfortunately, there's no difference, so I had to use the word “lady”, which is a bit flashy, but which, actually, is the best solution I could conceive

Chapter End Notes

I hope you liked this chapter. Feel free to leave a comment, if you want to, I always like receiving my readers' opinion about the story. Next chapter will be published on Friday. Have a nice evening!
Chapter 15

Chapter Notes

WARNING (containing spoilers): As I wrote in the tags this chapter contains suicide thoughts. If you don't feel like reading them, but you want to go on with the story, ask me for a summary and I'll gladly write it for you.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

WE DON'T HAVE TO BE ALONE – CHAPTER 15

Days passed, weeks faded away, and nothing changed. Pitch continued to take care of Jack, Jack to let himself be cured by Pitch, the Guardians to help where possible, and the days to seamlessly come one after another: the sleep, the waking up, the morning ablutions, the breakfast, the lunch, the dinner, and then the sleep again, in a succession with no end and no aim. The dust slowly began to accumulate on Toothiana's volumes, which have become mere trinkets to kill time, disorderly piled up in a corner to make way for blankets, towels, pillows, bandages, medicines and whatever else might come in handy for the pregnant patient; the window glass began to opacify, attacked by the ice from the outside and by the warm and almost sticky air from the inside, remained closed for too long to shine; the mattress began to deform, yielding under the weight of the boy always still to create a sort of hollow which had the exact shape of his body. Actually, on second thought, the Boogeyman had to admit that many things had changed since he had decided to settle at North’s Palace: the company had increased, the privacy decreased, the daily rhythms had slowed down and the frequency at which objects of any kind were transported back and forth from the room soared, and yet, the more the chamber was filled with furniture and furnishings to the point it had become almost suffocating, the more he felt his soul become empty. It didn't matter if he was alone or in the presence of other people, it didn't matter if he spoke or kept silent, it didn't matter if he moved or not: in any case he perceived that the passing of the seconds worn him out, and at that point, rather than admitting that everything was slipping more and more into a stalemate, he preferred to say that nothing had changed. He repeated it to himself over and over, while he cooked, while he tidied up, while he added new wood to the fire he had decided to never let die, and the mantra worked: he prevented him from thinking, he helped him focusing on what he was doing and holding on until the next pleasant moment, because, he couldn't deny it, in that life of a thousand shades of grey much more than a flash of colour peeked out. The Nightmares which came to visit him, the occasional walks he allowed himself to make sure that the world continued to fear him, the periods, more and more numerous and long, when the Guardians decided to step aside and leave him alone, and, in general, any time spent with Frost: he would have never got tired of assisting him, undressing him, washing him, dressing him up, feeding him, cuddling him and holding him in his arms, whispering sweet words to repeat him how special he was, rocking him slowly to facilitate his sleep, because, in the end, he was doing all this for him, and seeing him quiet was the best rewards he could desire. The boy had weakened a lot in recent weeks, although he had eaten regularly, to the point he had lost further muscle tone in arms and legs and got to whisper less than half a dozen sentences a day, but the man had decided not to lose faith: sooner or later his lover would have recovered, and all the loving cures he was giving to him would have had effect, rekindling him the energies and the smile.
For this he was working, for this he undertook so much to look after him, for this he kept him safe: to protect his body and his soul, to keep the peace he already had and turn it into happiness, to preserve the most precious treasure he had ever owned, because he had been on the verge of losing it too many times to risk again. For this he was working hard: he had to endure, he had to do it for him, because the partner had become his whole world and his sole purpose, and to him was dedicated every act he did. He had to endure for his little snowflake, because, in the end, he was doing everything for him.

Days passed, weeks faded away, and everything changed. At first Jack almost didn't notice it: he had felt so bad and for so long, both physically and psychologically, that it didn't seem real to him to have his mind clear, to manage to enjoy both the small and the big moments of the day and to be able to fully appreciate the others' help, and he devoted himself mainly to these activities, basking in the serenity he had reached for accepting the situation and thanking everyone over and over for any favour they did to him. After a while, however, laziness was replaced by awareness, and he began to notice small details out of place: a few caresses all too mushy, a few words all too schmaltzy, some aid all too zealous for things that, in truth, he was perfectly able to do by himself, trifles, mostly, but which could anyway make him feel uncomfortable, and he tried to ignore them, hoping they would have drained away on their own. In the end, however, all was clear: when he had accepted the baby he had lost his freedom, and he would have never had it back.

The days, from sweet and funny, turned into grey flatness, coming one after another in a downward spiral which seemed to have no end: at first, in fact, the boy still had freedom of action in some matters, but it was enough for him to stumble while walking down the halls to earn a permanent escort who, when they didn't come to pick him up, held him by the shoulders, and to slip off the mattress while he was taking off his shirt to gain a squire always ready to undress him and dress him up without he needed to lift a finger.

The daily rhythms became more and more slow, more and more monotonous, more and more limiting, extending beyond belief although, in truth, many hours were committed to rest; the Guardians, who had always supported him, soon turned out to be a company exceedingly annoying and importunate, even irritating; the biggest change, however, was definitely the one happened in Pitch. Jack had always been aware that the Boogeyman was an insecure and possessive person, who often needed physical contact and similar demonstrations in order to feel reassured, to prove his usefulness and reaffirm his presence, but he had carried it to excess: now no second passed without his stroking, was it for a gentle caress or to help him in any activity, the mushy talks were the order of the day and the favours he did to him innumerable. He did almost everything in his place, from retrieving various kinds of objects to tidying up the room, from tucking him the blankets to cutting the food he prepared for him, and the boy, in order to defend himself, started to make less and less things: he stopped asking to go out, resigning himself to lay on the bed, because now he understood that North's Palace had became his gilded cage, and he had no interest in exploring it, carried around like an invalid; he talked less and less, coming to utter just three or four sentences in a whole day, so as not to give the other any excuse to speak; he increasingly slowed down his movements, to take the longest time possible to carry out even the simplest actions, and therefore reduce their number.

This solution, of course, wasn't effective at all, and did nothing but make the situation worse: seeing him so lifeless the man became even more thoughtful and suffocating, going so far to watch over him while he slept and to follow the few steps he covered from the bed to the sink beneath the window, the Guardians chose not to bother him any more, leaving behind themselves a great void, and everything deteriorated. Pitch's cuddle became a torture, his voice a torment, the food he served to him venom, and the hours of sleep, the only relief left, harrowing suspension: since he did nothing all day he felt perpetually tired, but never enough to fall asleep, and he often found himself staring at the
ceiling, waiting for a truce which never came.

To overcome those dead times, inevitably, he started to think: at first about everything and nothing, still too confused at the idea he had suddenly become a doll to be really able to pull himself together; then, in a fit of nostalgia, about the past, full of adventure and breathtaking sceneries, full of explorations and exciting times, filled with a touching love that, albeit protective, had been a springboard for new experiences, and which had never clipped his wings; finally, almost without realizing it, he slipped back into the present, in the wearing of the seconds which passed without passing, which eroded his soul and body without leaving any significant trace, and which seemed to benefit only the creature in his bump. Against all odds this had grown again, coming, in barely a month, to take up his whole abdomen from the ribs to the groin, and forcing him to ask for modification to his shirt almost weekly, and, although they didn't stir, Frost could perceive them all the time: it didn't matter if he was sitting or standing, if he was resting or struggling, if he was lucid or clouded by numbness, the baby was always there, nestled in his flesh, intent to eat and stay safe, and they were completely indifferent to his problems. Obviously the boy didn't expect that they physically did something to help him, well aware that they were completely unable to move, but, considered that he had given all of himself to them, he had hoped anyway for some benefits: he had believed he would have felt better, and instead the only thing they seemed to let him was freeing him from the nausea; he had thought they would have made him happy, and instead the idea of having them inside himself filled him with sadness; he had deemed that they would have enriched him, and instead every day he felt poorer and poorer. While at first, gripped by fear, he had always seen them as separate from himself, when he had accepted them he had automatically considered them part of himself, but soon the situation had got out of hand, and the infant had taken over, replacing him altogether: for them he ate, for them he didn't make physical efforts, for them he stayed warm and safe, about them the others cared, about them Pitch asked for news. Indeed, in retrospect, Jack soon realized that for weeks all had revolved around that big belly, passing through him just because he was the only messenger, the only channel of communication for a being who still had no face and no voice, and not because there was really the will. Indeed, in retrospect, Jack realized that he had become exactly what, at first, he hadn't understood: a simple and anonymous incubator.

The music. The basses. The lights. Jack had been thinking about it for a long time now, maybe hours, maybe days, maybe weeks, but he couldn't say precisely, given the state of absolute lethargy in which he had fallen. The music. The basses. The lights. The dark and terrible world of the rave, the guys huddled together with no sense, no respect, no intimacy, but also with no shame, no inhibitions, no silly rules to undergo to. The music. The basses. The lights. The hell on earth, the pit of degradation, the stunning loss of identity, so awful, and yet so familiar, because it was not much different than the torment he was already experiencing, and, actually, if he could have chosen how to die, he would have rather done it there, rather than in a quiet room. The music. The basses. The lights. And a grunt.

The discordant note, came sudden and amazingly real in the world of dreams in which Frost had taken refuge, made him wince, bothering him enough to wake him up, but not to make him regain lucidity, and with his eyes still fogged he turned to the left, looking instinctively for source of the sound.

«Oh, baby, did I wake you up? I'm sorry: I'm afraid I dozed off without realizing it. Do you want me to make you sleep again? You seem to be still very tired» whispered Pitch, rushing eagerly to the bedside.

With a sigh almost suffering the boy moved, feeling distinctly his joints creaking due to the forced immobility and blinking to focus the scene, and suddenly he remembered: he was lying on the bed,
as he's been doing for a week and a half now, and, in order to escape his lover's suffocating care, that morning had declared his intention to rest. Given that the Boogeyman had evidently watched over all the time, guarding him from the comfortable and spacious armchair which had been definitely placed next to the bed, this could be considered only half a victory, but he had to content himself with it: he hadn't avoided his eyes, but he had at least spared himself the physical contact, which had become almost a painful feeling for him, and this was no little achievement.

The break, however, didn't last: seeing him hesitating the man immediately began to stroke him, absentingly combing his hair and also going down his cheek and neck, and he whispered: «Do you want me to massage your belly to make you relax?».

«I'd like to listen to music» answered Frost.

He had spoken instinctively, almost trying to escape the umpteenth unwanted attention, and not even addressed to himself, more than really to propose anything new to do, but reflecting on it for a moment he convened he had had a great idea: listening to music would have undoubtedly distracted him, and then, since North's gramophone was under repair, he should have necessarily had to move away from the Palace to do it, finally giving a breath of fresh air to his stale routine.

As he expected the man reacted with surprise, clearly taken aback by that statement, and he asked: «Music?».

«Yes, music» explained the boy; «I've been thinking about it a lot until a few seconds ago, and I'd really like to listen to it a little».

Trying to ignore the hand that, nevertheless, had slipped right on his swollen belly to fondle it, he stared at his partner, showing off the expression more hopeful and disarming he was able to take, and finally he heard him replying: «Oh, yes, sure. Unfortunately North's gramophone is broken, but a few weeks ago I retuned the piano he keeps in the attic, so I can play you something».

A look of pure disappointment came over Jack, who was almost shocked by the speed with which his plans went up in smoke, and Pitch hastened to demand: «Are you all right? Maybe you don't like the suggestion, by any chance?».

The boy took a moment to dispose of the sadness and the awareness that he would have never come out of there, but then, sure that answering otherwise would have not allowed him to get what he wanted, he lied.

«No, it's all right: the suggestion is fine with me. Let's go?».

The Boogeyman furrowed his brow immediately, probably not convinced about the truthfullness of his words, but he didn't insisted further, and, smoothing the frown, he concluded: «Yes, let's go, but first you must have lunch: it's way past noon».

Without even waiting for a response he stood up, settling his robe and looking around to start the day, and Frost struggled greatly to refrain himself from screaming: it was unbearably irritating the way in which the other had taken control of his life, planning every moment and deciding for him what should be done and when, and he was really about not to bear it any more. Caught by a fit of rage and a sudden feeling of nausea he tried to counter: «I'm not hungry».

Casting him a sympathetic smile the man leaned over him and said: «I'm sorry, baby, but there is no question about this: you must eat. It's been too long since your last meal, and the child needs something to eat, or they will end up stealing your flesh again, as they did it all too often. If you're not up to a hearty lunch we can start with a meal small and easy to digest, like a piece of focaccia:
North brought here for you a freshly baked one just an hour ago.

Not reassured at all by the gentle tone his lover had used the boy closed his eyes, holding back the tears of frustration which had arisen spontaneously, not only for the refusal, but also for the reason given to it, which, incidentally, concerned once again the baby, and abstaining from opposing he yielded, murmuring: «All right, I'll eat the focaccia».

Nodding condescendingly Pitch turned, walked up to the desk to retrieve a plate covered with a cloth, then he went back, placed it on the bedside table and began to take care of Jack: at first he freed him from the soft blanket he was wrapped into, briefly folding it and putting it on the armchair; then, noticing that his clothes were creased, he rearranged them, caressing them several times to remove wrinkles and making sure to cover every inch of exposed skin; finally, after taking him by the shoulders and making him sit with his back against the plumped pillows, he draped the napkin over his chest and left the dish full of food on his thighs.

The boy, during all these procedures, didn't speak, nor move, letting himself being shifted like a doll and suffering in silence, and he didn't react even when these were completed, staring at a corner of the room with his eyes clouded and ignoring the partner; the latter, however, didn't ignore him, and after about a minute of tense wait he giggled and whispered: «All right, baby: I'll feed you».

Biting his lower lip to hold back a lament Frost came under it, letting himself go against the pillows in the final surrender and turning his head to offer himself to the man who had become nothing more than a useful but annoying nurse, and he opened his mouth, trying not to think about anything in order not to show his emotions and to maintain a neutral mask on the face; lowering his eyes he followed his long, thin fingers breaking up the focaccia, giving him each time the pieces obtained and inserting them directly in his mouth, and he chewed with difficulty, hampered by the dough too dry, by the complete lack of hunger and by the situation which, on the whole, filled him with nausea; finally, when the plate was completely cleaned up and he was about to breathe a sigh of relief, he heard: «Baby, you should not let yourself down in this way: there's nothing wrong in needing help».

The phrase, though conceived as an encouragement, was yet another joke for the boy: oh, how much he would have wanted to contradict him, how much he would have wanted to scream in his face that, actually, the only thing he needed was to be left alone! Now, however, he didn't have the strength to do it, nor the courage, and the only thing he could do was whispering: «Let's go?».

«Sure» conceded at last the other; «Place your hands on the belly and bend your legs a little, so I can lift you up».

Not at all surprised by this request, which lately came without even being anticipated by a question about his health or his wishes, Jack obeyed, staying focused on the end to bear the means, and he curled up with difficulty in the most comfortable position he was able to to take; tilting his head to leave him more room he let him, leaning back in his arms and feeling a fit of insane joy when he heard him grunting for the effort of lifting him; finally, feeling guilty about his last thought, he definitely calmed also his mind and relaxed.

Inert like a corpse he let himself be carried, from the room to the hallway, from the hallway to the Globe's hall, from the Globe's hall to the stairwell and hence upward and upward, step by step, floor by floor, in a physical ascent which contrasted so much with the path his soul was following, so overwhelmed by the sense of helplessness that he couldn't even enjoy the fresh air and the scenery finally different and full of life and colour, but in the end, as soon as he spotted the impressive wardrobe which hid the entrance to the attic, he recovered and began to stir, in order to induce the Boogeyman to speed up the pace: holding on to his collar to straighten up and raising his head as best as he could he looked for a good place to sit and he noticed almost immediately a comfortable
armchair, identical to the one they had in their room, so, judging it an optimal positioning, he pointed at it, to make sure to end his short trip there. A huge relief pervaded him when the man turned and headed to the object of his desires promptly, but slowly, and the boy, too impatient to wait, twitched: suddenly stretching out his legs he almost freed himself by his lover's grasp, seriously threatening to roll on the ground and drag him with himself, but the other, albeit taken by surprise, quickly snatched him, saving him from a certain trauma and running for the final steps to follow the momentum. By no means regretting the method not really appropriate he had used to reach his destination Frost was satisfied and smiled, willingly accepting the brief check up the partner subjected him to, because he was aware that this would have been the last contact he would have had with him for some time, and in a curious tone he asked: «Are you really able to play the piano? You never told me about this».

Still dazed by the accident just happened Pitch gasped, partially collapsing on the arm to recover, then he replied: «Yes, I'm able to play it: I started practising about two centuries ago, fascinated by the sounds and melodies it produces, and I never stopped. I'm sorry I've never told you, but I did it just because you didn't seem interested: I remember very well that, when we casually chanced upon a concert and I proposed you to stop and listen to it, you reacted with a yawn and a bored expression, so I definitely let the matter drop».

Remembering well the event the boy blushed slightly, repented of his harsh reaction and saddened by the fact this had induced his lover to withdraw: he didn't imagine that the other had such a passion for the instrument, and, if only he had guessed it, he would have thought twice about answering in that way and mortify him; nervously intertwining his fingers he pondered a little, at first inclined to simply ask for pardon, then to justify himself by saying that a general concert couldn't draw him as much as one performed by him in person, but in the end he didn't utter a word and he just lowered his head, curling up better between the backrest and the seat cushion to look smaller and pretend to be busy. Unable to get a good view of the Boogeyman he couldn't tell if he had noticed him escaping and, if so, how he had taken that gesture, but soon after he heard him fumbling with the furniture and, with his ears pricked, he managed to follow his every move: a brief series of clicks and thuds announced him that he had retrieved a bench to sit on, a loud rustle that he had uncovered the instrument, a more soft ones that he had taken place, and, at that point, overwhelmed by curiosity, Jack couldn't help but slowly raise his eyes to peek at the scene, and immediately remain speechless.

In contrast to what he had originally imagined, and to what, more importantly, he remembered from his last visit, the instrument was not a banal vertical piano, but a huge grand piano, slightly warped under the weight of years, but equally beautiful: the case, albeit partially hidden by fabrics and objects of various kinds, was so shiny it seemed to glow in the dark, more reddish on the lid and darker on the edges, and it grew into a sinuous shape that it was virtually impossible to find in its more modern brothers; the keys, albeit yellowed and deformed by time, still showed the signs of the man who had meticulously carved them, more visible on the ivory, more imperceptible on the ebony, and they seemed to be more numerous than usual; the lectern, albeit full of music sheets covered in dust, violently emerged from under them, thicker at the base and thinner on top, and it seemed about to fly, given how graceful his silhouette was. Enchanted by the relic survived through the centuries, the boy lowered his irises, slowly following every curve of the three paunchy legs, focusing on each curl which adorned them and getting lost into the spiral which formed their footholds, and hence it was quite natural for him jumping at the man's feet, climbing along his tapered calves and then along his back, lingering on the exposed jugular vein and the tendons before finally stopping on his parted lips: oh, how much he yearned touching them, how much he missed their passionate touch, how much he wanted to devour them and then being devoured by them! More than a month had passed since the last real kiss he had received, and the nostalgia was seriously about to cause him to get up and run to him to ask for another, then another, then another, on the mouth, on the neck, on the collarbones, because, actually, what he abhorred was not the physical contact in itself, but the fact that this was aimed purely and only to make the baby feel good, because, actually, he would have
liked his caresses, if only they had reached him in other spots, because, actually, Frost missed him, and he didn't really want to keep him away from himself: if only Pitch had approached him to sit between his legs, to hug him tightly, as he used to do when they didn't meet for a few days, or just to talk about this and that in a natural and relaxed tone, he would have welcomed him with joy, showing him all the affection he still felt for him and working to regain the intimacy, both psychological and physical, they had lost, but the hopes that this could happen had become dim, and he had less and less faith.

Deeply lost in these thoughts which did nothing but chasing their tail the boy didn't notice that Pitch had finished the preparations, and he almost winced when he heard the first, shrill note that this played: he didn't remember that the piano's strings could emit sounds so piercing, and the fact that he had lived for weeks in a cocoon-like environment only increased this perception. Snuggling into the seatback's soft padding to protect his sensitive eardrums he endured the first strums, giving time to his lover to warm up and to himself to get used to the vibrations, realizing only in this moment that the other, next to the instrument, looked so perfect to seem a piece of past fallen into the present, and focusing on this he finally managed to let himself go.

It all began with a few sounds, spaced out, powerful and almost echoing, despite that room was too crowded to allow sound waves bounce from a wall to the other; then, suddenly, the melody took shape, flowing as if by magic from the thin fingers caressing the keys, growing in intensity without turning annoying, and it filled the air, balancing perfectly the acutes with the basses and becoming the only and true protagonist of those moments; less than a minute after, however, the rhythm was broken and the atmosphere changed. The player's phalanges, from graceful dancers, became tired walkers, the motif, from flowing and strong, stumbling and uncertain, the notes came one after another slowly, more and more heavy, more and more feeble, like boulders which fell with difficulty off the side of the mountain only to roll down to a few feet below, like the last spasms of life of a creature which was about to be silenced: it was like watching a slow death, sometimes heartbreaking, sometimes calm and next to expiration, but always full of harrowing sadness, and that was too much to bear for Jack.

"This song is sad, I don't like it" he snapped.

Frightened by the sudden exclamation the Boogeyman, which was completely immersed in the performance, startled and missed a key, playing a wrong note which made him wince again; he remained motionless for a few seconds, clearly confused and mortified by what happened, but eventually he pulled himself together and, casting him an encouraging look, he whispered: "I'm sorry: I didn't choose a great melody, and I let myself go too much. How about your coming here with me to play? You could help me choosing something more cheerful: I'm sure you'd have fun".

The boy beamed to the suggestion, came out of the blue after weeks of calm, and he instinctively shouted: "Yes!".

Without waiting for the other he jumped, rolled in some way down the armchair and ran towards him, leaping from a handhold to another to help his skinny and trembling legs to support the weight of the body plus the belly and reaching him before this could even think about coming to his aid; blatantly ignoring the shocked look on his face he smiled, holding on to the piano's top edge to take a little break and catch his breath while he considered the best way to sit; finally, opting for the most classic and rocambolesque one, he lifted his foot to pass it over the bench.

"Baby, no, wait, don't be hasty, you'll get hurt... look out!".

It was a matter of a blink of an eye: a moment before Frost was in perfect balance, ready to let himself go on the seat and start the impromptu music lesson, and a moment later he was on the
ground, one leg bent under the bench and the other abandoned above it.

The man, who with a quick jump had managed to snatch him and hold him in his arms just in time to protect him from shocks, let him go, kicking away the useless seat to rescue him and lifting his shirt to check him, and he anxiously asked: «Jack! For all the Nightmares, did you get hurt!? Did you hit the head or to the belly?».

Even before Pitch finished, however, the boy burst into tears, not because of the physical pain, which he had no experienced, but in exasperation: what had made him fall hadn't been the carelessness, nor the vehemence with which he had moved, but the belly, which, pressing against the keys, had bounced him back, and this awareness was the drop which broke the vase brimmed over too many times.

The music. The basses. The lights. Jack had been thinking about it for whole hours, now, hours during which he had let himself being carried, medicated, watched over and abandoned without emitting a sound, hours during which he had managed to do nothing but suffering and breathing with difficulty, hours during which he had lain like a corpse on a bed which adhered to him like a coffin padding. The music. The basses. The lights. He couldn't get his head rid of them, the first so intense, the second so vibrant, the last so flashing, and, actually, he didn't want to, because that seemed to be the only viable distraction from the apparent death he had fallen into. The music. The basses. The lights. The dark universe of the horrible truths and the amazing illusions, the noisy world with no rights and no duties, the land of the free and the enslaved souls he had come to covet, because now he felt that he had lost himself so much to be able to merge into its frequenters to perfection, and because losing himself even more would have only made him feel relieved. The music. The basses. The lights. And the white powder.

The thought suddenly struck him, the only glimmer of activity in a clouded mind which had given up reacting, and awakened in him a self-destructive desire which, in the weeks before, he had tried with all his might to suffocate: trying the drug. If only he had been at the rave again he would have not hesitated a moment to grab a dose, regardless of the pupils which would have surrounded him and which, anyway, would have been too dilated to grasp the movement, but he would have not been as naive as the first time: he would have not chosen a soft substance such as cocaine, able to distract him only partially, and only for a few hours, but a heavier one, maybe several all together, in order to be sure to completely escape from the body which now he hated, and not to be sure to return, because, actually, he didn't care. He didn't care to preserve his senses, because the only thing he felt was pain, he didn't care to preserve the awareness, because this only allowed him to witness to his own decline, he didn't care to preserve the consciousness, because this only helped him to further torment himself: he just wanted to vanish, escape, leave behind himself his problems and the baby whom everybody loved to disappear and hope to land in a better world, where finally his identity would have been recognized and restored, or where, as an alternative, he would have not existed at all, because now he didn't care even to survive.

A high-pitched and rasping sob escaped from his throat, echoing in the empty room and fading without receiving a response, and the bump bounced, crushing him further and taking his breath away, apparently determined to torment him every second and in every way; blinking with difficulty Frost turned his head, in a childish attempt to avoid its silent tortures and its looming presence, and when he did it he noticed something shining on the bedside table, and he had a flash of inspiration: there was another way to escape the impasse, easier, more viable, more effective and less dangerous than the drug. There was another way, and he would have exploited it.
The Man in the Moon began to run, advancing with difficulty through the blades of grass he struggled to push aside with his short baby-arms, but determined not to give up for anything in the world.

«I'll catch you!» he shouted as a warning.

Without waiting for an answer he sped up the pace, jumping in order not to stumble in the flowers and shrubs' thick roots, and eventually, waving the hand he had stretched out in front of himself, he felt something soft and definitely hotter than a plant's stem.

«I got you, I got you!» he exulted.

Without further ado he wrapped his fingers around what he had found, feeling the delicate bones of a wrist under his fingertips and finally finding the girl whom they belonged to, but this didn't turn, and murmured: «Manny, you must let me go».

Not at all willing to obey that order the Man in the Moon laughed and, hugging the girl's slender figure, he exclaimed: «No, now you're mine and we'll be together forever!».

Stubbornly having her back on him the other insisted: «Manny, you must let me go».

Burying his face in her perfumed hair the child protested: «No, I don't want to, you're so beautiful, I will never leave you».

With an unexpected twitch the young woman turned, revealing two widened irises so intensely violet to seem amethysts, and, albeit in a gentle and almost pleading tone, she boomed: «Manny, you must let me go».

This last sentence echoed several times in the Guardian of the Guardians' mind, bouncing painfully in his skull, and he opened his eyes, finding himself panting and lying on his throne: evidently, while he pondered, he had fallen asleep.

Dazed by the sudden change of visual he lowered his eyelids again, allowing himself a moment to recover and massaging his temples to gather his thoughts, then, levering on his arms, he stood up: what he had experienced had undoubtedly been a dream, but the voice he had heard was all too real, and he knew very well where it had come from.

Rubbing his sweaty palms on his trousers he went down the platform's steps and walked to the right, looking back just to briefly check the Globe's lights and quickly entering a passage; advancing in a brisk pace through the meandering corridors which formed his Palace he moved away from the larger halls, penetrating at first into mysterious caves, which, despite being underground, shined in their own light, then in a maze of bridges suspended over the void; finally, after passing a series of arches so thin to seem roses' stems, he reached a carved door and opened it.

The scene which appeared in front of him, albeit known and expected, couldn't help but causing him a painful pang: lines of sophisticated machineries crowded the room, some placed on the floor, others nailed to the walls, others hanging from the ceiling, some buzzing, others silent, but all connected to each other through thick cables and teeming with transparent tubes, and there, in the midst of that chaos of serpentine pipes, laid his beloved sister. She barely emerged from the bed on which she rested, literally buried under layers of devices, as white as the sheets which warmed her, visible only thanks to the long, blonde hair which framed her thin face: a creature fragile, tiny, too weak to survive to the outside world, too delicate to be able to resist its cruelty; a creature frail, sickly, too receptive not to perceive any change, too sensitive to remain untouched; a creature born too early in the wrong universe, and with a task far too beyond her reach.
Letting out a sigh, the Man in the Moon stepped forward, carefully leaping over the bundles of tubes which covered the floor and lingering next to some machinery to adjust their values; then, when he was sufficiently satisfied with them, he advanced, silently approaching the invalid's bed and sitting beside them; finally, after taking her only hand free from the pipes between his own and bending over the mask which covered most of her face, he whispered: «Just a little longer, Cinnamonson. Hold on a little longer».

«But what the hell, you have it in for me, then!» snapped Pitch.

Trusting in his fortune, and especially in Voluptas' intelligence, he dropped the reins to bring his hands to his face and rub his eyes which have been blinded: only a few seconds before a ray of moonlight had struck him directly into his pupils, bending along an unnatural curvature in order to hit him and painfully fixing on his retina, and this had been only the latest of a fast and annoying series. Since he had crawled out of North's Palace, taking advantage of Jack's sleep to make up for a whole week of complete abstinence from work, he had had only a few hours of complete freedom, during which, due the anxiety to return as soon as possible to his suffering lover and to make sure he wouldn't have had to leave him for several days, he had been able to summon hundreds of Nightmares, but for five minutes the Moon seemed to have picked on him, using him as a target for its silly games. What the hell was the Man in the Moon thinking? Wasn't it enough the fact he had completely shook his life with an unexpected pregnancy? Did he also have to stoop to stupid and annoying pastimes?

As if in answer to that question not expressed a new beam of light reached him, bouncing on a window and then jumping on him, and the Boogeyman, on the brink of exasperation, shouted: «Dare to send me another and I swear I'll come on your pathetic satellite to tear your hands off your arms!».

In order to make the threat look more credible he called the Purebloods which were in the area, while moving his arms to create an arrow of black sand and pointing it toward the hideous satellite, but this didn't answer, standing out indifferent in the night sky, and the man could do nothing but lower the weapon: from where he was he couldn't even hope to reach him, but, after all, he had conceived the whole scene only to induce him to give up, not to start a war he had planned to undertake later, therefore he had obtained what he wanted.

Shrugging he got ready to resume his raid, but before spurring his horse he stopped: in the air there was something wrong. It was not a smell, nor a sound, nor a colour: it was more a feeling, a detail detectable only with the mind and only by focusing properly, but it was there, and, once perceived, it was hard to ignore.

It took a few moments to Pitch to decide: neither by concentrating he was able to identify that particular out of place, but he had the distinct feeling that this was a danger, therefore, oblivious to any task, he headed back, hurrying to get to his lover and check that everything was all right.

Chapter End Notes
I hope you liked this chapter. Feel free to leave a comment, if you want to, I always like receiving my readers' opinion about the story. Next chapter will be published the next Friday. Have a nice evening!
Chapter 16

Chapter Notes

WARNING (containing spoilers): In this chapter Jack will cut himself

See the end of the chapter for more notes

WE DON'T HAVE TO BE ALONE – CHAPTER 16

Flattening himself against Voluptas' neck to offer less resistance Pitch urged her to increase the speed, making her fly very near to the ground to avoid the head wind which was blowing and skilfully guiding her between an obstacle and the other to prevent her from crashing. Using this strategy he managed to travel very quickly, covering the North Africa, the Mediterranean sea and the whole Europe in just a few minutes, soon spotting the mountain chain in which was hidden North's Palace and taking less than a second to reach it, and it was with a genuine sigh of relief that he jumped into the roof round opening: during the short journey he had headed out the concern which had prompted him to return had done nothing but increase, and he couldn't wait to dispel it by spending some time with Jack. In the recent days the boy had given him a lot to think about, both for the perennial sad expression he had on his face and for the general state of apathy into which he had fallen, and the unfriendly attitude he had taken during the small diversion with the piano and soon after had just worried him further, but the Boogeyman was sure to know the reason: the partner had needed his help many times, even for the simplest tasks, and he had covertly showed impatience in those occasions, so it was extremely probable he was feeling embarrassed about having to depend continuously and entirely on him; a normal reaction, actually, even understandable, but not right, and in fact he had every intention to make him understand how wrong it was.

Rehearsing the speech he had prepared about that matter, concise, so as not to tire him further, but effective, in order to be certain to convince him, the man dismounted, reabsorbed the mare with a soft movement of the arm and he strode away, along the parapet surrounding the Globe and then into the corridor which led to their room; he identified in a blink of an eye the door he was looking for, ajar, exactly as he had left it a few hours before, and exactly how he hoped to see it, and he slipped through the thin split between it and the frame without making any noise, then, once he had materialized himself again, he raised his eyes and cheered up: Frost was awake, sitting on the bed with his legs dangling and facing the window, and he seemed to be perfectly healthy.

Smiling Pitch leaned against the wall, allowing his body time to recover from the anxiety and, in the meantime, staring at the boy, naked from the waist up: his swollen belly, which, anyway, wasn't even visible from that angle, had undoubtedly deformed it, but not ruined it, and he still felt attracted to it, to the point that letting his pupils slide along his spine and neck caused him more than a few thrills. Indulging in fantasies which, considering the other's pregnant state, he couldn't actualize, he allowed himself a few moments, then, realizing that Jack didn't seem to have noticed him, he decided
to approach him from behind and enjoy a little more the vision of his sensual back; advancing with a stealthy step in order not to be discovered he crawled towards him and got ready to give him a pleasant surprise, but, unfortunately, he was the one who received a surprise, and not pleasant at all: as soon as he cast a glance over his shoulder he saw his hands clasped and pointing to his stomach, and, in them, a pair of scissors.

Upset as never before in his whole life he froze on the spot, unable to turn the irises away from that terrible scene, his partner's tapered fingers so thin in comparison to the two large blades of the tool become weapon, the blood dripping from the wound already opened so red in comparison to the white of the skin become target, and for a moment he couldn't even think to react, but, as soon as he saw his trembling arms moving to enlarge the cut, he pulled himself together: whatever was the reason which had led him to attempt suicide he had the duty to stop him, and he had to do it now.

«Jack, no, stop!» he exclaimed, awkwardly leaping on the mattress.

Frightened by the call and the impact the boy jumped, swerving and accidentally loosening his grip on the scissors which, almost miraculously, slid down his belly and hence to the ground leaving behind themselves only a light scratch; gasping the Boogeyman stretched out his right hand toward him, intending to draw him towards himself in order to check the wound and help him, but, as soon as he touched his bump, Jack screamed: «Do not touch me!».

Fast as a lightning he flung himself off the bed, falling sprawled on the floor and, at the same time, trying to retrieve the weapon and crawl towards the window, but the man was quicker than him: exploiting his long legs he leaped in no time on the parquet, putting his foot next to the scissors and kicking them away, then, with a twitch, he grabbed his lover, placing his own arms on his and forcing them against his chest, so he couldn't move.

«Jack, don't worry, now we'll go back on the bed, medicate the wound and talk a little, okay?» he suggested, maintaining a controlled tone despite the panic which had gripped him.

Frost, who, in the meantime, had no longer been able to hold back the tears which moistened his eyes since he had met him and had started to cry softly, struggled weakly, letting out faint moans as he leaned with all his weight on his limbs to make him release him, and Pitch, willing to appeal even to the guilt to calm him down and induce him to obey him, whispered: «Baby, think about the child, they'll get hurt in this way».

Unfortunately for him that device had the opposite effect to what he intended: instead of grieving and calming down the boy was pervaded by an uncontrollable rage and he growled, kicking and elbowing him to push him away and even giving a push with his shoulder to the bedside in order to escape, and when he succeeded he turned and shouted: «The child, the child, always the child, why don't you take them, since you like them so much? You're not able to think about anything else! Always them, always them, it seems there are only them now, I can't stand this, I haven't asked for them, I've kept them only in order not to be cruel, but they've been cruel to me, they stole me everything, everything, I can't stand this any more, always them, you touch always them, never me, you don't look at me any more, it's a torture, always them, stop...».

Bringing a hand to his chest, probably to soothe the stitches which contracted it, taking his breath away, he went on, lowering his eyes and mumbling words more and more incoherent and more and more interrupted by sobs, and the Boogeyman, who would have never expected such a resentment from him towards the creature he carried in his belly, hastened to tergiversate: «Okay, baby, okay, let's not talk about the child: let's talk about you. You need help, let me come to you and give you a hand».

«I've never been sick, I've never needed all the things you gave me» whispered Jack.
The man frowned, confused by the feeble statement that seemed to have little to do with the current conversation, but it was enough to him to ponder on it a bit to understand it and open his eyes: the real problem was him, and him only. The pregnancy, the consequent sickness and the discomfort due to the bump had, no doubt, contributed, subjecting both his mind and his body to a considerable stress and continually putting him to the test, but it had been his nagging assistance what had destroyed him completely, obtaining in exactly what he had intended in any way to avoid: making him feel useless.

Trying to stifle the myriad of thoughts which crowded his mind Pitch raised a forced smile and said: «Jack, right now you need help, and that wound needs to be medicated: let me give you a hand».

«Leave me alone» murmured Frost.

Powerless in front of that refusal the Boogeyman didn't move, holding his hands back in order not to infringe too abruptly the boy's space and then upsetting him even more, but when, as he reflected on how to act and the other swung back and forth remaining curled up, he saw him rubbing his fingertips on the cut and starting to torture it to widen it, he concluded: «Forgive me, Jack: I must do it».

Bending his knees to increase his momentum he leaped, reaching him in the blink of an eye and holding him tightly, then, pressing his palm on his forehead, he evoked a handful of black sand and caused him to fall into a deep sleep. It was with a pang in his heart that he saw those irises bright of madness rolling back before the eyelids pityingly went down to cover them, and with a tremble that he supported the weight of that body which had dangerously risked to become a corpse, but the fact he had managed to arrive on time to prevent the tragedy was a little consolation: he had saved his flesh, but his spirit had flown away, and the abandonment of his weary limbs, combined with the gash this had opened on his stomach, was an image of the death which had taken him too strong to be driven out.

Narrowing his eyes to focus better he knelt, slipped an arm around his lover's shoulders and the other under his thighs and lifted him up, making sure to be gentle and quick in order to disturb him as little as possible with the physical contact he now seemed to abhor and which, despite his unconscious state, he could still perceive, then he shifted him and deposited him on the mattress, evoking some tentacles of darkness to support his lolling head and place it on the pillow flattened by his long and frequent rests; averting his gaze for a moment he bent down to open a little dresser that had been added next to the bed and he retrieved some gauzes, a mild liquid disinfectant and a long bandage, which he moved on the bedside table so that they could be more handy during the medication, and finally, after uncorking the bottle and damping cloth, he turned back to the patient and got ready to heal him.

First of all, even though the situation had alarmed him a lot, the Boogeyman tried to keep calm and examine the wound with a critical eye: the blood had gushed copious from it, clogging it and splitting into two irregular streams, but the gash didn't look deep, and, since it was over the bump, it couldn't have damaged any vital organ, nor the baby, so there was no reason to fear the worst. Partially reassured by this conviction he rolled up his sleeves, starting to clean the skin from the swollen belly and slowly going up, folding the fabric whenever he saw it too dirty and returning back every time he considered it necessary in order to eliminate any trace of the crimson fluid; then, after removing the curdled clot which had occluded the lesion, he disinfected it and found that it was formed by two separate cuts, albeit close, clear and about half an inch deep, and he simply rubbed their edges with the cloth, hoping that this was sufficient to prevent an infection in order not to force them open; finally, after tinkering a little with gauzes and dresses to figure out how to bandage him without bothering him neither physically, nor psychologically, he decided to give up and leave the wound uncovered.
Calmly he put away the bottle and the cloths he hadn't used in the cabinet, gathered the dirty ones and stood up, walking around the bed to throw them in the fireplace, but, given the almost catatonic state in which he had fallen and the attention completely focused on his goal, he didn't notice the scissors and he stumbled over them: an unbearable ache gripped his sole, causing his calf a violent contraction and making him grunt in pain, and, lost his balance and too far from any handhold, he couldn't help but let himself go. Driven by the momentum of his own brisk pace he fell forward, writhing to escape as soon as possible to the torture of the contact with the odious weapon and bending his knees to avoid the risk of tumbling too close to the flames, and he slid to the floor without a lament, sitting on his shins and digging his palms on the ground for support; the gauze, instead, on which he had lost his grip from the beginning, took longer to fall, gliding down as gruesome snowflakes, and when the last landed with a rustle a faint thud sealed that suspended moment: a drop of water, perfectly circular, which seemed to appear on the parquet as if by magic, but which, actually, had done nothing but ploughing through the layers of thoughts buried in Pitch's mind, slipping silently from his eyelids and showing all the pain that he had neither the strength, nor the courage, to express.

A small sob shook his chest, then another one, then another one, causing his shoulders to bounce in a ridiculous way while he tried in every way to maintain his self-control, but his efforts served no purpose, and, in the end, he could do nothing but surrender: the sufferance he was feeling was too big to be hidden behind a forced smile. He didn't let himself go to a desperate cry, nor to a quiet one, because shedding tears wasn't like him: simply, with the composure which often distinguished him, he dragged himself to the nearest chair, laid his head on the soft seat and closed his eyes, wondering why. Why? Why had such a thing happened? Why had Jack attempted to commit such an act? Had he really felt hunted down to this point? Had he really come to hate his loving cures so much to prefer death to them? And he, had he himself really been so insistent? But, if it was so, why had the boy not talked to him? Why hadn't he tried to explain how the treatment made him suffer, to reject him, to fight him? Why had he clammed up, letting everybody believe he was tired while he was just withering? It made no sense: among the two the one unable to communicate and express his feelings had always been him, the Boogeyman, not Frost, a change so sudden and abrupt was absurd and rather suspicious, and, unfortunately, it made him fear more and more that he had received and then completely ignored those signs of discomfort, suffocating them under words of reassurance and cuddles in order to continue to enjoy his useful and irreplaceable role of caring and attentive lover.

An intense pang pierced his heel, exactly where he had felt the scissors sink up to the bone, and, although he had no desire to take care of himself, the man made an effort, he put aside his thoughts and bent down to check: considering how deep was the boy's malaise there should have been required a lot of time and work to even hope to revive him, and the last thing this needed was seeing his beloved one, perhaps now not so beloved, in pain, wounded and indifferent to himself exactly as he was. Using his hands to better expose the sole and touch it he realized that no cuts ruined it, and that the soreness he felt, albeit intense, could cause him at most a bruise, therefore he took a moment to massage the area and stimulate the circulation and, stretching out his arm towards the tool it had harmed him, he summoned a tentacle of darkness to retrieve it, intending to take it as far away as possible from that room.

As soon as he managed to hold in his fingers that cruel metal he painfully stood up, making his eyes wander around the room looking for any other sharp or breakable object that Jack could have used to harm himself again, then, making sure that the boy was still immersed in a deep sleep, he headed for the door; opening it just enough to pass through it without risking to get stuck he went beyond, his eyes staring at the ground to stay focused and think about what was the safest place to hide the scissors, but suddenly a shrill warbled: «Hello, Pitch! Going for a walk to stretch your legs? It's been a long time since I saw you out of this room. How does Jack feel? A little better?».

Taken by surprise Pitch gasped, instinctively withdrawing from the unexpected visitor and casting
her a frightened look, and Toothiana, dumbfounded, asked: «Pitch, are you all right? Is there something wrong? Is... what are you holding?».

Caught red-handed the Boogeyman didn't try to hide the weapon in the folds of his robe, knowing it was too late to do so, and probably not appropriate, and, still too upset by what he had experienced, he dodged her irises; the fairy, in return, frowned, clearly puzzled and worried, but soon she widened her eyes, as if struck by a realization, and she whispered: «Pitch, tell me what you did».

Unable to find the words to describe what had happened the man tergiversated, letting out a tired laugh as he shook his head and prayed that the interlocutor grasped by herself the terrible event, but the Guardian, trembling with fear and anger, shouted: «Tell me what you did!».

Without waiting any longer she jumped on him, flinging herself with all her weight against his chest to unbalance him and then leaping to the door, but Pitch, who, nevertheless, hadn't lost neither his physical strength, nor his quick reflexes, grabbed her by the forearm, exploiting her momentum to crush her against the wall and hissing in her ear: «I stopped him, Toothiana. I stopped him».

Struck by this revelation Toothiana stared at him, breathing hard against his chest pressed on her and still faintly flapping her wings against the wooden pillars which adorned the hallway, and, in a choked voice, she demanded: «Stopped from what?».

Exasperated by her blindness, which, however, was more likely just pure disbelief, the Boogeyman stepped back and answered: «You should already have guessed it: the blood that stains these scissors is his, but his were also the hands which were holding them».

Free of the weight of his body which, however, albeit oppressive, had been for her a valuable support, the fairy slid to the floor, failing in her attempt to lean against the wall and ending up collapsing on the parquet, her head bowed and her tails disorderly spread around her figure; she remained motionless for several seconds, merely panting and shivering slightly from time to time, then, lifting her face reddened and wet with tears, she whispered: «Please, tell me you reached him in time and managed to stop him quickly».

The man, who, in the meantime, had withdrawn further and began to count the edelweiss carved on a lintel to distract himself, nodded a few times, then he explained: «He has only two cuts, half an inch deep and two inches long, both far away from the vital organs, probably caused by a single blow given with the scissors slightly open. I've already medicated them, but I didn't bandage them, because Jack doesn't seem to like physical contact».

Rubbing her fists on her cheeks to wipe them the Guardian commented: «This news don't surprise me at all. Pitch, I need to talk to you, and I need you to listen to me: may you?».

Already imagining what the other wanted to talk about Pitch shrugged, angry at the idea that this could criticize his work, but, actually, also eager to receive an outside opinion to better judge himself, therefore, showing undisguised impatience, he ordered her: «Do not waste time in pleasantries and go right to the point».

Ignoring the rude tone he had used Toothiana replied: «Pitch, I'll be direct just as you asked me: in these weeks you've been suffocating. You've cured and medicated Jack, you've prepared his meals, you've always been close to him, and this is a good thing, but you've also substituted him in things that he was perfectly capable to do by himself and you didn't let him room, and this is not good at all. I know that you acted in good faith, frightened by all the physical and psychological traumas he suffered and eager to spare him other fatigue and sufferance, but there's a line between care and intrusiveness, and you crossed it. We Guardians made mistakes, too, we've been too present and oppressive at the beginning, and it's now clear that our decision to step back to leave him more
privacy hasn't been a good idea, and then we can't deny that pregnancy and all that ensues from it have done nothing but worsen the situation, but of course you don't have power on these things, then you can't deal with them. For all the teeth, it's useless for me to feign, I'm shocked: I expected Jack would have burst, but I thought he would have accumulated and then vented anger with a rant, not that he would have harboured sadness in his heart and then ending up desiring to die. It should have never gone in this way».

Throughout the speech the Boogeyman stood motionless, narrowing his eyes and modulating the breath so as not to let out a snarl, and he struggled a lot to hold back himself from blurtling out: during the months spent in Jack's company he had slowly learned to admit his mistakes to himself and accept, at least partially, his critiques, but receiving a rebuke from any other person caused him an uncontrollable annoyance, as well as embarrassed him; when she concluded he said nothing, still too tense to be able to speak civilly and still too hesitant to decide how to proceed, but in the end he decided to confess a detail which he had been brooding about since his first attempt to rescue his partner.

«Toothiana» he began, stubbornly staring at a chest; «I'm not trying to downplay what happened, but I have a feeling that Jack didn't try to commit suicide. I told you that physical contact bothers him, but actually he complained about it only when I touched his belly, while when I hugged him he calmed down a little, albeit remaining upset; then, when I tried to convince him to relax for the sake of the child, instead of worrying he flamed up and yelled at me, saying that now I only think about them and that I don't look at him any more, and that the child is cruel to him. They are both strange reactions, which surprised me a lot, and which I'd have never expected, given how happy he seemed for having accepted this pregnancy, but what arouse most my suspicion was the cut he dug: he made it exactly on the seam between the belly and chest, not an inch under it, not an inch over it. Unusual, isn't it? If he had moved from there even just a little he could have done irreparable damages, piercing the bump and causing a dangerous, forced abortion, or focusing on wrists, neck or thighs to obtain, with minimal effort, a huge loss of blood, and yet he preferred to choose that area, uncomfortable from any point of view. I know it sounds absurd, but I think he was just trying to separate himself from the child by cutting off the belly».

The fairy startled at that assumption, pressing her hands on her lips to hold back a scream and then sliding them over his heart, and she said: «Pitch, this is bad, this is definitely bad: if we don't do something to change the situation Jack will ruin himself beyond repair long before the end of the pregnancy. He may have changed his mind about keeping the baby, and, in that case, we will have to act in a different way, but honestly I think he just poured his frustration on them only because they're the most reasonable scapegoat, and if so there's only a possible solution: stopping considering him weak and needy and treating him just like we always did. Jack is a free spirit who cannot accept constricting changes easily, so we must impose them to him as few as possible: he has already lost his powers and many of his physical abilities, therefore it's essential to deny him only what is really dangerous to his health. Enough with forced rests, enough with constant assistances, enough with prohibitions: let's let him free to live, and let's behave as friends, not nurses».  

Piqued by this second reprimand the man snapped: «Just to make things clear, I have imposed him much less than half of the constraints that you imaged. I've never forbidden him to walk around the Palace, he was the one who stopped asking to go out of this room, I've never forced him to sleep, he was the one who decided to rest for most of the day, and then, do I have to talk about meals? The first thing I always do is placing the plate on his thighs to see if he prefers to eat by himself, but he never moves, what else should I do but cutting the food for him and feed him?».

Letting out a sigh, the Guardian commented: «I had guessed it, given what happened, and I'm sorry it went this way. Until few weeks ago his fiery temperament compensated for his natural discretion, but now that he's become more reflective he finds hard talking about himself and his problems, even with
you: pregnancy changed him. We must stay close to him and encourage him to open up».

At that suggestion Pitch nodded briefly, his lips curled to reveal the irritation that such a conversation had caused him, but his heart lighter for the advices he had received, and, eager to put them in practice, he concluded: «I'm going to put away the scissors. I'll leave them on the infirmary's top shelf, just to be sure».

«Don't, I'll go instead of you» countered Toothiana.

Flying up she reached him, gently taking the tool from his fingers with her left hand, then, moved, she started to stroke his fingertips with her own, but the Boogeyman stepped back and harshly ordered: «Do not touch me».

Blinking back the tears which moistened her eyes the fairy stepped back in turn, a pained expression while she grabbed better the scissors and made sure they were closed, then she whispered: «Pitch, your Jack isn't really changed. He has more problems, more needs, he's more sensitive and delicate than before, but his spirit has remained the same, and his desires, too. Don't be his nurse, because he's not sick: be his partner as you've always been. You can still have fun with him, walk, read, play in the snow, explore new places, love him whole hog, yes, that, too: you'll just have to be more careful, and he won't be in danger. Think about the last time you gave him a real kiss, because, perhaps, the fact that it's so far in the past made him suffer».

The man, who had taken advantage of the space between himself and his interlocutor to walk towards the door, froze on the spot, hit right where he felt weakest: in those weeks he had had huge problems in dealing with sexuality, hampered by Jack's unfriendly attitude, by his belly and the fear he could accidentally hurt him, and he had therefore come to a drastic decision and completely refrained himself from any exuberant display of affection, including kisses and caresses in spots he knew were more exciting to him. He had done it for safety reasons, to avoid any risk, and also not to cause him desires he was convinced he couldn't satisfy, but in hindsight he fully realized that such precautions had been excessive: showing his love for him in a more explicit and adult way than limiting himself to mushy endearments and cuddles didn't necessarily have as a result arousing him, and, anyway, even if that had happened, there were countless ways to please him without endangering him or the creature he was carrying.

Without troubling himself to reply or greet her Pitch started walking, entering the room and quietly closing the door; he stood with his forehead resting against the wood for nearly a minute, thinking about everything and nothing while gathering the courage to face again the vision of his lover, and, when he felt ready, he turned.

He had to advance a few steps to be able to see him clearly, and when he succeeded he struggled not to fall: the limbs abandoned on the sheets, the nails and fingertips still stained with blood, the chest slightly moving up and down under the weight of the belly, the wound running around this, the exhausted expression, everything in him spoke about defeat, everything seemed to wait for the final release. It was a vision hard to bear, too cruel for a boy so good, too sad for a spirit so cheerful, too wrong for a person who had always been righteous: a vision upsetting, depressing, a vision that caused rejection and which, yet, he didn't refuse, because now it wasn't the time to back out, and because, anyway, fleeing was not like him any more.

Outflanking the rags that still laid on the floor he approached him, sitting quietly at his side and bending over his face to check if his breath, albeit rattling, was regular, and in doing so his eyes fell inevitably on his lips, chapped, but no less beautiful than usual; he stared at them for a long time, inevitably leaning on them and almost touching them with his own, but at the last he stopped: he had no intention to violate them without permission. He didn't want to steal them a kiss, he wanted to
receive it from them, seeing them moving to ask him for it and to give it to him, and finally widening into the beautiful smile that, once, adorned them even in his sleep: he wanted to see them come back to life, along with the body and the soul which they belonged to, and now he knew exactly what to do to succeed.

A sharp snap echoed in the distance, muffled, but equally piercing, and Jack, who until that moment had lain in a state of unconsciousness so deep not to even remember to exist, awoke. At first he could do nothing but wait, the inert limbs so difficult to move to seem dipped in molasses, and the mind so nebulous and dazed to seem confined into a place with no light and no exit which sucked it all the vital energies, but in the end, somehow, he shook himself: moaning weakly he opened his eyes, blinking a couple of times to dispel the veil of tiredness which still opacified them, and, albeit with difficulty, he managed to stretch his arms, shivering at the clacks his creaking joints emitted at that simple gesture.

Making his pupils wandering around to familiarize with his surroundings and allow himself all the time he needed to recover from that sleep he couldn't recall he had fallen into the boy inhaled, preparing himself to the assault of questions and cuddles by Pitch, but when the contraction of the diaphragm caused him a sharp twinge right on the stomach he remembered: the apathy, the inertia, the only diversion in weeks of flat boredom degenerated, the partner's panic, the pain, the exasperation, the desire to return to the rave and get lost, the scissors, the wound, the rescue at the last minute, the umpteenth series of wrong attentions and, finally, the black sand falling down on everything. Widening his eyes for a few seconds he tried to recover, driving away with all his willpower those memories so vivid to burn, the tapered weapon heavy as a boulder in his hands, its sharp tip shining in a mocking light of insane joy as it sank into the flesh to separate the old from the new and finally make them two distinct entities, but as he struggled a rasping sob escaped from his throat, and a thoughtful voice promptly intervened, asking: «Good morning, Jack. How do you feel?».

Disoriented by the calm tone which contrasted so much with the roaring confusion of thoughts and fears which filled his consciousness Frost turned, looking for the source of that kind attention, and when he spotted Pitch he froze: the man was, as always, settled on his armchair and staring at him, but, unlike the usual, the seat was next to the fireplace, pretty far from the bed, and his iridescent irises were so clear to shine in the dim light.

Well aware that only a deep sense of dismay was able to drive away both the gold and the dark tentacles which normally permeated them, the boy looked down, not ready to face the consequences of his foolish act, and he moved his left hand near his face, in a childish attempt to hide and escape his responsibilities; the Boogeyman, for his part, didn't press him further, nor tried to violate the ridiculous refuge that he had had created by approaching him, but after several minutes of waiting he said: «I know that probably this is not the best moment to tell you, but there's a surprise for you: when you'll feel like let me know, and I'll show it to you. While you think about it I'll bring you your breakfast».

Caught by surprise by the news Jack winced, wondering what the other might have conceived for him and, above all, why he had done it, but, as soon as he heard him mentioning the word “breakfast”, he countered: «I don't want to have breakfast».

He had snapped by instinct, hastily, his voice harsh and decisive to refuse flatly yet another unsolicited and unwanted attention come timely despite all that had happened, and the irritation burst to levels so unbearable to make his skin itch, but Pitch didn't get perturbed and replied: «I'm sorry, Jack, but I won't compromise over this: you must eat something, whether you like it or not. I guessed
you would have not been hungry, so I prepared you a cup of tea and some rusks. If you don't want them and you prefer something else, of course, tell me».

Startling for the refusal the boy gasped, surprised by the firmness with which the other had talked despite the polite tone, and he had to close his irises to hold back the tears which had almost instantly wet them, but he soon realized that fighting against that order was useless, so he gave up and nodded. Keeping his eyelids lowered he pricked his ears, following his stealth feet walking back and forth in the room, his tapered hands rummaging with plates and cutlery, and when the noise stopped he heard him murmuring: «I'll leave everything on the night table. Take all the time you need to eat, and try to finish it: it's a scarce meal».

Dumbfounded by that statement Frost raised his head, tilting it slightly to check what was going on, and when he managed to focus the scene he almost couldn't believe his eyes: the Boogeyman had already stepped towards the fireplace, without trying, or proposing, to feed him, and he had left him alone. Feeling almost a sense of bewilderment as he realized he had been abandoned, the boy shivered, wrapping his arms around his body to console himself with a hug and stroking the fabric of the shirt which, evidently, he had been dressed with in his sleep, but after a little he put himself together and cheered up: more space and autonomy was exactly what he had longed for for weeks, and now that he had achieved such a result he should be happy and enjoy it, not let himself go into melancholy.

Animated by new energies he rose, levering on his elbows to support the weight of the belly and almost immediately throwing his legs over the edge of the mattress to unbalance himself towards that side, and he successfully managed to sit up, but it was enough to him to cast a look to the tray to feel the nausea growing: he had no desire to eat, especially after the experience he had had and the fact that he had neither processed, nor overcame it, but there was no way to avoid that meal, so it was better for him to hurry up and finish it as soon as possible. Taking a deep breath he grabbed a rusk, dunked it in the tea and brought it to his mouth, barely holding back a grimace when he felt its slimy, spongy consistency on his tongue, but fortunately the delicate flavour didn't disturb him, allowing him to swallow without problems; holding on he plunged it again, tearing off each time pieces smaller and smaller so as not to provoke himself retchings, but after nearly two minutes spent trying to bite and withdrawing he decided to switch to a more drastic solution: with a twitch he seized all the cookies, crushing them against his palm to crumble them coarsely, then he threw them into the cup and began to recover the fragments with his fingers, blatantly ignoring the spoon which had been left on the night table and swallowing them without even chewing.

He proceeded without stopping, a little ashamed by the fact he was eating like an animal, but sure that education and composure would have only made him feel worse, and when he realized that the last remnants had fallen to the bottom he brought the bowl to his mouth, drank the content so quickly to risk to provoke himself hiccups, then, regretting to have forced Pitch to witness such a scene, he wiped his chin with the back of his hand, hoping that the liquid poured on the clothes could dry quickly and without staining them.

«There's a napkin under the plate, if you need to use it» said the Boogeyman, who had watched quietly and never intervened, nor criticized him; «Were you hungry? Do you want something more?».

«No» immediately replied Jack.

Placing the cup on the bedside table he hastened to retrieve the napkin, rubbing it repeatedly on his arm and face to remedy the mess, then, overwhelmed by curiosity despite the sadness that still persisted to harbour in his heart, he dared to ask: «What's the surprise?».
Shaking his head the man replied: «I cannot answer, or I'd ruin it: you will see it with your eyes when you'll feel like going out for a walk. Do not feel under pressure, it can wait here for days».

Slightly piqued by the fact he hadn't received an explanation, but at the same time fascinated by the aura of mystery that the other had created, the boy hesitated for a moment, tempted to indulge again in idleness and pain and also intimately convinced he didn't deserve any gift after the terrible act he had committed, but eventually he pulled himself and declared: «I want to see it».

Pitch stared at him for a moment, maybe unsure about allowing him to go out so soon, maybe simply to check his conditions, then he nodded and concluded: «Sure, okay. I'll bring you the staff».

Glad to hear his permission Frost relaxed, but when he saw him handing him the staff he instinctively demanded: «Why do you give it to me? It's been weeks since I lost my powers».

«You're not supposed to use it to fly or to evoke snow» countered the Boogeyman; «You won't need to do any of these things: I just thought it might have been useful as a support for walking, but if you don't want it we'll leave it here».

The boy, who had assumed he would have covered the distance which separated him from the surprise in his partner's arms, was almost shocked to hear that he could have walked on his own feet, and he gladly accepted the support offered to him: with his heart beating fast he grabbed it, turning it in his hands to reconcile himself with it and get used to the veins which wrinkled it and which he had almost forgotten during those weeks of complete apathy, then he hold it firmly and, digging it in the floor, he levered to get up. He had to try several times and make a huge effort, hindered by the muscles out of training and by the bulky bump he had decided to momentarily ignore, but at the third attempt he managed to stand up and, after a second of suspension when he was about to lose his balance, to straighten his back, therefore he announced: «I'm ready, let's go».

Without daring to touch him the man preceded him, opening the door and then leading the way into the corridor, and Jack followed him, soon starting to blush and wonder: his lover patiently waited for him at every turn, allowing him all the time and the space he needed to reach him and casting him looks thoughtful, but not compassionate or concerned, just as he used to do in the past, and just as the boy had long desired to see him doing again. Hiding the embarrassment behind a concentrated expression he sped up, managing to get a good pace and find the perfect angle to hold the staff so that he could lean against it without hitting it with the foot, but, as soon as he reached the end of the passageway, Pitch blocked him and said: «I'm sorry, but, from now on, you'll have to walk keeping your eyes closed: the surprise is above the Palace and you could clearly see through the hole in the roof. Don't worry, the road is straight and clear, and I'll lead you with my voice in order not to let you stumble».

Even more curious than before to find out what the partner had in store for him Frost didn't object, starting to walk with his eyes closed, and he followed word by word all his instructions on how to proceed, but, just when he had regained full confidence in himself and in his lover, this leaped on him, grabbing him by the shoulders and under the belly and pulling him back.

Startling for the sudden gesture the boy didn't manage to fight back, but, as soon as he felt him stopping, he yanked him and shouted: «Leave me, I can walk by myself!».

The Boogeyman hold him for a few seconds more, helping him to straighten up and emitting a strange chink, then he freed him and answered: «I know, Jack, I didn't want to pick you up, just not to let you put your foot over a bag of nails a stupid elf toppled to the ground right now. I don't know how North manages to bear them and produce millions of toys without them breaking everything again and again. Go on, I've cleared the way: a couple of steps and we'll get into the elevator».
Regretting having assaulted the other so rudely without first asking him the reason for his gesture Jack cringed, daring to squint an eye to check if he had hurt him, but the only thing he managed to glimpse was a portion of room blurred and immersed in a strange, orange dim light, so he gave up: he had no doubt disappointed him with his sharp reaction, and he didn't want to disappoint him further by getting caught peering.

Walking slowly he entered the elevator, settling next to the railing so as not to block the access, and when the machinery moved he clung with both hands to his staff, in order to avoid the risk of falling; when the route ended he turned, letting the man leading him out of the wooden cage and up a narrow, drafty staircase, where he momentarily left him the stick now become a hindrance; finally, after waiting for a moment that a latch and a door were opened, he climbed the last few steps and emerged onto the roof.

A strong wind with a sandy consistency hit him, ruffling his hair and making him almost lose his balance with the power of his blasts, but the boy couldn't imagine a better welcome: he had lived for weeks in the cocoon-like and stuffed atmosphere of the room, confined in that small prison where the air didn't move and became more and more stale, and finally being able to smell new scents and bask in the hot and cold currents which there continued to alternate was a pure pleasure.

While he enjoyed his freedom Pitch handed him back the staff, daring to touch his wrist with his fingertips just to make him to open his palm and withdrawing soon after, then he whispered: «Now you can open your eyes, Jack».

Too impatient to wait any longer Frost took a deep breath, dispelling both the negative thoughts about himself and positive ones matured in the last minutes, then he opened his eyes, and when he did it he lit up in wonder.

New fanart by agito87!

http://agito87.tumblr.com/post/105266857928/oh-thank-you-well-i-have-a-scene-in-mind-but

Chapter End Notes

I hope you liked this chapter, even if, I admit it, it's definitely strong, and not happy. All comments welcome. Next chapter will be published on the 5th of December (obviously friday), because the next week the friend who checks my translations won't be at home. I wish you a nice evening
Chapter 17

As soon as he opened his irises Jack let out a cry of wonder, and he almost leaped back in amazement: in front of him loomed up Sandman' ship.

Immense against an even more immense sky the vessel floated above North's Palace, the large and flat nose facing the sunset, the big belly so prominent it touched the peaks of the mountains below and the tapered tail coiled around the roof watchtower, and above them a structure, barely visible from that distance, but clearly distinguishable from the rest and made up of minute details: it seemed in every way a lazy whale, which had lingered till the end in its own little haven to watch the setting sun and now ready to go to chase it in the cosmos darkness, carrying on its back a magical and mysterious town.

Too stunned to do anything but gasping without emitting any sound and staring with his eyes widened at that beautiful sight the boy froze, failing both in the effort to speak and in the one, later, to close his opened mouth to keep a minimum of decency, and he almost didn't notice the arrival of the mute owner: the surprise and the curiosity he felt towards the colossal dream factory, which, despite the centuries he had lived in spirit form, he had never had the opportunity to visit, were too overwhelming to let him react, and for the first time in his life he regretted having given so much attention to the Earth and so little to the sky, therefore missing a beauty unique in the world.

While he tried to catch up on lost time devouring with his gaze that huge beast a thin curl of magic sand moved up his stick, coiling a couple of times around the hook and then unrolling itself in front of his chest, and when it flew away the boy finally managed to shook himself, following his meander up to Sandman' deft hands and, hence, to his jovial face.

«Your ship is wonderful» he commented; «I've been such a fool, I never approached it in all these years, but I've always been so busy trying to make someone see me... I never allowed myself to spend more than a few minutes away from the residential areas, except to gatecrash in North's Palace, and then I have to admit that the idea of sneaking in a building made entirely of magic sand scared me a little. Did you bring it here just for me? The few times I spotted it in the sky I've always seen it floating above places uninhabited, but warm, like the great African desert».

Sporting a wide smile, the interlocutor nodded, making sure to bend over in a slight bow to show that moving his home there had been a real pleasure, and not a nuisance, then he pointed to his right, and, when he turned, Frost spotted Pitch.

«Was it you?» he asked, dumbfounded; «Did you ask him to bring the ship here?».

Slightly embarrassed the Boogeyman hesitated, dodging his pupils and clasping his hands behind his back to take time, but finally he answered: «Yes, indeed it was me. I knew you never visited, and I thought you might like to have a chance. If you don't feel like doing it now, or if, in general, you're not interested into it, do not hesitate to refuse: you're not forced to do anything».
Wincing for that revelations the boy nestled the staff against himself, confused by that gesture so out of step with the attitude the man had had in the recent weeks and, at the same time, embarrassed by his affectionate generosity, and in a faint tone he mumbled: «No, no, I feel like doing this, I'm interested, it was a good idea, in fact, it's something I wanted for a long time, but I never had the courage to do. Can I really visit the ship?».

«I'm not the one you have to ask for permission to» replied the Boogeyman, taking a step back.

Showing off a hopeful look Jack turned to the Bringer of Dreams, parting his lips to politely ask for permission to start off his first, real outing after weeks of agonizing inertia, but before he could utter word the other forestalled him: bringing the index to his mouth he gestured him to keep silent, then he opened his left arm and stepped back to make the show begin.

It all started with a soft rustling, so faint to be almost imperceptible, and with a small flicker on the ship side, so little it could be mistaken for a simple twist of view; then, in few seconds, the phenomenon intensified, growing in volume and width, filling the air with a buzz so intense to shake the ground and making the gunwales vibrate so visibly to threaten they could collapse at any moment, and the process evolved at an exponential rate to levels almost unbearable; finally, as if by magic, everything fell silent, remaining suspended in time and space like an unfulfilled dream remains in eternity, and from that stillness the towering factory of visions engine sprouted: a series of five long fins, some larger, others tinier, which slid out of the beast's side with a hissing whisper, trembling a little to settle and then bending upward, ready to exploit all the stroke available to secure vigorous flaps.

While those new limbs were still oscillating, basking in the last sun rays and straightening even more to better enjoy its light and heat, a small hole appeared beneath one of them, gradually widening and thickening its edge until it assumed the aspect of the shells that so often infests the old boats hull, then it twitched and, from it, it began to trickle a rivulet of magic sand: at first thin and irregular, then denser and denser, this slither into the sky, initially too flimsy to do anything but collapsing and dissolving in the wind, then strong enough to manage to compact itself, and it formed a solid walkway which extended towards the ground, ending exactly at Frost's feet.

Excited for that splendid concession the boy didn't hold himself back and he immediately stretched out his right leg, tapping with the fingertips the silky sand and chuckling a little when this climbed his phalanges, tickling them, then, shifting his weight upwards, he dragged the left one, and it almost didn't seem real to him to be on the threshold of a new place waiting to be explored, but just when he was about to advance a doubt occurred to him, so he turned and asked: «Pitch, what will you do?».

Pitch, who had remained silent all the time in a corner, replied: «What you want me to: if you want me by your side I'll follow you inside, if you prefer to be alone I'll wait here».

«But coming in here wouldn't hurt you?» objected the boy, genuinely concerned.

«Oh, no» promptly contradicted him the Boogeyman; «I'm stronger than it seems: I just need to stay away from the ship's heart, and I won't have problems. Don't worry about me, Jack, decide according to your wishes».

Again embarrassed by the thoughtful and not oppressive attentions the other was addressing to him Jack blushed, troubled not only by them, but also by the strong sense of guilt he still felt for the terrible act he had committed a few hours before, and by the fear he could be excessively driven by this in his decisions, but in the end he concluded: «If it can't hurt you, you can come».

He never knew if he spoke following his mind or his heart, too overwhelmed by conflicting thoughts to figure out if they had won those which still urged him to seek his lover's company, or those which
aroused compassion towards him for the delicate and complicated situation in which he had dragged him, and soon he preferred not to wonder about this: taking the plunge had been much easier than facing and solving all the reflections which had arisen spontaneously in his mind, and, by sheer coincidence, it had led to a solution which was the perfect compromise between the search for a contact and the confirmation of his own spaces, so it was better not to overthink and go on.

Seeing the man nodding he nodded in turn, dodging his clear eyes to dispel the discomfort they caused him, and he covered his own turmoil by exclaiming: «Well, Sandy, let's go? Where will you take me? Does your ship have many rooms to visit?».

Showing a sly smile Sandy shrugged, opening his palms upward as if to pretend not to know the answer to the question, then he hovered in the air and, grabbing his guest's hand, he headed towards his house; seeing the other teasing him the boy clouded over, sporting an offended and annoyed expression to induce him to reveal in advance what wonders awaited him there, but, as soon as Sandy dragged him by the arm, he could no longer keep serious and he couldn't help but following him.

At first, driven by the irrepressible enthusiasm which had caught him since his arrival on the roof, he immediately threw himself into a haphazard run, playfully trying to compete with Sandman to overtake him and pulling his sleeve when he saw him speeding, but soon he realized he had had a very bad idea: his legs, weakened by the long rest, were not ready to bear such an effort, his body, accustomed for too long to lay down, not able at all to maintain a good balance at that speed, and his swollen belly coup the grace to both of these fundamental skills, but it wasn't like Frost to give up, nor to admit his weakness, therefore he persisted to continue at the same pace, contracting to the breaking point his poor, skeletal limbs and clenching his teeth; thanks to this exhausting gimmick he managed to hold out for several seconds, going up the winding walkway and almost reaching the ship's side, but at the last his muscles betrayed him and, stiffening for a cramp, they made him fall. Unable to cling to a handhold the boy couldn't help but let himself go, falling on his knees and sliding for a few feet on the soft sand, while the Bringer of Dreams held him by the arm to help him stop and the staff, on which he had lost his grip, flew away, and he instinctively closed his eyes, not much for the crash, but in order to mentally prepare himself to Pitch's arrival and his aggressive, nervous attentions, but, while he was still waiting, he heard a deep voice murmuring: «Do not worry, your staff is safe: I seized it just in time. I would gladly give it to you again, but I noticed that it easily sinks into the sand, becoming more a hindrance than a help, so I think it's better to leave it here. If you need support, you can ask Sandman to model a handrail for you. Please, from now on, try not to run as you did: you're allowed to remain on this ship as long as you want, even for days, so there's no reason for you to visit it in a hurry».

Dumbfounded Jack opened his irises, and he found himself in front of a scene that left him stunned: the Boogeyman, by weeks now overzealous guardian, was not bent over him and intent to assist him like an apprehensive mother takes care of her infant, but he was a few feet away, upright, the rod carrier of frost in his hand and his back straightened, and only the worried expression betrayed the anguish he had felt for that tumble. Unable to figure it out the boy stared at him, cowering for the shame as he smoothed his crumpled shirt and nodding weakly to his last suggestion, and when he saw him dissolving and jumping off, he instinctively uttered a strangled sob and stretched out his arm to stop him, for thousand reasons and none; his lover, however, didn't seem to notice him, and the only one who reacted to that gesture was Sandy, who, perhaps fearing he could fall again, hugged him and supported him, but not pulling him back.

Embarrassed by the fact he had made worry twice in few seconds the one who had helped him to take the first step toward freedom Frost composed himself, leaning on his chest to straighten up and accepting more than willingly the hand which was offered to him to stand up, and when he succeeded he whispered: «I'm sorry, Sandy, I didn't mean to worry you: I promise I'll be more
Not reassured at all the other pulled him closer, studying him with an upset look and, at the same time, stroking his cheek, and when his sunny irises shone with tears the boy knew he had guessed, at least in part, the tragedy happened, and he felt a sense of guilt so excruciating he couldn't breathe; prey of tremors fortunately not evident, but still uncontrollable, he unsuccessfully tried to raise a faint smile and break free from the grip which has now become painful, but, just when he was sure he would have witnessed a crisis similar to Pitch's one, or, at least, received a loud scolding, he perceived those gentle fingers caressing his forehead and hair, then, after ruffling it, opening up to show him the way.

Deeply grateful to Sandman for the discretion and the understanding he'd been able to show Jack nodded, clinging to his waist in order to have a firm support and, therefore, advance safely for the last few steps which separated him from the magical vessel, and he took care to keep his pupils lowered, not only to be sure not to stumble, but also to save the surprise until the end, and when he raised them he didn't regret this choice.

The interior of the ship was completely hollow, from the ceiling to the bottom of the hull, and it was crossed by dozens of bridges, emplacements and boardwalks of any kind, some suspended, others supported by columns, others by tie-rods, but all perfectly linked to each other: in that place it couldn't be caught sight nor of a straight line, or of a sharp edge, but only of an endless series of serpentine swirls, which embraced softly, instead of closing, and which resembled so much the amazing sandy concretions in the Arabian desert. The whole breathtaking landscape, albeit globally stable, seemed in constant motion thanks to the cascades of sparkling sand which trickled almost everywhere, slipping in hushed whispers from a platform to the next one and getting lost in the most remote hideouts of the mobile factory, capable to amaze with its every small detail, and the boy, loosening the grip around his silent host's chest, decided to get closer: slowly stretching out the right he approached the closest rivulet, at first dipping only his fingers in it, then all the wrist, enjoying its silky texture and the warmth it emanated, intense, but completely different from the stale and almost unhealthy one of the blankets in which he had resigned himself to lie, and without even realizing it he smiled, stepping forward to appreciate those beautiful sensations throughout his body.

A second before he dived his face under that dry fall, however, the Bringer of Dreams patted him on the shoulder and made him turn, resting his cheek on his joined hands to remind him that a deep sleep would have caught him if he had basked in that flow of solid light, then, without further ado, he grabbed his hand, pulling him slightly to guide him along a gentle slope.

«Where are you taking me?» asked Frost, intrigued.

Shaping a handful of magic sand above his head Sandy created what seemed in every way a cart wheel, object with no meaning nor correlation in a building capable to float hundreds of feet above the ground and not suitable to move on it, but it was evident that the other had neither the ability nor the will to express himself more clearly, therefore the boy didn't insist further and followed him. Helped by his strong arms and some tentacles he evoked specifically for him he managed to advance easily, going slowly, but without incident, along various walkways, and he continued to scrutinize the horizon to gather some clues about their destination, but the landscape, albeit beautiful and never boring, remained essentially unchanged: after every platform there was a bridge, after every bridge a platform, between one and the other pillars and arches of a thousand shades of yellow and orange, and occasionally some portholes, overlooking the roof of North's Palace, which, from up there, seemed a pretty building toy.

Just when he had finally given up on discovering the destination they were heading to and he was beginning to fully enjoy the peaceful walk, the road took a sharp turn, defying gravity to completely...
bend on itself, and, after laboriously climbing along it, Jack cracked the conundrum: the image Sandman had showed him was not a wheel, but an impressive helm, which stood out proudly in the centre of the terrace on which they had just arrived.

With his eyes wide with wonder the boy stepped forward, braving the wind to touch that exotic object carved so preciously to catch the eye for hours and hours, and, in an excited tone, he demanded: «Can I drive it? Seriously?».

A veil of sadness clouded him when, turning, he spotted in the distance the dark figure of his partner, hidden behind a pillar to supervise without participating, but Sandy's smile was enough for him to shake himself, and his gesture of invitation to completely forget the embarrassment: he had never driven anything in his life, surely not a ship, and surely not one so big, and he couldn't wait to embark on this new adventure.

«So, what should I do? Should I turn it? Keep it straight? Is there any lever I have to pull to make the ship move?» he immediately urged the other, so eager to start he was on the verge of bouncing for joy.

Holding his stomach the Bringer of Dreams let out a silent chuckle, clearly amused by this exuberant display of enthusiasm, then, without further ado, he went near him and he prepared him: first of all he intertwined his fingers with his, accompanying them on the spokes and closing them around two of the dozens of handles protruding from the circular frame; then, stooping, he touched his calves, parting them a little to make him take a more stable position; finally, after extracting from the floor a long lever, he pulled it and moved behind him, putting his arms around his shoulders in a warm embrace to better guide him.

As soon as the stake disappeared in the deck floor the vessel quivered and slightly moved back, rising several feet above North's Palace roof, and it let out a long, piercing hiss, while its surface swelled like the chest of a living creature intent to inhale; when it reached what seemed to be its maximum capacity it froze, trembling a little as its passengers dug their feet better in order not to be shot out, then, with a loud snap, it unhooked itself from the tower which was anchored to, finally beginning to advance.

Although the noise with which it had started its journey had been rather sharp the departure was not abrupt at all, and Frost had no difficulty in the least to keep his balance, but, sensing how the wind changed, he soon realized that the dream factory was accelerating almost to a dizzying speed, then he immediately hastened to keep it safe: carefully turning the helm he manoeuvred it, deftly making it zigzag among the mountains peaks and exploiting the ascending and descending currents he knew to perfection to avoid any obstacle, then, at Sandy's instigation, he pulled the instrument itself, thus reclining the plank it was fixed to and activating the side fins to gain altitude.

Letting out a delighted laugh Jack rose on his toes, raising his face to better enjoy the night breeze, then he turned the helm, heading to a bright and populous European town whose name he couldn't remember. Despite the very poor level of preparation he had learned almost immediately how to manoeuvre the beast of sand and visions, using the most favourable winds to make it glide effortlessly and skilfully guiding it over the deserted taiga, and he had even dared a few sharp veers to test its resistance, but, as soon as he had reached the inhabited area and, above all, Sandman's patience limit, he had hold himself back, and simply limited himself to proceed in a straight line, turning only when the other showed him a specific direction to follow: a job seemingly boring and repetitive, almost frustrating, but for him so exciting to set his heart racing and make two whole hours pass as fast as a blink of an eye.
A gentle tap on the shoulder suddenly drew his attention, shaking him by the trance of pure joy in which he had fallen and causing him to turn around, and when he did it he found himself in front of both the Bringer of Dreams and his lover, the second one aside and composed, the first lit up by a jovial smile and with a hand outstretched toward him.

«What is it? Do you want to take me away?» asked the boy, already sad about having to leave the command of the ship.

«As you no doubt noticed we've reached a big town, and it's time, for Sandman, to get to work. He's going to enter in the ship heart, activate it and generate a great quantity of good dreams to be sent to all the children in the area, and he would love to show you the whole process. Would you like to follow him?» explained Pitch.

«Oh, yes, I'd be very happy to!» immediately exclaimed Frost.

«Very well» replied the Boogeyman; «The heart is located behind the pilot house, about fifty meters far from here, and it's easily accessible, but it has only one entrance, so don't lose sight of Sandman, or you won't be able to enter it. I can't follow you, because that area radiates too much positive energy, but I'm sure you'll do just fine by yourself. I'll wait at the main mouth, where dreams come out to undertake the journey: if you need me you'll find me there».

Without waiting for an answer the man bowed his head and dissolved into a handful of thick shadows, immediately leaping over the helm to the prow and soon disappearing from view, and the boy didn't even try to stop him, in part caught by surprise by the sudden escape, in part not willing to prolong the contact: despite the long and serene diversion that that trip had offered him he didn't feel really relaxed, still tormented by the sense of guilt for the insane act he had done and haunted by the memories of what had caused him to commit it, to the point he had serious difficulties to stay focused for more than a few minutes, and he preferred to completely avoid the partner, rather than staying beside him with the terror he could be, at any moment, questioned.

Grateful to the other for the break he had conceded him, Jack shook himself, leaving the helm to reach out to the Bringer of Dreams and accept his silent invitation, and he followed him, showing a serene expression to thank him and not make him worry; docile as a lamb he let himself be guided towards an arcade and, hence, along a narrow staircase sinking down, clinging to the handrail in order not to slip and wondering how he couldn't have noticed such a strange structure while he'd gone to the terrace, but soon he had other things to think about: unceremoniously the mute cicerone landed and made him kneel, then he pointed to a narrow opening just half a meter high and pushed him inside.

Dumbfounded by Sandy's rude manners the boy didn't even manage to protest, merely scrambling to please him as quickly as possible and wondering the reason of this unexpected change of attitude, and he frowned when he saw the Guardian imitating him and literally rolling on the floor to hurry, but he decided not to comment; made patient by the weariness and wary by Pitch's advice he waited for him, watching as he closed the hole and immediately heeling him when he crawled along the narrow passageway where they were, and he felt a clear sense of claustrophobia growing and almost suffocating him, but luckily the supplice didn't last long: it was enough for him to advance a few feet to reach an open space, and, at that point, he found himself out of breath not because of the anguish, but for pure amazement.

In front of him, locked in a perfect sphere, stood out the heart of the ship, a conglomeration of incoherent sand so fine to seem dust and so bright to look almost white, which rotate on itself relentlessly, constantly changing its shape and producing a strange, soft hum: it seemed in every way a bizarre and fascinating alien creature, come from the deep space to give a display of its beauty and
selfishly trapped in that secret shelter where no one but the owner could admire it. As if to confirm that impression the unstable mass of newborn fantasies swelled, roaring angrily as it pressed on the walls of its cage and releasing rays of light so intense to blind Frost even through his closed eyelids, and the boy, frightened, cried: «Sandy, what's going on?».

In response the other stroked his hair to calm him, standing between him and the fickle being to protect him, then he opened his arms and he began to withdraw: proceeding a little step at a time he moved away, immersing himself in the heart until he was almost completely absorbed by it and shining of an inner light so dazzling to make those around him pale, then he hovered in the air and, once he reached the centre of the sphere, he disappeared.

Confused by that unexpected event and extremely concerned about his friend's fate the boy called him, making his eyes wander around as he crawled toward the spot where he had vanished, and for a moment he seriously feared he had lost him forever because of a wretched incident, but he was soon, and fortunately, contradicted: as fast as he had disappeared Sandman reappeared, curled up on himself, gathering around him all the magic sand contained therein and even tearing away some layer from the walls, then, after a moment of suspension, he opened his limbs, freeing it all at once and throwing it in every direction.

Raising his arms to protect himself Jack crouched down, belatedly covering his ears when he felt them ache for the sharp blast generated by the explosion and pressing his face against the floor to escape its destructive fury, and, despite he had always been intrepid, he couldn't find the courage to stand up, maybe because he was still too shocked to think coherently, maybe, simply, because of an instinct which by nature shouldn't have belonged to him: was it for the first, for the second or for both reasons he just remained motionless, his muscles contracted and his mind blocked, and the shame growing proportionally to panic as every attempt to rise failed miserably. He fought for long against his own body and conscience, too stubborn to give up and show the white feather in front of a friend in distress, and yet too weak and worn out to overcome his fears, but, where the personal will power capitulated, the other's altruism won: instead of waiting for his guest to calm down by himself Sandman approached him, kneeling at his side and caressing his bare wrists to reassure him, therefore, when he managed to make him open up again, both physically and psychologically, he laid on his back and gestured him to look up.

Feeling groggy for the crisis he'd just had the boy obeyed, at first turning only the chest, then also the dangling head, and when he did it his conscience, ready to attack him with an excruciating sense of guilt, had to surrender and fall silent in the face of the beautiful vision standing in front of him: a swarm of hundreds and hundreds of creatures of magic sand, some huge, other small, some terrestrial, other marine, some detailed, others sketched so roughly to seem shaped by a child, but all in movement, and all clearly eager to bring joy and hope to the world.

Dazed Frost stared at them, realizing only in that moment that the strange and worrying process he had witnessed had served to give them life and instinctively stretching his hands towards them, and he inwardly rejoiced when he saw them responding to the mute call, opening his arms to welcome them and allowing them to rub against his body, but, as soon as one of them tried to creep under his blouse, the awareness of his condition returned strongly in him and he cried out: «No, not there!».

Quick as a lightning he rudely slapped the curious beast which had dared so much, making it tumble sprawled on the floor and starting to crawl in the opposite direction to prevent any other aggression, and he didn't care at all about the master of the house's reaction at that scene, but the other certainly didn't ignore his, and, after hastily getting on his knees, he reached him and embraced his shoulders to assist him: unable to communicate with him neither using words, which he had never been able to utter, nor using sign, which the excessive proximity impeded him to model, he bent over him, gently tapping his back to soothe the coughing fit by which he had been caught and rubbing his chest to
ease his breath, then, without hesitation, he slid his hand on his swollen belly.

«Sandy, wait» protested Jack in a faint voice; «No, stop, Sandy, please, not there, sto-ah, Sandy...!».

Obeying his request Sandy stopped, casting him a compassionate look while he scratched his nape to calm him, but he didn't satisfy him for long: after just ten seconds he came back to it, going as far as to lift his blouse to the chest to better expose him at his mercy, then he placed the palm exactly on his navel, and, as soon as he did it, it happened something so incredible to leave the victim of that act completely stunned.

Recalled from this fluid motion much of the magic sand which was still free in that protected nest awoke, converging on the boy's bump and illuminating it to the point it made the skin almost transparent, and Frost, unable to hold himself back, let out a moan: rarely in his life he had felt a sensation like this, not exciting at all, but very pleasant, pure gold dust in a life devoted mainly to fun, and never before he had perceived it so sweet and beneficial, sensing it trickling like a warm balm on his chest and wipe all the excruciating pain that, after weeks of pure suffering, he had unknowingly accepted as an integral part of his existence.

«Did you do it for the baby? To calm them?» he asked in a faint voice.

The interlocutor sighed, raising a tired smile and promptly shaking his head, then he gently patted his left hand on his heart and, moving his lips, he composed a sentence as short and simple as touching: “For you”.

Hot tears ran down Jack's cheeks at that statement, too sincere and liberating to be held back, and he demanded: «So you still care about me? You don't think only about the baby?».

In response Sandman hugged him even more tightly, starting to rock him gently and cuddling his belly with his fingertips to give new energy to the dreams which had pervaded it and, thus, intensify and prolong their relaxing effect, and the boy, bursting into a sobbing laugh, exclaimed: «So I understood nothing, absolutely nothing, all your gestures, or at least most of them, were for me, the baby was the channel, not me... I've been a fool, a fool, I drove you away for no reason, just because I didn't dare to speak openly...».

A chubby phalanx pressed lightly on his lips, interrupting the outburst in the most discreet and peremptory way that could exist, then, after collecting a nascent tear stuck in Frost's eyelashes, it moved and pointed to a wide arch which had appeared the other side of the room.

«Do you want me to go in there? What will I find? More magic sand? Do you want me to sleep?» naively guessed the boy.

Opening the palm the mute Guardian called new sand and modelled a perfect reproduction of Pitch's profile, then he casted Jack a serious and determined look, as to thwart any protest and, at the same time, give him strength, and the boy, unable to do otherwise, surrendered: in truth he didn't know what to think of his partner, torn between the anger and sadness matured in the recent weeks for the oppressive treatment he had been subjected to, the amazement and confusion felt in the last few hours for the sweet and rapid change of attitude he had witnessed to and the excruciating and inevitable sense of guilt that, since he had wakened, had never failed to torment him, but it was clear that overthinking was unnecessary and harmful, and he was far too tired and too worn out to withstand other futilities and other pain.

Driven by a new force of will, much weaker than the one which had always characterized him, but still strong enough to move him, Frost bent his legs, using hands and feet to stand up and politely refusing the help which was offered to him, then, after hastily wiping his wet cheeks, he walked to
the opening: staggered visibly he reached it, managing to cling to a providential ledge just before collapsing with fatigue and allowing himself a small break to recover, then, without any warning, nor farewell, he closed his eyes and lunged forward.

Considering what he'd been able to see immediately before leaping, the boy had expected to fall for about ten meters, land on a small platform and, hence, tumble in some way on a bridge which seemed to lead in the direction indicated by Sandy, but it was not so: as soon as he let himself go something caught him, something soft, warm and quivering, and it was enough for him to raise his eyelids to discover that it was a newborn manta ray of magic sand, which had considerately slid under him to accompany him to his destination safely and without the slightest effort; grateful for that last and umpteenth favour his friend had conceded him he tried to relax, settling as best as he could on the back of that fairy creature, gazing the shapes and the stunts of all those who followed it and touching with his fingertips the contrails of those which preceded it, but soon this amusing diversion ended: in less than a minute the flock reached the mouth of the ship, gliding enough to lay him on the floor and flying away immediately after, and at that point he had to pluck up the courage and face the situation.

As he expected the Boogeyman stood exactly in the middle of the wide crack, having his back on him and intent on observing the city below, and his garments betrayed his long stay in the factory of sweet visions: endless spirals of shiny dust adorned it, more dense near the hems, more sparse on his thorax and hips, gracefully intertwined to form an abstract design without rhyme or reason which, anyway, had something wonderful in themselves, and, where these hadn't arrived yet, there could already be spotted tiny bright grains, small pioneers of the golden decoration perennially expanding.

Fascinated by those arabesques which, in contrast with the matte black of the fabric, seemed to glow like a ray of sunshine in a dark room, Jack stepped forward, approaching the other from behind to avoid being noticed; the man, however, who has always been accustomed to perceive everything around himself, didn't take long to turn around, at first showing a hard and suspicious look, then softening it into a relieved and almost embarrassed expression, and after shrugging he exclaimed: «Oh, it's you, Jack: I didn't hear you coming. Come here, this position is perfect to watch the dreams gliding on the city».

Bending over to gather the long and heavy flaps of his robe Pitch readily moved aside, going much farther than necessary and opening an arm to invite him to take his place, and the boy, blushing, humoured him: advancing in little steps he reached the highest point of the thick lip which was the ledge of that immense mouth, then, digging his feet in the sand, he settled and craned his head.

As soon as he managed to lean over the edge, an amazing show stood out in front of him: flocks of animals of various species and swarms of animated objects of every shape and size sailed the sky, throwing themselves into risky nosedives and quieter glides, gathering in huge groups and then separating, intertwining one with another in complicated stunts, almost touching each other when the flow of dreams flying out the opening became so dense to obscure the stars, and finally, just when the collision seemed inevitable, they split into small units, which, snaking into the dark, headed to the Earth, each in a different direction, to bring joy and serenity to the children which they were destined to.

Holding his breath in front of the amazing show of lights and shapes which continually renewed themselves Frost stood motionless, focusing just enough not to lose balance and devouring with his irises every small detail of that ritual he had gazed many times, but never from a so perfect point of view; suddenly, however, a doubt occurred to him, absolutely grounded and, moreover, useful cue to start a conversation, so he decided to ask out loud: «Pitch, doesn't it bother you watching what's going on?».
A discreet chuckle came to his ears, tickling them together with the constant rustle of the sand, and a warm and deep voice answered: «No, Jack, I have many flaws, but hypocrisy is not among them: I give credit to others' talent. Beyond the source of these dreams and the effect they may have on children who believe in me, the show I'm watching is wonderful and unique, a real joy for the eyes and nostrum for the soul, and denying it would be foolish: I'm enjoying it exactly like you».

Caught by surprise by the mature and respectful reply the boy hugged himself, clutching his back to keep himself busy while trying to put together a sensible comment: he hadn't expected such a display of honesty and tolerance by the Boogeyman, considering the matter he had talked about, and he had presumed he would have blurted out a sharp criticism, maybe even an insult, so he was completely unprepared to carry on the conversation. Struggling and striving he tried to reflect, mulling for minutes over the question and managing to collect only an endless series of pointless phrases and ridiculous exclamations, and eventually, exasperated by his own inability and unnerved by the tense silence, he burst out: «It's really cold up here».

A snap sharp and, at the same time, incredibly soft pierced the air, echoing at irregular intervals and variable intensities while it got closer its ear, and when Jack turned he found the man at his side, his left resting limply on the right hip and his right outstretched to hand him a cloak as black as a moonless night.

«Take it» encouraged him Pitch.

Trembling the boy leaned towards him, touching at first the silky fabric, then slipping almost casually on the other's equally silky skin, and he murmured: «What would you do if everything was like before? If it had happened nothing at all? What would you do if the last few weeks had never existed?».

A flash of pain crossed the Boogeyman's clear irises, making them shine in a light cold, and yet incredibly human, and showing all the fear which still pervaded them, and, after a moment of hesitation, he asked: «May I?».

Without further ado Frost nodded, actually simply bowing his head slightly, but showing his consent with a delicate caress to his lover's tapered phalanges, and when the other saw him ready he acted: moving the forearm in a quick twitch he got rid of the cape he had shaped, throwing it on a side and letting the current grasp it and drag it away, then, covering the distance between them with two long and hasty steps, he bent over him and hugged him tightly.

Feeling all the tension accumulated in the weeks before suddenly loosening at that gesture, the boy sobbed, clearly perceiving his belly bumping against the partner's flat stomach and hot tears impossible to stop moistening his face and neck, and, in a vain attempt to save his dignity he snapped: «This stupid belly, it's always getting in the way!».

Letting out neither a laugh nor a comment about that exclamation, the man slightly loosened his grip, turning around his torso to stand behind him and kneeling down to reach his same height, then, after passing an arm around his chest and the other around his waist, he said: «Voilà, now it's not in the way any longer».

Vaguely amused by that little trick Jack managed to calm down a little, controlling the tremors just enough to breathe without gasping and leaning to the other for support, but soon he replied: «Actually it's always on the way, it doesn't matter what position I take».

At that statement Pitch hold him even more tightly, making sure not to touch in any way his swollen belly and resting his head against the hollow of his neck, as he used to when he was in the mood for tendernesses, but soon he let out a heavy sigh and, albeit in a faint tone, he asked: «Jack, are you sure
you want to keep them?».

And for the first time in weeks the boy found himself completely unable to answer.

Chapter End Notes

I hope you enjoyed this chapter. Every comment is welcome. Since in this weeks I'm a little busy and my friend won't be at home during Christmas holidays I decided I'll publish next chapter on the 26th of December, and the one after it on the 9th of January: in this way you won't wait for long for any of them, and I'll have all the time to translate them properly and, I hope, to move forward with this work. I wish you a nice evening.
Seconds passed, then minutes, outside silence, inside a discordant cacophony of disjointed thoughts, and finally a voice whispered: «Jack, if the answer is “no” you should not be afraid to utter it».

Wincing for the interruption, so real in a world where reflections, fears and assumptions were now the only survivors and the only constituents, Jack gasped, instinctively clinging to the other's arm to keep his balance, but soon he managed to compose himself and, in order not to worry him, he said: «I'm sorry, I was not paying attention, I didn't mean to scare you».

Pitch, who, feeling him collapsing, had promptly hugged him, slowly loosened his grip and replied: «Don't worry, I imagined it».

More minutes passed, sliding one after the other as the little dreams which kept escaping from the ship heart to plunge into the void, accumulating in a silent waiting which was getting heavier and heavier, and in the end the boy, overwhelmed by an anguish he couldn't grasp, nor describe, snapped: «I don't know, I have no idea, I can't tell».

Moving his hand up on his chest to touch his shoulder the Boogeyman murmured: «What about sitting down?».

At that suggestion Frost, who, back from weeks of unremitting cures, had little tolerance for all the attentions which made him feel weak and needy, immediately protested: «I'm not tired, I don't need to rest every minute!».

A light shiver shook the man, showing, albeit discreetly, all the insecurity which had gripped him since the tragic event and which hadn't faded yet, but soon a slight laugh swept that looming cloud of melancholy, and, quietly and almost amused, he contradicted Jack: «Oh, Jack, I never doubted you were the strongest among us, even only for your stubbornness, which, although it may seem incredible, it's greater than mine. No, I never said, nor thought, you were tired: I asked you to sit down to help you think, and because, to be sincere, I find more and more difficult standing up in the midst of all this magic sand».

Regretting the rude reaction he had had the boy didn't dare to turn, but, anxious, he demanded; «Pitch, are you feeling sick? Do you need to get out? You should have never brought me here, you're growing weak!».

«I'll let you be mothering only because I know I've been so with you for weeks, and it seems fair to me allowing you a little revenge» immediately interrupted him Pitch; «Anyway, you have no reason to fear. It may seem that the magic sand drains my energies, but in truth it merely dispel the shadows I exploit to move: in concrete terms the only thing which harms me is the habit, not this gold dust. If this were not enough to reassure you, know also that I visited this ship in the past, a few times in a hit and run, to monitor Sandman's activity, while the last one, dating back to a few months ago, for almost half a day, and I never had any major problem».
Intrigued by the reassurance Jack couldn't refrain himself from asking: «A few months ago? And for so long? Why?».

«It happened in July» promptly explained the Boogeyman; «During the week when you left to bring snow in the southern hemisphere. Coming back from a lap I found the floor around the entrance of Behemuth's prison cracked, and, just to be sure, I decided to climb down and check it. I passed my hands on the wall and I clearly perceived the beast beyond it, strong, but quite helpless, and I breathed a sigh of relief, concluding that the cracks had been caused by an earthquake, but unfortunately lowering my guard was a bad mistake: taking advantage of my distraction the monster managed to deceive me, giving strength to my darkest shadows and making them turn against me, and the nightmares which had tormented me during the convalescence went back to haunt me. I fought for long against them, struggling tooth and nails in order not to let them overwhelm me, but there was no way for me to find peace, neither in sleep, nor in wakefulness, neither in my job, nor in meditation: nothing worked, and nothing could work. I held on for more than four days, then I gave up and, putting aside the pride, I came here. I must admit it, although it was not the first time I allowed Sandman to use his magic sand on me, it's been very humiliating crawling to him to ask for help, but I couldn't do otherwise, and, in truth, the fact he knows to be as terrible as pitiful simplified everything: never for a moment he stopped to endeavour to dispel that darkness not mine until he completely defeated it, never for a second he made me feel guilty for the immense pleasure he granted me, and never once he held it against me. I stayed here for a few hours to let him cure me, then for almost half a day to sleep, and, in the end, when I came out, I felt stronger than ever».

Extremely surprised both by the story, which revealed the partner's most intimate and sensitive soul and how much it had learned to emerge thanks to the new confidence he had gained with the Guardians, and by the last revelation, which comforted him a lot, the boy relaxed, nodding vigorously to agree to the suggestion, then he stepped forward a little to leave room to the other: patient as never he waited for him to bend over and settle down, attentive to his every move, but never brave enough to turn and watch the scene, then, when he felt ready, he sat in his lap, allowing him to grab him by the hips and move him in a better position and, eventually, to wrap his arms around his shoulders.

Eager to fill that indolent moment with any words to stifle his conscience Frost pointed out: «It's the first time I hear this story, why didn't you tell it before?».

Shrugging Pitch nonchalantly answered: «While you were working I didn't want to disturb you, and when you came back I was already fine, so I had no reason to talk about it and unnecessarily worry you».

«It worries me much more knowing you don't talk to me, especially about something so important» immediately countered the man.

«Same goes for me, Jack» imitated him the Boogeyman.

Stabbed in the back by that reply as simple as cruel in its frankness Jack gasped, leaning forward to escape the partner's gentle grip and taking his head in his hands, and in a cracked voice he hissed: «What are you trying to insinuate?».

«Nothing more than what I said, Jack. You were the one who taught me that communication is important, and yet you were the first one who stopped doing it. Why? Talk to me, Jack. Talk to me, explain me your problems, tell me what's wrong: talk with me» encouraged him the man.

Choking back a sob at that invitation the boy muttered: «Why should I talk, you wouldn't even listen to me...».
"No, that's not true!" contradicted him Pitch; "I just asked you to talk to me, why shouldn't I listen?".

Clamming up even more Frost whispered: "Because in these weeks you've never done it".

The Boogeyman sighed deeply, clearly hindered by those continual refusal, but finally he declared: "Jack, enough. Enough with this indulging in pain, enough with this sinking into indifference, enough with this basking in "anyway, even if I tried to do something, nothing would change, then better not to try at all"; giving up is easy, but it's not right. You've never been a lazy person, and, at least in this, I will not let you become so, as well as I will not allow you to hurt yourself: come here".

No longer showing any hesitation he grabbed him by the waist, dragging him back up against himself, then, after hugging him tightly, he started: "Jack, in the last weeks I've made many, many terrible mistakes: I breathed down your neck, I stifled you, I substituted you in things you could have done by yourself, I programmed your days, I anticipated what I supposed were your requests and needs, I considered you weaker and more helpless than you really were and wrapped you in cotton wool, I isolated you from the others for selfish reasons, I treated you like an infirm, and thousand other things which would take me a whole day to list. I'm not going to deny my mistakes, nor to minimize them, but I want you to realize a thing: for every error I committed, you did one back. Why didn't you ever stop me? Why haven't you ever criticized me? Why haven't you ever explained how much my attitude hurt you? I'll concede this to you, perhaps, even if you had done it, I would have not listened to you, perhaps, even if you had insisted, I would have gone ahead undaunted, but you didn't even try: why? If you had done it I would have, at least, known what you really wanted, and I would have been aware I've done you wrong, but thus I could do nothing but to guess, and I failed miserably. Talk to me, Jack, I beg of you: tell me what's wrong, try to explain it to me, try to solve your problems with me".

Touched by that speech, botched and rambling, considering how wordsmith the orator who had uttered it was, but moving in its sincere self-criticism, even more valuable, given the proud heart from which it came, the boy couldn't hold on any more: overwhelmed by guilt he burst into tears, collapsing against who he had thought he had arrived to hate, but who, in truth, intimately, he knew he had never stopped loving, and in a faint whisper he confessed: "Pitch, I missed you, I missed you so much... In these weeks you've been so close, and yet I felt you were so far away".

Resting his hollow cheek on the other's head the man bent his legs, crossing them to wrap him in a warm, protected nest, then, ruffling the rebel strands which covered his brow, he murmured: "You too, Jack: I missed you so much, too".

Stirring a little to find a comfortable position Jack curled up better, allowing himself a few minutes to vent and gather up his reflections, and basking in the cuddles, finally not mawkish, he was receiving, then he began: "These weeks have been hard, perhaps even more than those when I've been sick without knowing why, or those when I've been shocked because I had discovered I was really pregnant. I didn't expect I would have suffered, not in this way: all the most bothersome symptoms of pregnancy were gone, I had accepted the child who's growing inside of me, my friends were even more exuberant than usual, you were so thoughtful, what could I ever desired more? Everything seemed perfect, and yet there was something wrong, a particularly out of place that bothered me all the time, and that, in the end, I managed to identify: the baby. It may seem absurd, you'd probably say "but the baby is the centre of everything", and this is precisely the problem: the child had become the centre of everything, and I didn't exist any more. The other Guardians came into our room and asked him how they were, not how I was, they approached me, but then hugged my belly, they brought food to me, but then they kept saying it would have made them grow well, and you were no less so: your attention had shifted from my face to my bump, you touched it continuously, you talked about it continuously, you worried about it continuously, and it seemed that now you cared only about it. I tried to be happy, at first, to tell myself that, actually, I should have rejoiced about the fact
you had accepted such a shocking novelty, but I didn't manage to, and your change of attitude towards me, along with all the prohibitions, more or less explicit, you had imposed, only made matters worse. In order to defend myself I tried to clam up, to drive away everybody and not to talk any more, but it wasn't a great idea: I soon found myself alone, and I felt more useless than ever, and when I realized it I no longer had the strength to fight back».

After waiting for several seconds, probably to make sure that the other had actually concluded his speech, Pitch dared to ask: «I don't want you to think I'm rushing, but I have to ask you something. When I walked into our room and I found you with... with the scissors in your hands, I noticed that you cut yourself on a spot rather atypical: were you willing to end it all or to separate the child from your body?».

Distinctly feeling a painful twinge in his chest for the question so direct the boy gasped, tempted to flee away, but in the end he gathered enough courage and answered: «The second one, but I wouldn't have cared if it had happened also the first».

A distinct shudder went through the partner, shaking him clearly to the core, even though he had tried in every way to cover it, and Frost, sobbing, whispered: «I'm sorry, Pitch, I'm so sorry, you have no idea how ashamed I am, I was not myself, if only I could go back...».

«No, Jack» interrupted him the Boogeyman; «No, you don't have to apologize to me, but to yourself. Come here, vent. I'm sorry I didn't stay close to you in the right way, I promise it will never happen again».

Pushing slightly on his chin he made him turn, offering his chest as a refuge, and the boy, although still afraid to cross his pupils, let the other guide him, obviating the problem by simply looking down and snuggling more than willingly against the warm thorax whose scent he had been denied to enjoy for weeks; he stood silent for a long time, occasionally rubbing his cheek against his grey skin to dry the tears he couldn't choke back, and after a few minutes he heard him asking: «Do you feel a little better?».

«Yes, a bit» whispered Jack, sniffling.

Probably sensing the boy's fear to lock eyes with him the man never attempted to make him lift his face, going as far to tilt his to the right to stare at his back and massaging it to help him relax, then, when he received his assent, he dared to demand: «Would you like to talk about the baby?».

Frost swallowed hard, closing his eyes for a moment to gather the courage, then he replied: «Yes».

«Are you sure? It's a delicate topic, if you don't feel like facing it we can delay this conversation» suggested Pitch.

«No» immediately refused the boy; «No, this topic is too important, I can't delay it forever, then better facing it right away and not having to think about it any more, and then, actually, I feel quite calm now. Can I wait a little before starting?».

«Take all the time you need» readily consented the Boogeyman.

Grateful to the partner for his gentle courtesy Jack brought his right hand to his chest, lingering to count the beats of his heart went crazy before letting it slip almost inevitably on that swollen belly which he had willingly ignored for hours, and which, now, he necessarily had to pay attention to, therefore he took a deep breath and began: «I've been a fool. Few minutes ago I talked to Sandy, and I realized I had misunderstood much of what happened in the last weeks: in short, it seems that the Guardians were not focused only on the baby, but mainly on me, and that they showed interest in
them mostly to make sure I was okay. What about you?».

The man seemed a bit surprised by the question, but without any hesitation he answered:
«Personally, I've always been focused only and solely on you. I asked you many questions about the child and showed interest in them basically for two reasons: the first is due to the fact that, since the foetus is inside you, their health and yours are closely related, so I must monitor both of you simultaneously to be sure you are well; the second one, instead, was the will to cheer you up: when you accepted this pregnancy you looked attached to the baby and you declared you were more than ready to take care of them, so it seemed natural to me to think talking about them would have made you happy».

Strong feelings of guilt assailed the boy at that statement, showing with no maliciousness how much he was actually responsible for what had happened in the previous weeks, and, taking the blow, he murmured: «Great, I got everything wrong, and the fault is only mine».

«No, it's not only your fault» contradicted him Pitch; «The fact that both me and your friends had the best intentions doesn't justify us: we acted clumsy, showing what we felt so badly to prevent you from understanding what we were really aiming to and, indeed, giving you the impression we were doing the exact opposite of what we had planned, and for this we have no excuse. To each his own, Jack: to you your mistakes, to us ours, to you the task to understand, to us to make you understand. Do not fret about the past, look forward now».

Partly heartened by that speech Frost nodded absently, rubbing the back of his hand on his eyelids to wipe away the tears which, now, too often moistened them without his being able to stop them, then he continued: «Okay, fine. Thank you for heartening me, and thank you for apologizing: you made me feel much better. You know, in these... no, stop rambling, I must get to the point. The baby. The baby, yes... I didn't have a high regard for them lately, indeed, to be completely honest, I have to admit I came to hate them at times: carrying them had been a heavy burden. First of all the belly is bulky and it unbalances me continually: every time I try to move I risk to bump into the walls or to stumble, every time I sit it drags me down, every time I lie down it crushes me, it seems there is neither an activity, nor a comfortable position for it. Psychologically, then, it's a torture: on one hand I am perpetually worried I could hurt myself or not take care of myself well and, therefore, harm the baby, on the other hand I feel overwhelmed by their presence and I feel that they're taking over me up to replace me. I never thought that a pregnancy could be simple, never, but, once I had accepted it, I always believed it would have enriched me and made me feel good in a very special way, but it's only consuming me».

Nodding the Boogeyman commented: «Jack, the only thing we can say with certainty about a pregnancy is that it's a strong experience, but depending on how you deal with it it can turn out wonderful or disturbing. I'm not surprised you expected something beautiful, because many future mothers experience this as a splendid journey to a world they've been dreaming about, but you've never seen it this way, then, for you, it couldn't be so. Do not take offence, I'm not accusing you, but if you feel the child is devouring you it's just because you're allowing them to do it, or because you cannot tolerate them».

At first the boy resented for that last statement, ruthless come like a stab in the back just when he had finally started to feel safe, but it took little to him to understand that, more than an accusation, it was merely an observation conceived to encourage him, then he replied: «You know, indeed, I'm afraid. This is not just a bump, it's a baby, a person who will move, cry, talk, who will need help, and continuous company, it's... it's... really, have you ever thought about this? It's so absurd to me! Now it's like it doesn't exist, it's only a swollen belly, but it will not be like this forever, and I'm afraid of that moment».
As soon as he stopped speaking the man sighed, then he grabbed his shoulder and, in a serious tone, he asked him: «Jack, are you absolutely sure you want to keep this child?».

«Yes» abruptly replied Jack, digging a foot in the sand as if to give greater emphasis to his assertion and to crush the fears which reflecting on it had caused him.

Shaking his head Pitch began: «Jack, all this hurry to answer to me sounds pretty strange, just ten minutes ago you didn't know what to do and we've barely started to talk about it, maybe you should pond...».

«No!» immediately cut short the boy, clenching his fists to dispel tremors which had caught him and pluck up his courage; «No, I don't want to abort, I'm absolutely sure about this. What I tried to do this morning has been pure madness, there is no way to remove the baby from my body without killing them, and I don't want them to die. It's not just fear, Pitch, it's not lack of courage, I do want them to live: no one deserves to die, and the child, who has no fault at all, less than anybody. No, I will not let selfishness, a whim or a personal weakness prevent them from coming to life: I'll hold on until they come into the world, at least until that moment».

Impressed by his resoluteness the Boogeyman soon gave up both on concluding his sentence and on getting at him, waiting patiently for him to explain his ideas, then he urged him: «And then? When they will be born what do you want to do? Will you keep them with you, or will you leave them to someone else?».

Taken aback Frost hesitated for a moment, stunned by his mind while his heart cried to have its voice be heard, and eventually he confessed: «I'm afraid of responsibilities, I'm afraid I won't be up to the situation, but I'm not afraid of the baby: I'm keen to know them, I can't wait to play with them, to see them growing up day by day and to learn new things, and so much more... I would really like to keep them with me, I'd love to, but I fear I'll end up disappointing them or even harming them, so I don't know».

Letting out a light chuckle, not derisive at all, the man kissed his forehead and murmured: «Oh, Jack, you're always the same: sweet from beginning to end, and playful at any occasion. I think you're underestimating your skills, but I'm not going to discuss about this, because I'm not the one who has to persuade or dissuade you: you'll decide in the fullness of time. You'll think about later later, now it's time to think about the present: what about finally starting to enjoy this pregnancy you've decided to accept?».

The boy, who, in truth, had completely resigned himself to suffering during the gestation and who had not yet clear how to get by, demanded: «Enjoy my pregnancy? How?».

«Like all the pregnant women satisfied by the experience they're having: there are endless pleasant activities to do in a period so special. Do you want to know them? A very common thing, for example, is gossiping for hours about other mothers» answered Pitch.

Dumbfounded Jack asked: «Gossiping? But why? And then, about whom? I don't know any mother!».

Looking around with a circumspect behave the Boogeyman drew the partner towards himself, then he whispered in his ear: «You know, I'm pretty sure Toothiana is going to lay an egg».

A merry laugh, impossible to be held back, arose spontaneously from the boy's lungs, shaking his chest before bursting from his lips, and he couldn't help but let himself go: he didn't expect a joke in a speech so serious and grave, least of all one so funny and well targeted, and the image of Toothiana intent to hatch in her round bed full of pillows and veils which had inevitably leaped in his mind had
given him the coup de grace. Laughing together with him the man hugged him, ruffling a little his hair before daring to press a hand on his forehead and expose his face, then he stroked his cheek and whispered: «Oh, Jack, you don't know how happy it makes me hearing you laugh again, and so hearty».

Squinting to dispel the dizziness the hilarity had caused him, Frost grunted, then he exclaimed: «And how could I have held myself back in front of a joke so stupid? Do you have the slightest idea what Toothiana might have done to you if she had been here?».

«Oh, who knows, maybe she would have punched me hard enough to bust all my teeth out, maybe, instead, she would have taken the opportunity to confess to us her little secret» commented Pitch in an amused tone.

Letting out yet another giggle the boy stirred a little, undecided whether to investigate the matter, which, albeit ridiculous, seemed more and more realistic given the insistence with which it had been repeated, or whether to contribute to it with other jokes, but when, almost without realizing it, he opened his eyes, he forgot that silly dilemma, because a much greater enigma stood out in front of him.

His lover, who had been at his side for almost a year and who, anyway, he had known for centuries, had changed: his hair, always raven-black and, albeit not sparse, not bushy, had taken an intense ebony hue and they had become thicker, his grey pearl skin, often changing depending on the environment in which he was, had brightened up in a rosy tone incredibly warm and human, his robe, black as the shadows of the night, had turned crimson and had been covered by a shining armour, and his eyes, his beautiful eyes of the eclipse infinite nuances had become two disks of pure gold, with no stains, no imperfections, so as to seem two sparkling stars fallen from the sky.

«Pitch, is... is that you?» asked instinctively Frost, his eyes widened in wonder and bewilderment.

Smiling, amused, the Boogeyman commented: «Oh, Jack, we've been talking for almost half an hour and only now that you look at me you wonder if it's me or not?».

«But, you have a pink skin, and brown hair, and you're wearing a shining armour... who are you?» insisted Jack, who, albeit not scared, still couldn't figure out that singular and inexplicable situation.

«All this dream dust is starting to go to your head, huh, Jack?» teased him the man, starting to rock him; «These are only tricks of light and gold dust, nothing more: it's still me, and I didn't change. Ah, look: you're so tired you struggle to keep your eyes open. I'm not surprised that your sight is playing tricks on you. Rest a little, Jack: it will do you good».

Suddenly caught by a deep drowsiness the boy failed to object to the thoughtful suggestion, too weak and confused to do anything but moaning and letting himself go in the strong arms come to support him, and he snuggled better, pressing his forehead against the only part of the partner's elbow not protected by the hard cuirass just born and getting ready to doze off; at the last, however, with the extreme flash of consciousness, he lifted an eyelid for a few seconds, making the pupil wander up to meet his lover's one, embracing with his gaze that new creature, and yet old, that stranger he had never met, but always glimpsed, and recognizing what he loved most in the other he smiled, and fell asleep.
the boy had slept for a few hours, then waking up groggy more than ever and standing up to wander around, heard the suggestion to go back to sleep in his own bed to avoid being stunned by the sand he had absently nodded, literally collapsing on the partner to be dragged along the paths of golden dust, and once he had got down the vessel he had started to ramble, putting together speeches as elaborate as uneven as he staggered along the corridors.

«Where is my ship?» suddenly snapped Frost.

Grabbing him by the shoulders to help him go down the platform steps and walk around the Globe the Boogeyman answered: «We left it on the roof, Jack».

«Oh, yeah, right, on the roof!» exclaimed Frost, vaguely gesturing upward; «Sandy is guarding it, right? Very good! There's much to do tomorrow».

Intrigued, the man demanded: «Oh, really? And what will we have to do tomorrow?».

«Conquer the world, indeed, the space!» promptly replied Jack; «A great adventure is waiting: I'll be Jack, the pirate, I'll have a big hat with a feather and an eye patch, and I'll drive the ship from planet to planet to explore them and steal the most beautiful hidden treasures which exist, while you'll be my princess and you'll look at my feats from the deck. Many enemies will try to kidnap you, but I'll always come back in time to defend you and I'll defeat them all».

Pressing the left hand on his mouth to hold back the belly laugh which had arisen spontaneously at the image created by his lover Pitch pulled away, guiding the other only with his fingertips in order not to let him feel the violent shivers of hilarity which were shaking him and trusting in his confusion and in the dim light in order not to be noticed, therefore, reached the desired corridor, he warned him: «It’s time to port, pirate Jack»

«Captain Jack» readily corrected him the boy, turning sharply to the right.

Grabbing him the Boogeyman deviated him, carting him to their room access and then leading him inside, and, after closing the door behind himself, he announced: «Here we are, now... no, Jack, you have to undress, and then you cannot sleep on the blankets, come back here».

Smiling at the sight of his lover, so tired he couldn't even climb successfully on the bed, the man shook his head, then he immediately came to his rescue, helping him to straighten up and sliding the phalanges under his shirt to undress him.

«Ah, why is sleeping so complicated? And then these trousers cannot be taken off» mumbled the boy, fumbling unsuccessfully with a side seam of his trousers.

«Let me, Jack, this time I'll do it for you» hushed him Pitch.

Facilitated by the docility induced by drowsiness he made him raise his arms, taking off in rapid sequence his blouse and trousers and settling better his underpants, then he uncovered the mattress and said: «See, now you're ready, go to sleep».

After beating a bit the two garments to remove the grains of golden sand which dirtied them the Boogeyman folded them and put them temporarily on the desk, then he proceeded to reach the fireplace to spread the embers and extinguish it, but, as soon as he turned, he saw Frost still standing, his hands pressed on the bump and his eyes shining, and he heard him asking: «And you? You don't come with me?».

Touched by that question the man gasped, fully realizing only in this moment he hadn't slept with the partner for weeks, and, moved, he couldn't help but satisfy his wish and follow his own: covering the
distance which separated them in three quick steps he joined him and picked him up, lifting him effortlessly and smiling at him; then, without breaking eye contact, he placed him on the mattress, letting in the meantime his clothes come apart and fall to the ground and holding just a flap around his private parts in order not to force too much the reconciliation just occurred; finally, after laying at his side, he tucked the sheets and hugged him.

Feeling the embrace the boy shuddered and exclaimed: «Oh, so beautiful, you're back here with me, we can sleep together, you know, I missed it so much, it was so sad sleeping alone in this bed so big, I didn't feel good, I missed you so much...».

Feeling a pang in his heart at that childish and sincere revelation Pitch stiffened, biting his lip to vent his grief in silence, then he shook himself and replied: «Yes, I'm here again, Jack, and I will never leave you again: I will never let you feel alone, not once».

Rejoicing at the serene beam which rose on the lover's face the Boogeyman calmed down, happy both to have pleased him and to have been understood despite the short and easily misunderstandable sentence, and, in a gesture of tenderness, he rubbed his nose against his cheek, then allowing him to hide his head against his neck and massaging his to ease his sleep: indulging once again in such pampering was an indescribable pleasure, which he had and it had been denied to himself not only in the half-day of pain and misunderstandings, but also in the previous weeks. Although he had repeated to himself he was acting for Jack's sake, in fact, he had never been able to deny himself he had sensed something wrong in him, some discomfort, a lack of reactivity in the moments when he touched him, which deprived those moments of intimacy of any meaning and fulfilment, and when he had caught the boy with the scissors in his hand he had cursed himself for not having inspected that feeling better, but now that he was there, nestled in bed, finally with him, finally in peace, he stopped blaming himself: the past was the past, it couldn't be changed any more, he should focus on the present, and, fortunately, this seemed to shine of a thousand rays of golden light able to dispel the blacker shadows. He had erred, no doubt, he had risked to destroy his little, beautiful snowflake with a grip too tight and too selfish, but he hadn't failed, because Frost was still there and still loved him, and he would have had thousand days and thousands opportunities to remedy: he just had to put efforts and follow him, instead of stifling him, pushing him onwards the future without replacing him, and soon he would have find himself flying at his side, as he had always done, and as he had always wanted to do.

It was with this thought that he fell asleep in a few minutes, his heart animated by a hope he would have never believed he could mature and his mind imbued with a serenity he had rarely experienced, and, perhaps for this reason, he never noticed the thin curl of magic sand which hovered over him until he closed his eyes, nor the discreet hand which quietly closed the door.

Chapter End Notes

Obviously, every comment is welcome. As I already wrote the last time, next chapter will be published on the 9th of January. I wish you a Happy New Year
Moaning weakly Jack stirred a little, snuggling better among the freshly laundered sheets which seemed shreds of dream fell from heaven to wrap him, and he blissfully sighed. In truth, in his heart, he knew he was in the real world, lying on a solid bed in a universe which had always existed, but the awareness that the everyday life, now, corresponded in all respects to the sweetest vision he could imagine, induced him to indulge a little longer: both if he was asleep or awake, Pitch was always there with him, finally close, finally loving without being stifling, finally become again who he has always been, so he didn't have to worry about searching for him, nor about escaping.

While he was absorbed in these confused thoughts, he exhaled, instinctively stretching out his arm to his right to touch his lover's body, but under his fingertips he felt only the blanket soft fabric; dumbfounded he tried to search him to the left, well aware that he remembered little or nothing about the previous night and, therefore, that he could have got wrong, but once again the only thing he found was a chaotic drape of blankets hanging from the mattress; alarmed beyond measure he squirmed, freeing himself as best as he could from the fluffy cocoon where he was resting and raising his head, and after a few seconds of frantic research he spotted a lanky silhouette bent on the hearth.

Recognizing his partner, he sighed, letting himself go on the pillow while trying to conciliate the relief in knowing he had not been abandoned and the sadness in seeing the distance which separated them, but a voice promptly intervened to interrupt the train of his thoughts, whispering: «Jack? Are you awake?».

The boy hesitated for a few seconds, choking back a sob in order not to show his melancholy, then he sadly answered: «Yes».

A slight metallic clang and some rhythmic creaks announced that the Boogeyman had put back the fire irons and had walked towards him, momentarily diverting to the desk before reaching him, and at that point he heard him murmur: «Good morning, Jack. Did you sleep well?».

Turning, Frost stared at him, trying to remain expressionless and to let himself been distracted as little as possible by his long fingers wielding relentlessly a wet rag, and he replied: «Yes».

The man frowned at his reaction, casting him a suspicious glance as he finished to clean up his phalanges, and he asked: «Are you okay? Is there something wrong?».

Dodging his look the boy tergiversated: «No, no, it's all right».

Puffing, Pitch beat the cloth, spreading it right before throwing it into a bowl full of water, then he declared: «Just for your information, know that I have no intention to ignore your melancholy
reactions, so, if you see me staring at you or harassing you with questions, do not be surprised: I will only be soliciting your answer».

Vaguely piqued by those veiled threats, Jack clouded over, tempted to drive the other away with a rude comeback, but eventually he realized that, albeit clumsily, they only showed all the sincere concern the partner felt in seeing him clamming up, then he gave in and admitted: «Not a big deal, really. I would have simply liked to wake up next to you».

The Boogeyman sneered at that confession, shaking his head as he watched him from the height of his stature, then, without warning, he snapped his fingers, making his robe dissolve in dozens of tentacles which rushed to the door and then crawling under the blankets, and he commented: «Was it so hard to say?».

Bending his lips into a shy smile, the boy leaned his forehead against his, closing his eyes for an instant to better enjoy that moment of pure tenderness, and he answered: «Just needed a little push».

Staring back at him, the man reached out for him, gently caressing his cheek before ruffling his hair, and he demanded him: «Jack, may I know what you want from me?».

The amused reflection in his irises and the mocking grin the other had properly taken reassured Frost, confirming that this was not really complaining, but just trying to play down, then, assuming he was referring to his sudden lack of affection, he vaguely replied: «Oh, I don't know, I want you to stay close, but not too much, I'd like a hand to do certain things, but I do not know what, and I'd rather not ask, but you must be careful to guess them right, otherwise I'd get angry, then I would also like you to sleep next to me all the time, hugging me, but without making it seem like I need you, then I'd like cuddles, but not mushy, and then, since you're at it, if you also brought me a hot chocolate...».

«Jack, this may be a pregnancy for you, but for me is becoming a real labour!» exclaimed Pitch in a dramatic tone.

Letting out a giggle the boy settled back, slipping towards his lover to feel his body pressing against his own and enjoy the contact, but at the same time turning his head, in order to gain a little more time to dispose of the melancholy, and he tried to relax; the Boogeyman, for his part, did his best to make him comfortable, allowing him to curl up as he desired and passing his arm around his shoulders to wrap him in a rough embrace, and after a few seconds he asked: «So, how do you feel?».

Jack hesitated a few seconds, breathing deeply as he pondered on his conditions and on his bump which, invariably, crushed him against the mattress, then he declared: «I feel like a beached whale».

The reaction he had in response was completely unexpected: he had imagined from the outset that the partner would have laughed, at least to give him the satisfaction of feeling proud for the simple joke he had conceived, but the guffaw he heard went far beyond his expectation. Dumbfounded, he turned, lifting the blankets to allow the man rolling on his back unhindered, and soon after clinging to them in order not to be dragged away with him, and he exclaimed: «Pitch, are you crazy? My joke wasn't that funny!».

Overwhelmed, Pitch laughed even more, baring his teeth and half closing his irises to better express the hilarity which animated him, and merely letting out a grunt when a leg slipped off the bed, and he cried: «A beached whale! You slipped off the deck, by any chance? From the sky to the abyss? You sank quite low, my dear pirate Jack, indeed, Captain Jack!».

Even more confused than before, the boy bit his lip, trying unsuccessfully to touch the other's forehead to check if he had a fever, and he continued: «Pitch, seriously, are you crazy or what? What
decks? What skies? And, above all, why are you calling me captain?».

Propping himself up with his foot the Boogeyman finally managed to climb back on the bed and, although not to compose himself, at least to regain enough self-control, then, after clearing his throat, he asked him: «You do not remember anything? No ships? No space travels? No planets to conquer? No hats with feather and eye patches?».

Frowning, Frost answered: «I remember Sandy's ship, the dreams and our conversation, what's with the rest?».

Flaunting a sly expression, the man continued: «No, really? So also no princesses?».

Rolling his eyes, the boy insisted: «No, not at all, and certainly no princesses: the only partner I managed to find is a self-willed Boogeyman who seems to be gone crazy just a little while ago».

At that accusation as sincere as devoid of malignancy Pitch grinned, scratching his shoulder as he murmured to himself incomprehensible comments, then he shook his head and said: «Returning to more serious matters, it's time to eat. Breakfast in bed or breakfast together?».

Taken aback by the sudden change of topic, Jack winced, biting his tongue in order not to let other mocking comments out and focusing on what he had been asked, then he answered with a hopeful expression: «What about breakfast in bed together?».

The Boogeyman smiled at the proposal, and he conceded: «Well, if you want to come back down here to eat, we can do it, but I fear you haven't understood the second choice I gave you: with “breakfast together” I meant to propose you to come into the kitchen with me and help me cooking».

At that explanation the boy's eyes widened in an expression of pure wonder: never, ever in his life, not even in his wildest dreams he had ventured to hope his partner would have allowed him a substantially complete freedom, no doubt not so soon, and not so generously, and yet it had just happened, even in a field in which he himself would have never dared to meddle. It was clear as daylight, now, the mushy and stifling attitude the other had had until the previous day had been contrived, the result of deep-seated fears and apparent expectations to fulfil, and it had been enough dispelling the firsts and reappraise the seconds to make their relationship become again not only tolerable, but even pleasant, but this... this was the best Frost might have expected, the final confirmation that the person he loved had never disappeared, but only eclipsed, and that he just needed to reach out a hand to help him out and enjoy the whole eternity with him.

«Jack?» called him back the man, a look half surprised and half worried while he shook his shoulder; «Are you still with us?».

Bending his lips into a beaming smile the boy replied: «Breakfast together».

Pitch blinked a few times, pursing his lips as he studied his face with a thoughtful expression, then he commented: «Well, actually I should have expected it: Jack Frost would never lose an opportunity to cause chaos, and what better place than a kitchen? At least, among all the bungling elves who regularly hang around there, you'll go unseen. Come on, blankets off and dress up!».

Without even allowing him the time to understand the exhortation, the Boogeyman grabbed the sheets and folded them a couple of times, piling them in few seconds at the foot of the bed, and Jack, suddenly finding himself uncovered, couldn't help but curling up on himself, in part because of the cold, in part to demurely hide the new forms he hadn't yet come to accept; foreseeing the partner, who, in the meantime, had deftly recreated his robe, would have brought him his clothes, he waited, idly scratching his knee as he looked around, and when the other returned, handing him the
garments, he gladly accepted them, thanking him with a soft caress on his wrists.

«So, what did you plan to cook?» he asked, trying to dispel his embarrassment and, at the same time, distract the lover.

«Actually I was going to ask you» admitted the man, approaching the door to reabsorb the tentacles with which he had sealed it; «How hungry are you? Do you prefer something sweet, savoury, or both?».

Writhing as best as he could the boy wore his trousers, struggling to tie them and thanking his lucky stars for having given up the laces around the calves weeks before, then he replied: «I'm rather hungry, sweet or savoury it's the same, maybe can I have both?».

«Sure» conceded him Pitch, fiddling with the handle to unlock it; «It's good that you're finally hungry. What about starting with a couple of fried eggs, toasts and some grilled tomatoes?».

Frost, who never in his life had tried tomatoes, but who had been able to see and smell them countless times in the houses of the children whom he had struggled to get noticed by, wrinkled his nose and commented: «No, not the tomatoes! They're so full of seeds, and then their skin cannot be removed, I bet they don't taste good at all. Can't I have some mushrooms?».

«No, no mushrooms» immediately denied him the Boogeyman; «They're definitely too dangerous during pregnancy, and I'm not willing to risk. What about some courgettes? Or maybe you would prefer other vegetables? North's greenhouse is well provided».

Trying unsuccessfully to disentangle the blouse abundant folds in which he had promptly got stuck the boy muttered: «But I don't like vegetables».

A heavy sigh reached his ears and two gentle hands touched his head, freeing him in few gestures from the tangle he had created, and when he managed to look up and lock eyes with the man he heard him murmuring: «Spoiled child! Fortunately, until now, in every dish I prepared you I always hid the vegetables among the other food. Fruit would be better?».

At that reproach Jack crossed his arms, sticking his tongue out to tease his lover and confirm his childish attitude, but eventually he gave in and negotiated: «Yes, fruit is okay: I like it».

Raising his hands to the sky Pitch rolled his eyes, pretending to thank some kind of spirit, then he exclaimed: «Oh, finally we found something for you, princeling! Are you going to get up, or maybe you changed your mind and prefer to call the room service?».

Although aware that the other was just kidding a shiver of fear went through the boy's spine at the thought he could be closed again in that room, and he hastened to stubbornly repeat: «I said breakfast together, and breakfast together will be!».

Drawn by his determination he rolled over, using his arms to reach the side of the mattress, then, taking a deep breath, he got ready to get up: first he threw his legs over the edge, leaving them dangling while he sat up; then, leveraging on his hands, he stood up, visibly shaking and remaining with his back bent for better balance; finally, after managing to settle on his unsteady legs and straighten up, he ventured a few timid steps towards the partner.

The Boogeyman, who had let him do it himself all the time, standing by to watch him instead of intervening to help, walked towards him, holding out his hands as a father would do with his own child intent to move their first steps, and he pulled him into a warm embrace, then he commented: «Good job, Jack, you improved a lot. I'm sure that, in a few days, you'll be able to walk without problems,
as all pregnant women do. Do you want your staff now?».

«No» answered Frost; «It's not really comfortable, especially with the belly, and then I no longer need it. Let's go».

Lingering for a moment in his lover's arms, he sighed, enjoying the smell and the warmth of his skin, appreciating the way in which he had considerately bent to offer him a full contact, instead of merely and roughly encircling him and so let the belly keep them separated, then, feeling ready, he pulled away from him and headed for the door. It was with complete naturalness that he intertwined his fingers with his, gently brushing them before grabbing them, and with total confidence that he relied on his grip to keep himself from falling, knowing that the other would have not taken advantage of this, nor make him feel incapable, and so, a little guiding and a little being guided, he went down the corridor, and finally came to the Globe hall.

As soon as he entered a whirlwind of aeroplanes welcomed him, deftly gliding few inches over his head, and then dispersing among the columns of the loft, and the whole room seemed to wake up: as responding to a silent signal all the futuristic jellyfish lazily floating around the imposing Globe activated, lighting up from the inside and rolling out their long tentacles, complex jointed, colourful butterflies flew from every angle, moving in sync to form merry rainbows, and toys of every shape and size came to life, moving their mechanical limbs as to greet the newcomer.

Amazed by the warm welcome the boy got excited, moved in seeing that the entire building had mobilized to help him recovering and having fun again, and he decided to let himself go: ignoring momentarily the partner, who, with a grumpy attitude, had immediately begun to yell against that friendly attack and who was trying to strike up an effective defence, he advanced, spreading his arms to invite those mechanical marvels to approach him, rejoicing when they rushed and laughing when they, then, escaped, and, almost inevitably, he got carried away in their game. It was so easy giving in, stretching out his fingers, the touch-and-go trick so perfectly conceived it didn't even give him the impression he had been taken in, waving his hand, the flickering of the toys so mesmerizing to fully capture his attention, trying to jump to reach the unreachable, the pulsating reflections of infinite shades so fascinating to overshadow everything else, and suddenly everything changed: an unexpected step, one foot rested badly, the only available support an inch too far, and in a moment Jack lost his balance.

He fell without a lament or a cry, too amazed by the unforeseen fact and too scared about the possible consequences, well aware that any clumsy attempt to remain standing would have only caused him a more severe injury and instinctively he tried to shield himself, bringing the right hand to the head and the left to the bulging bump, but, a moment before the impact on the hard floorboards, something intervened, partly creeping between his body and the floor and pulling him back.

Disoriented by the sudden movement the boy couldn't hold himself from startling, conscious that, actually, he was only hindering his unknown as deducible saviour, but totally unable to control his reactions in such a short time, and, in order to compensate, he twisted to meet him; against all odds he managed to jerk, landing successfully against his chest, then sliding to the ground, and once there he turned around, shouting: «Pitch! Are you okay!?».

The interlocutor, who, on the contrary, had violently beaten his side on the floor, took a moment to recover, barely holding back a grunt while blinking to familiarize with his surroundings, but when he did he immediately leaped on Frost, blocking his wrists and shouting: «Are you mentally deficient or what!!?».

Shocked by the angry reaction the boy widened his eyes and he froze, terrified by the other's hard stare, by his cruel grip, by his sharp teeth bared in a feral snarl, by him in every detail and overall,
and for a moment he seriously feared the man was about to hurt him; shortly after, however, his gentle soul managed to silence the overprotective voice born with the child which deafened his consciousness, delving into his memories to bring to light all the times that the worst could have happened, but had never occurred, immersing himself in those magnetic irises pervaded by dark tentacles to reach the pure light which laid below, and, once he relaxed enough not to pant, he quieted down, waiting.

Pitch, unlike him, need much more time to pull himself together: although he had realized right away he had been too brutal, he didn't radically change his attitude, continuing to flaunt an expression distorted by anger and an aggressive pose, his wet eyes the only clue of the repentance he felt, and at one point he even seemed about to attack him, but in the end he just narrowed his irises and whispered: «Jack, let me clear this: you're pregnant, you can't do most of the thing you used to do before, and no doubt you can't do any of the stupid things you've tried since the conception to now. I don't know why you conceived certain ideas, or why you seem to have lost any sense of self-preservation, and not even why you enjoy so much walking around without looking where you're going, but I'll tell you this: dare, just one more time, to stumble and fall as you did now, and I swear I'll tie to a wheelchair since now to the childbirth».

He uttered the threat in a calm tone, albeit shaky, succeeding, in his almost total composure, to make it sounding terribly intimidating, but Jack, who already knew him well, didn't quail: behind those words there lurked not ruthless cruelty, nor any abusive intention, but only a more than motivated concern, fuelled by dozens similar episodes, now so deeply rooted in him to devour his soul, and such an ultimatum, if not entirely justifiable, was at least more than understandable.

«I promise you it won't happen again» he vowed, delaying to a less tense time his thoughts in order not to keep him on his toes.

Not satisfied at all with that promise the Boogeyman stared at him, straightening his back to look up and down him, and probably exploiting his impressive stature to intimidate him even more, then, after pursing his mouth to show all his disappointment, he declared: «I'll carry you hence to the kitchen, in retribution».

Not daring to protest even in his mind the boy nodded, promptly bending his legs and back in a comfortable position to be grabbed and immediately snuggling against his chest as soon as the other lifted him up; remaining in silence he let himself be carried, slightly sad for the fact he could no longer enjoy the colourful toys or the Globe hall, which he was forced to abandon, nor the Christmas decorations which adorned the corridors, that rarely reached the ceiling, but certain that wriggling to peek them would have only worsened the situation, so he tried to enjoy that moment of intimacy with his lover; when, however, the impatience began to take over and overwhelm even the comforting certainty that, even if not immediately, thanks to his regained freedom he would have been soon able to gaze at each corner of that Christmas paradise, a series of excited yells and deafening clangs interrupted the train of his thoughts, and a delicious smell of food definitely dissipated them.

Guessing that the kitchens had to be now close, Frost rejoiced, dangling his feet and taking a deep breath as she struggled in every way to restrain himself and wait until the end, and almost letting out a cry of wonder when, looking up, he saw dozens of copper pipes peeping through the blackened beams, but the excitement lasted for little: in less than a minute his authoritarian transporter crossed the room, rudely pushing away Yetis and elves and deftly zigzagging between an obstacle and the other, then he walked away, passing a narrow antechamber and reaching a more secluded place.

«Now you're allowed to climb down» finally conceded the man.

Champing at the bit, the boy got ready, making sure not to make any sudden gesture in order not to
harm himself or his partner, but also to react as quickly as possible to the other's movements, so as to speed up the process, and when he managed to stand by himself he looked around, bewildered: he didn't imagine such a place existed in the Palace, and, no doubt, he didn't imagine he would have been accompanied there.

The room in which he was, in fact, was more like a closet than a kitchen, so small it couldn't contain two Yetis side by side, and so crammed with furniture not to let emerge neither the floor, nor the walls: in the centre a wooden table with a chair and a spartan stool, on the right a cast iron stove antique crafted, on the left a huge credenza, and everywhere pots and pans of every shape and material, hanging from the coffered ceiling, dangling from some hooks, clinging almost by magic on every sharp corner of that secret spot. Initially, disoriented by the abundance of objects, Jack couldn't focus on any of them, jumping from a wooden teapot with multiple spouts to a copper mould shaped like reindeer, from a painted tile to a stack of pot-bellied vases, from the chiselled oven door to the carved one of the cupboard, so amazed he couldn't even wonder how such a multitude could have been accumulated in such a hole, but in the end, focusing on the large fireplace, which was not only the unique source of light, but also the only spacious corner, he managed to pull himself together and ask: «What is this place?».

Pitch, who, in the meanwhile, had begun to tinker with shutters and drawers to gather some tools, emerged from an opening and answered: «Judging by the age of the furniture I would say that this is the first kitchen the Palace has ever had. The credenza has been assembled snap-fit, without using nails, the stove is made of unglazed cast iron and its decorations are made of copper, its chimney is on sight: decidedly less modern than the main kitchen. Given its condition I would say that now it's used primarily as a storage room, but they keep it clean, and I have some reason to believe that North still uses it to prepare some delicacy, from time to time».

Making his eyes wander around, the boy stepped forward, touching with his fingertips a row of pots to make them jingle and walking around the table, then, after sitting, he suggested: «So, can I help you? What should I do?».

The Boogeyman, who had already retrieved eggs, butter, bread and a mysterious object wrapped in a towel, began to think aloud: «So, I gathered all that we need, I'll do the cooking, there's the bread to cut...».

«I'll do it!» promptly volunteered Frost.

Without waiting for an agreement he reached out his arm, grabbing the loaf and the cutting board in a single movement, but when he tried to reach the knife the partner intervened, slapping his hand and grasping the object in his place; dumbfounded the boy raised his head, ready to ask for explanations and, in case, also to complain about the rude gesture, but when he met his eyes and saw them pervaded by fear he understood, and fall silent. Crushed by the memory of the folly he had done and mortified by the idea he had upset his lover enough to cause him to fear the worst in any moment he cringed, stepping back from the table and turning his eyes elsewhere, and in a faint voice he whispered: «I didn't want to use it in a wrong way, I'm sorry».

«No!» hastily intervened the man; «No, I already knew, I was just... it was just a respondent conditioning, don't think about it. Come on, cut the bread, I'll start to cook».

Not reassured at all by that sentence, which, moreover, he couldn't understand, Jack shook his head, waving the other to give up and resigning himself to be a mere spectator, but, as soon as he moved the wrist, trembling fingers intertwined with his, offering him the knife handle and helping him to hold it, and a hesitant voice urged him, murmuring: «Come on, take it. In the stove there are still some hot embers I would like to use, but I need to hurry». 
With a lump in his throat the boy resolved to accept, still sad about the past fact, but moved by the other's trust, then, mustering up his courage, he prepared himself: first he retrieved the cutting board, sliding it on the table until he felt it stable; then, remembering the words of his mother, he stood up in order to gain a better view and to have more freedom of movement; finally, after placing the bread down, he started to cut. The first attempts ended in an almost total failure, the serrated blade which just rubbed over the crust barely notching its surface layer of flour, the memory of the scissors merciless sinking into the flesh too vivid not to overlap the present and dye it in red despair, but what he was about to pierce was just food, simple, banal food, ordained to be cooked and eaten to make him feel good, and he didn't want to give in to the visions which haunted him: he was stronger than them, stronger than the uncertainty he felt, stronger than the fears which had pulled him to the brink of madness, and he had nothing to do but show it. Shrugging he shook himself, clearing his mind, and, at that point, cutting became a completely natural gesture, maybe not easy, considering he hadn't done it for centuries, but no doubt not macabre at all: one after the other the slices piled up on the wood, some thinner, other thicker, some crushed, other soft, but all more and more regular, and when he arrived at the end of the loaf he stopped, gently placing the blade to his right and letting out a sigh.

Pitch, who, perhaps thinking to be unnoticed, perhaps indifferent to that, had spied him all the time over his shoulder while stoking the embers and warming the pans, turned and approached him, then, after lifting a piece of bread full of holes and peeping with the eye by one of them, he commented: «If I had known from the beginning how you handle knives I would have not made a scene before».

A shy smile appeared on Frost's lips, the first, little demonstration that he wasn't only working to return the one he was before, but that he was also succeeding, and in order to defend himself he snapped: «Think about yourself, instead of criticizing, or your dear embers will die out!».

Laughing at that rebuke the Boogeyman shook his head and he exclaimed: «Capricious and touchy even more than usual, you're pregnant for sure! If you want to help me you can put the bread you're going to eat on the hot plate, bring what's left to the Yetis and take two fruits from the basket, if you prefer to stay here and command... do not expect me to bow my head».

Caught off guard by the unexpected conclusion the boy gasped, taking a sulky expression, but too stunned to conceive in his feet an effective comeback, and he had to resign himself to leave his partner the satisfaction of having won the first battle; still offended he began to rummage among the cut slices, choosing three of medium size among the best he had obtained and then heading to the stove, and at that point a providential lighting gave him inspiration for his revenge.

«Oh, don't worry, I would never dare to, in the end we both know you're the one obsessed by commanding» retorted, pushing him away with a blow struck with the hip.

Letting himself be shoved without opposing the man continued to laugh, and answered: «No doubt, and I'm proud of it. You, on the other hand, remain a big touchy child».

«Said the lovable man, huh?» countered Jack.

Glimpsing a mischievous sparkle in the other's irises the boy hastened to place the bread on the hot plate and tried to flee away, but he was too slow to avoid him, and he ended up being hit on the butt by a smack, which stole him, plus some chuckles, a cry not exactly of pain; slightly embarrassed by the incident he composed herself, rubbing his buttocks as he limped to the table and grabbed the cutting board, then, after blowing a raspberry to his lover, he turned his back on him and walked into the main kitchen.

As soon as he entered it, a cacophony of rattles, grunts, clatters, incoherent yells and bangs of varying intensity welcomed him, the perfect accompaniment to the organized chaos which reigned in the big room, and he felt immediately at ease: over the centuries he had become a regular visitor to
this place, to the point he had memorized every single activity which happened there, and being finally able to access it without fearing to be thrown out was a real pleasure. Zigzagging among those present he began to look around, smelling freshly baked pastries, bothering the Yetis intent to decorate them and helping a couple of elves to flee undisturbed with a tray of cookies, and, spotting an unattended spoon covered with cream, he leaned over to lick it, but when he was an inch far from it an animal-like scream stopped him, and two hands as large as shovels pulled him back.

Immediately recognizing the stubby fingers covered with calluses which had grabbed him, Frost turned and, exhibiting the cutting board, he exclaimed: «Hi, Phil! I came here to bring you the bread!».

The hairy giant, in return, glared at him, not troubling himself to look at what was offered to him and continuing to complain, and the boy, who was starting to feel the effects of fatigue, begged him: «Come on, Phil, I cannot hold it forever, grab it! I myself cut it, can't you consider it as a sign of peace?».

Muttering unintelligible words Phil grabbed the wood, knitting his bushy eyebrows at the sight of the mutilated slices and quickly putting them apart, then he tried to go on with his reproach, but Jack stopped him immediately, murmuring: «Okay, okay, I tried to lick the spoon, I admit it, but I'm so hungry... can't you make an exception for me?».

Unfortunately for the boy, nothing seemed to work with the other party, neither the sorry look he had flaunted, nor the pleading tone with which he had prayed him, nor the joined hands he had raised, but at the last the Yeti, noticing his bump, relented and decided to satisfy him: moving furtively he grabbed him by the arm, dragging him to a bowl filled with a soft stuffing, then he dipped in it a small ladle and brought it to the lips of the rascal who, for centuries, he had struggled to drive away.

Overwhelmed by the other's imposing bulk, Frost couldn't help but following him, and he almost risked to choke when he was forcibly fed, but the burst of sweet and spicy flavours which flooded his mouth compensated those clumsy and almost rude gestures, and he enjoyed whole hog that small victory after years of toil.

As soon as he emptied the spoon the giant offered him a second one, but the boy, who, despite everything, had no intention to take advantage of his generosity, said: «No, don't trouble yourself, it's enough: the cream is really good, but I shouldn't spoil my appetite for breakfast. I'll return to Pitch, okay? Thank you for everything, Phil».

Saying goodbye with a quick hug, Jack walked away, escaping the hot hand which had slipped on his swollen bump and which had made him feel a little uncomfortable, and hoping thus to escape also the conflicting thoughts which had arisen in his mind at the contact, and almost running he reached the small kitchen, announcing himself with a: «I'm back!».

«It took you a lifetime to come back, where have you been?» immediately complained Pitch, finishing to store the pans in the sink; «Come on, hurry to eat, before the breakfast cools down. Where's the fruit?».

Ignoring the reproaches, the boy hurried to sit down, licking his chops in front of the abundant plate of bacon and eggs waiting for him, and he nonchalantly answered: «I forgot it, I'll take it later».

«I'd have bet you'd have forgotten to take it! I'll do it instead of you» muttered the Boogeyman.

Glancing over his slender figure Frost grabbed the fork and a slice of toast, then he tucked in his breakfast; hungrier then ever he attacked it from every side, tearing some pieces of fried egg, folding the rasher of bacon to make them slid more easily in his mouth and swallowing the egg yolks whole,
moaning repeatedly to the pleasure that these intense flavours gave him and struggling not little to refrain himself from directly using his hands, and when the other returned he exclaimed: «Mh, Pitch, is all so good, thank you! What will we do next?».

As soon as the man saw him he froze on the spot, blinking a few times his right eyelid as he watched him, then he sharply replied: «Etiquette lesson, and we'll start from now!».

Realizing he hadn't offered the other a pleasant sight, the boy tried to compose himself and whispered: «I'm sorry».

«Do not talk with your mouth full!» immediately scolded him Pitch, striding towards him; «Come on, elbows off the table, back straight, head up, chairs are conceived to sit on, not to perch on, the fork must be grabbed with grace, not as a churn, chew more, use the napkin, and woe to you if you try again to eat two rasher of bacon together! You're incorrigible, what should I do with you?».

Partly overwhelmed and partly amused by the series of exasperated orders, Jack chuckled, trying to obey them all as best as he could, then, after swallowing, he asked again: «What will we do next?».

Giving up to further correct his partner's posture and manners, the Boogeyman sighed, letting himself go on the stool, and he replied: «What you want, Jack. The trip to Sandy's ship has been quite tiring, so avoid asking me out again, but, except for this, feel free to suggest what you prefer».

Not bothered at all by the mild prohibition, the boy nodded, agreeing with the other's reasons and so with his decision, and, struck by a sudden thought, he asked: «Pitch, what is the title of the book of the whale?».

«The book of the whale?» repeated the man, puzzled; «There are many, maybe you meant the tale of Pinocchio?».

Shuddering, Frost countered: «No, no, not that disturbing tale! I was thinking about a book book, which I never read».

Chuckling at that clarification, Pitch suggested: «Maybe you meant the book book titled “Moby Dick”? The one in which a whaling ship hunts for a huge, white sperm whale?».

«Yes, that one!» exulted the boy, overexcited; «Can we read it? I don't know why, but I suddenly feel the urge for sea adventures».

The Boogeyman bent his lips into an enigmatic smile at that last statement, tilting his head for a few seconds, as he was busy to bring back old memories to his mind, but in the end he shook himself and observed: «Honestly, I'm not sure that that book is up your alley: the language is slightly archaic, crammed with sailors' terms which you probably never heard before, and the story is more boring than you might think, because, despite the appearances, the system of symbols hidden behind the plot is more important than the adventure itself».

Too stubborn to be discouraged, Jack insisted: «Come on, please, give me at least a chance! If I'm too slow to understand I'll stop after a few pages, I promise!».

The man hesitated for long, a doubtful expression as he looked him from head to foot, as if, by doing so, he could guess his skills and predict how the reading would have gone, but in the end, touched, he conceded: «All right, Jack, let's go for “Moby Dick”, but first you have to finish what you have in your plate, and eat these two pears».

«Of course!» agreed the boy, and he immediately tucked on his plate to finish it as quickly as possible, raising again his educated partner's hackles.
«Shostakovich, here you are!» exulted North.

Triumphant as a conqueror at the end of a tough battle, he lifted a tiny chisel, shaking it to sweep away the dust and then he raised it against the light to see it better, but before he effectively verified it was indeed the right one, he smiled: after centuries and centuries spent handling his tools he had come to know them perfectly, accustomed not only to use them, but also to remember every little hump of their grips, so that visual inspection was more a whim than a real need.

Gloating, he placed it in a basket, along with other items he had recovered from that closet specifically to continue a work he wanted to keep secret until the last, then, after closing every shutter, he went out, willing to proceed immediately in the laboratory, but at last he changed his mind and decided to divert to Pitch and Jack’s bedroom to check their conditions. Normally, as the bashful and discreet men he was, he would have never dared to meddle in such an exuberant way in their private lives, limiting himself to talk to them on those occasions when they accidentally met into the Palace and venturing to disturb them only in case of extreme necessity, but at least for this time he wanted to make an exception: despite the hard work which, as every year, he had to undergo, he had noticed the decline they had been experiencing, withering day after day while their souls drifted away, and he felt bound to intervene to help them recovering.

Striding along the corridor, he entered the Globe hall, heading immediately to the left to avoid the myriad of toys the Yetis were testing and thus reach more quickly his destination, but as soon as he turned towards the fireplace he noticed a raven-black head of hair peeping out the back of the couch, and, after advancing a few more steps to gain a better view, he stopped.

The couple was sit on the sofa, just in front of him, and it couldn't have settled into a sweeter pose: Jack lying against Pitch, Pitch intent to hold Jack, the first deeply asleep, the second about to doze off, their arms perfectly superimposed, their bodies perfectly matching in the midst of the soft cushions which warmed them, exactly as they had always used to do, and exactly how he had prayed to see them get back doing. He didn't get angry for the bare feet placed on the pillows, nor for the cup of tea abandoned on the floor, nor, even less, for the fact the two had decided to stop in a communal room to exchange endearments, too mature to give weight to such trifles, and too happy to see them serene again to even think about ruining that magical moment with a rebuke, and he was moved almost to tears when the Boogeyman stole a little kiss from his sleeping lover, but in the end, after indulging for a few seconds, he headed back and walked away: spying wasn't like him, he had never done it, and he had no intention to start doing it now.

Smiling happy for the new turn taken by the situation, he walked down the corridor, whistling a tune as he checked that the Christmas decorations were in order, and when he passed by the kitchen entrance his eyes fell inevitably on the row of the gingerbread houses just completed, neatly lined up one next to the other as to form a neighbourhood and still wet with icing. Not sure about the colour scheme used he stopped, frowning to take a hard look while the poor Phil, tense as ever, looked at him in return, and finally he commented: «I don't like them, paint them white!».

New fanart by Fridarush!

As always, every comment is welcome. Unfortunately my friend told me she won't be able to check the next chapter within Friday, therefore I'm forced to delay the update to the 30th of January. I'm definitely not happy about this, I would have preferred to start publishing once a week again, but there's nothing I can do. I'll make sure to take advantage of this time to go on with the translation, so that I won't have problems during my exams in February. I wish you a nice evening.
WE DON'T HAVE TO BE ALONE – CHAPTER 20

A sudden movement and a slight blow to his stomach disturbed Jack, penetrating in the muffled silence in which he had laid more violently than an earthquake in a remote underground cave, and he awoke with a start, widening his eyes and instinctively sitting up. Obviously, given how deep and unexpected had been the sleep in which he had inadvertently fallen, he didn't succeed in any of the two movements, and he substantially found himself flailing in vain, anchored to the ground by the heavy bump and blinded by the fireplace light, which, albeit weak, was too bright for his pupils just emerged from darkness, but, despite the confusion, he managed to recover rather quickly: the sudden rise had not just scared him, but also helped him to interrupt a rest he had never had any intention to indulge in, and the desire to get right back up and fully enjoy the regained freedom hadn't been slow to recur strongly to his mind, shaking it with a shout of encouragement to push him towards new adventures.

Blinking and scratching his head to better pull himself together, Frost looked around, recognizing in few seconds the cosy corner where he had settled with Pitch to read, and, after that, Pitch himself, lying limply on the sofa beneath him and intent to hug him while sleeping, and, noticing the book dropped against his swollen belly, he soon drew his own conclusion: obviously, after he himself had capitulated, even the Boogeyman had succumbed to fatigue, letting himself go against the pillows after giving him one last cuddle and dozing off quietly.

Feeling perfectly at ease in that sweet situation the boy smiled, snuggling against his lover's chest to better bask in his skin warmth and scent, and he began to caress his arm, but as soon as he reached the back of his fingers a great disappointment caught him: the tome, which he remembered he had barely followed up to the fourth chapter, was opened in the middle, and now dozens and dozens of pages had been turned and studied without his being able to give them a look.

In part piqued because he had been left behind, in part well aware that, for the partner, waiting him while doing nothing would have been silly and boring, Jack grabbed the volume, reclining it until he found the perfect position to easily see every word, so he proceeded to face it a second time; in truth, judging from what he had already been able to browse, the text was well out of his league, its sentences too long and complex, the reasoning therein reported too articulate and refined and the meaning hidden behind them too deep and cryptic, but giving up wasn't for him, especially in fields
which fascinated him, so he rolled up his sleeves and started from the first paragraph he saw.

«“A squeeze of the hand”» he whispered in a low voice; «Hope I'll be able to make sense of this!».

Blatantly ignoring the fact he had missed dozens of chapters he focused to pick the thread, getting rather bewildered at the sight of proper names never heard before, and clinging to the few common terms he stumbled upon to go on, and soon he found himself immersed in a twisted and unique reflection: starting from the description of the treatment which the whale oil was submitted to before being refined, in fact, the author had thrown himself into a daring consideration regarding its properties, not only beneficial to the body, in his opinion, but also for the spirit, which came out refreshed and tamed by all that sweet squeezing, and in ecstatic phrases of dubious shades which painted quite strange situations and fantasies. Increasingly perplexed by the diversion, sometimes bizarre, sometimes ridiculous, sometimes almost inappropriate, Jack tried not to give up, restarting from the beginning every proposition in which he got lost and trying with all his being to grasp both the smallest details and the general meaning, but, at a point, he had to surrender and stop in front of the conclusive assertion, peak of that wild ride of the mind: “In thoughts of the visions of the night, I saw long rows of angels in paradise, each with his hands in a jar of spermaceti”. ¹

A laughter arose spontaneously in Frost's throat, irrepressible, unstoppable, and, almost without realizing it, he found himself lying on the partner, completely unable to move and about to roll off the sofa due how strong were the tremors which shook him: never in his life he had read something so absurd and funny! He laughed for long, his mind invaded by lines of cherubs intent on squeezing each other's hands, he laughed louder, his ears deafened by the satisfied moans of the satisfied seraphs, he laughed without even catch his breath, his eyes nagged by endless, angelic idiotic smiles, he laughed as if he couldn't do anything else, and, in fact, he could do nothing else, and finally a second voice followed him, joining his discreet laughter to his and then exclaiming: «But look what we have here! Did you play me some stupid joke while I was sleeping?».

Immediately recognizing his lover, the boy tried to compose himself, clinging to the backrest to climb back on the sofa and more than willingly accepting the help which was offered to him, and, when he managed to dispose, at least partially, of the hilarity, he explained: «Rows of angels, Pitch, rows of angels with their hands in whale oil! The paradise invaded by jars of spermaceti! Could you figure them? Was the author drunk or what?».

Again overwhelmed by that image Jack began to laugh, lifting with difficulty the tome to show the other the part in point, and the Boogeyman, in return, scolded him: «Oh, Jack, but do you think this is the way to talk? Melville was a great author, you cannot say such things! Anyway, I have to concede you that this part is a bit... particular, here».

«A bit particularly stupid, yes, with no doubts!» reiterated the boy.

«Just because you cannot appreciate art!» retorted the man; «The image you read should not be taken literally, but interpreted, because the whole book is nothing but a tapestry of symbols whose story is only the plot. I was sincere when I said this text was out of your league, and I didn't do it to insult you: intelligence is not enough to understand these works, you need also patience, and, while you have the first, you're lacking the latter».

Not offended at all by that statement, Frost giggled one last time, then he replied: «Yes, it's true, I don't think I'll ever have enough patience for these things: it took me almost five minutes to read this page, and a few seconds to get bored. The story, though, sounds interesting to me: does it happen to exist a summary or a shortened edition, by any chance? I want to know how it ends!».

At that request Pitch snorted, clearly annoyed by the idea that someone might want to set aside the soul of that book to focus exclusively on its external form, but in the end, softening the tone, he
conceded: «Yes, there are several shortened editions, including an illustrated children's version North keeps here, in his library».

Reassured by that confirmation the boy carefully closed the book, laying it on his thighs and caressing the cover made of tooled leather, then he asked: «So, what will we do now?».

Stretching his arms and legs the Boogeyman replied: «Do you want me to bring you the children's book?».

«No, thanks» politely declined Jack; «I'm still a bit dazed by the visit to Sandy's ship and I'm always sleepy, I'd rather do something which could help me wake up. What will we do now?».

«For all the shadows, you don't need to tear my skin off, suggest something you like!» snapped the man.

«But I have no ideas! What will we do now?» pressed him further the boy.

Letting out a frustrated moan Pitch slumped against the cushions, not caring in the least to hide the exasperation he felt and, indeed, highlighting it almost blatantly, then he suggested: «How about a piano lesson, so I'll have a little respite from your chatter?».

Not bothered at all by the partner's intolerant attitude, which he knew was jocular pretence and which was just the latest demonstration that the man had become again who he had always been, Frost smiled, tempted to tease him further in order to see him whimpering helplessly, but as soon as he heard the suggestion he clouded over and, looking down, he replied: «It didn't go very well the first time».

«You know, I'm pretty sure that if you try to use your fingers, instead of the belly, to play it, you'll achieve better results» observed the Boogeyman.

Too saddened by the memory of his awkward fall to be able to laugh at that joke the boy insisted: «But I can't, the belly is always in the way».

Sighing heavily the man shook his head, staring at the flames in the fireplace while he pondered, then he took Jack's face in his hands and whispered: «Jack, I won't deny that the belly is uncomfortable, I won't deny that it's a burden and a hindrance, but most of the time it's in the way only in your head. Do you think the bench on which I was sitting was nailed to the ground? Didn’t it even occur to you that, perhaps, if you had given me time to move it, you would have easily been able to sit and play? I wasn't joking a few hours ago, when I accused you you had countless idiot ideas since the conception to now: on too many occasions you acted like a fool, while it would have been enough using your head in order to avoid problems. Come on, stand up: we're going in the attic, at least you'll have the definitive demonstration that this belly is not as limiting as you think».

Without further ado he moved, wriggling a little to free his limbs and quickly standing up, then he turned and, after grabbing the tome, he offered his forearm to Jack; the latter, for his part, hesitated for a long time, not convinced at all by the other's speech, but sure that any protest in regard would have been broken off, and in the end he decided to accept: trying cost nothing, especially considering he had nothing better to do, and, in case of failure, he could have asked his lover to concede him a little consolation concert.

Leaning forward to labour as little as possible he stood up, frantically clinging to his partner till his legs didn't stop trembling, then loosening the grip up to just join hands with him, and, with a bit forced smile, he let himself be guided. He walked quietly, gazing at the Globe as he skirted it, looking curiously at the books spine next to which Pitch put the tome started and abandoned, getting
lost in the spirals of Christmas decorations alongside which he unhurriedly climbed the long stairs to
the attic, because he had no reason to run, and endless ones to enjoy that walk, and never as then he
had been happy to have met the Boogeyman in that cold December night of the previous year,
touched by the embarrassed nonchalance with which the partner had intertwined his phalanges with
his own, moved by the patience with which he assisted him, on cloud nine for all the love his mere
presence showed: there was nothing in the world the boy could wish for more, no power, no
treasure, nothing that was even comparable to the caring support he was receiving, nothing that could
make him feel so strong and, at the same time, so protected, and nothing that could encourage him
more to give the best of himself. He wasn't surprised to be able to climb the flights without any
difficulty, quite eager to show to himself and to the other that his rebirth was started, but also
conscientious enough to take a break whenever he felt the need to, he wasn't surprised by the
naturalness with which he confessed to his lover his passion for the garlands of flowers and berries,
not uncomfortable any more to open any conversation with him, he wasn't surprised even by the
speed with which he reached the entrance to the attic: now there was nothing he couldn't do, no
external impediment he couldn't overcome, and it was with this encouraging awareness that he
crossed the threshold with his head held high.

A chill went through him when he spotted the silhouette of the piano, looming in its immense size,
fascinating in its ancient beauty, absurdly cruel in the innocent stillness with which it had been able
first to tear him down, then to ignore him, but to Frost it was enough to shrug to dispel any tremor: it
hadn't been the musical instrument to make him fall, but the impetuous awkwardness with which he
had approached it, so there was nothing to fear.

While he lingered in these reflections to convince himself to dare, Pitch had taken the opportunity to
precede him and clear out the passage, and when he was satisfied he exclaimed: «Well! Are you
ready for the magic trick, Jack?».

Moving the arm in a wide, fluid gesture, to add more theatrics to what he was about to do, he
grabbed the padded bench and lifted it from the ground, then he whispered: «And here's a clear and
safe path to the piano. Come on, come here: lay your fingertips on the keys, keep your arms straight,
then, when I rearrange the bench, sit down».

Obeying the instructions, the boy stepped forward, immediately stretching his fingers towards the
keys, like a child at their first steps, to reach them as soon as possible and promptly finding the ideal
position, then, after touching them and waiting for the stool to be placed, we sat down and let out a
sigh as soon as he could relax his legs.

«See? Was that so hard?» teased him the Boogeyman.

«But I'm so far from the piano!» weakly protested Jack, seeing the gap between himself and the
keyboard widening more and more in a sadistic illusion.

«Nonsense!» promptly countered the man; «You don't need to have the keyboard in your mouth, the
keys are meant to be played, not eaten: you are at the perfect distance. Watch out now, I'll have to
move my side of the stool to sit down. Meanwhile, what would you like to start with? Would you
like to listen to a theoretical explanation, to try a scale or to directly throw yourself into a simple
piece?».

Although eager to start the boy restrained himself, waiting for the other to take place at his right,
then, casting him a smile, he answered: «A piece, with no doubt! But first I'd like you to play alone,
so I'll be able to watch and learn something».

Looking up to the sky Pitch remarked: «The usual impatient, I had no doubt you would have chosen
the piece! Since you asked me to start the dance, what do you feel like listening to? Chopin?
Beethoven? Mozart? Others?».

Dumbfounded Frost looked at him with a confused expression and he replied: «I don't know what kind of songs they are, I've never heard them before. Maybe a Mozart? Can't you choose in my place? I trust you».

The Boogeyman, who, hearing him talking, had had a reaction half horrified and half touched, stood motionless for a few seconds, staring at a curl of the lectern, then he shook himself and concluded: «Yes, indeed you couldn't have heard about any of these things. Maybe it's better to choose something more modern for you, huh? Ludovico Einaudi should be fine. I'll play a song titled “Becoming”: it's lively and powerful, without being neither agitated nor overwhelming, and I think it's perfect to accompany this new beginning».

Without waiting neither for a nod, nor for a go-ahead, the man sat up and immediately started the performance: first, as a kind of warm-up, he began to move his left hand, repeatedly alternating between two adjacent keys and only occasionally leaping towards two more distant, while the right beat lazily less than a note per second, creating a melody that, in its indolence, had something surprisingly impatient; then, when the expectation become almost palpable, the motif bloomed, impetuously gushing from the piano case to pour out on the floor, dancing graceful and playful among the furniture and the beams as its creator's fingers danced on the black and white runway, flowering in racemes of sounds which spun round, returning back on themselves and, at the same time, advancing, running faster and faster towards a horizon never known, but always craved, and flying up on the wings of the basses to reach incredible acutes; finally, as if it couldn't hold on any more, it fell. Albeit unexpected this step wasn't abrupt at all, as natural as a right break after a quick sprint, slowing suddenly at first, then more gradually, and so settling on a pace leisurely as a walk in the twilight of the sunset, and fulfilling as a hug before sleeping: something completely different from the excruciating agony of the first piece Pitch had proposed to Jack, something decidedly more full of sweet hopes and benevolent wishes, something which, as suggested by the title, led toward the becoming, and which indeed didn't wait to rise, gaining body and volume, climbing again with unparalleled dexterity along the scales to touch the peaks already conquered, and dancing a little on them before stopping abruptly.

The boy, who had chased every pirouette of that wonderful show and had been captivated by it, almost tripped when he heard it ending without warning, and he instinctively exclaimed: «Again, again!».

Casting him a sly and proud smile, the Boogeyman replied: «All right, I'll play “Again”».

After taking position he started again, this time creating a new melody, more complex than the previous one, in truth, at least judging from the concentrated frown painted on his face, but clearly more rhythmic, more regular in the repeated notes with which every graceful virtuosity was opened and closed, almost childlike in its slowest and heaviest parts, and, thanks to this, much calmer, although equally beautiful.

Relaxing to the rhythm of that motif, Frost closed his eyes, following without difficulty every gush and modulation and letting himself be hauled by it to the point he forgot he was in a dusty attic, and he felt to be, rather, in a magnificent theatre, or, even better, in a forest inhabited by newborn magical creatures intent to approach the world for the first time, and he cheerfully accompanied them in their first explorations, rejoicing of their discoveries and, almost inevitably, reaching out his hands together with them, slipping on the impalpable tendrils of his imagination until he touched the concrete ebony and ivory teeth of the instrument which had helped him soaring, and, so, returning back in reality.

As soon as he opened his eyes the music died down, slowly fading into silence, rather than simply
stopping, and the Boogeyman murmured: «It looks like you crave to play, huh, Jack? Come on, come closer to me. I thought we could play “Spring”: it's a piece relatively simple, but not boring at all, and I'm quite sure you'll like it. Now I'll show you the notes you'll have to play».

Retracting and lowering his hand as much as possible, so as to leave the boy a good view of the keyboard, he pointed to four buttons, two black and two white, and he played them for a dozen times, so as to show him the sequence and pace and to give him plenty of time to memorize them, then he encouraged him, whispering: «Don't be afraid, try».

Too excited to wait Jack immediately threw himself into the execution, at first beating the instrument so strongly to make it go out of tune, then, slowly, learning to use more gentleness, to caress it, rather than strike it, to court it with the right times in order to receive exactly the desired motif, in part following his partner's suggestions, in part letting himself being guided by its tapered phalanges, and when he was satisfied he asked: «Was that good?».

«It was perfect» praised him Pitch, brushing his cheek in a fleeting cuddle; «Keep playing, so I can accompany you. When the motif will change I'll give you a hand».

Flattered by the compliment the boy blushed, turning his head a little to dodge the other's gaze, and, in order to avoid further embarrassment, he began to play again, obediently repeating the four notes he had been taught; the Boogeyman, for his part, didn't force him, remaining close to him, but not trying in any way to violate his space, and, seeing him resuming, he imitated him. Unlike Frost expected he placed first the left hand on the keyboard, his long fingers so close to his they almost touched them, and he played between two white tiles, graceful jumping from one to the other and stopping every time the boy's turn came; then, after a few seconds, he raised also the right, caressing highest notes which bloomed in that hushed atmosphere as small snowdrops in the white winter coat; finally, as the title had already announced, spring came, and it was more beautiful and moving than ever. Slipping almost nonchalantly on his arm the man pushed him to the left, leading him to lower notes which gave body to the melody, filling it with new, infinite nuances, and thus evoking thin tentacles of darkness to guide him unimpeded, and it was with pure joy that the boy greeted their arrival: now accustomed to their behaviour he completely abandoned himself to them, relaxing every muscle to let them take the lead and show him the way, and then moving to follow them, dancing deftly among ivory and ebony to accompany his lover, never tired to always replicate the same sequences, never tired to always return to the starting point to begin again, too happy to be able to do anything but enjoying that magical moment of absolute perfection by participating in it with all his being.

He went on for a few minutes, barely holding back tears of emotion at the awareness he had been able to reach, in less than two days, the serenity he had dreamed about for weeks, then, overwhelmed, he hugged his partner and whispered: «Thank you, Pitch».

Surprised Pitch winced, abruptly interrupting the execution and almost risking to fall, but, as soon as he pulled himself together, he didn't wait to hold Jack in his arms and respond: «No big deal».

At that humble statement the boy said nothing, letting a silence far more full of meaning than a thousand words expressing what he wanted to say, and reinforcing it with a grip even more strong, then, changing the subject, he confessed: «I know it could sound strange said by me, but I miss the spring».

Touched the Boogeyman caressed his hair, distractedly combing them as he settled better on the bench, then he pressed the index below the other's chin to make him raise his face and he murmured: «We can go in a valley where it's still spring whenever you want, Jack, and, for the other times, don't forget that you always have a small bud of spring inside of you». 
Feeling his swollen belly being touched, Frost didn't shiver, indeed going to meet the warm palm which cuddled him and sweetly staring back at his lover, then he asked: «Can you play a little more for me?».

«Obviously» readily accepted the man.

After giving him a little kiss on the temple, he turned, freeing him from the hug to reach the keyboard, and he began to play, and Jack, closing his eyes to better enjoy the melody, snuggled against his chest, and for the first time, in that scene so perfect, he felt that his belly wasn't out of place.

Moving a bit his right leg, Pitch stretched his foot, then he returned to cuddle up around Jack to wrap him in a warm embrace. They were both in bed, lying in each other's arms after a placid and lazy day spent playing, reading, chatting and dabbling in culinary experiments, and they had been resting for several hours now, but, while the latter hadn't had difficulty in dozing off, the first couldn't close his eyes: the happiness which filled him was too much for him to let him sleep. After weeks of slow dying he had finally managed to live a full day of pure joy with his partner, a day in which Frost had laughed, talked, walked by his side, finally behaving naturally, finally letting the sweetness and the playfulness which had always distinguished him emerge and led him to do what he wanted most, opening voluntarily about small and big questions without showing any particular embarrassment, and, for the Boogeyman, it couldn't exist a better dream become true.

While he still basked in the beautiful memories of the activities done in company, his eyes closed to better remember and his lips bent in a placid smile, the boy moaned, beginning to stir and contracting his limbs; imagining he wasn't feeling good, the man proceeded to help him, at first moving away to leave him room, then bending over him to check him, but, as soon as he did this, the other turned, and, arching, he let out a sigh: a sigh warm, full, vibrant, a sigh absolutely unmistakable in its genre, and which, indeed, Pitch didn't struggle to recognize.

Struck by the awareness of what was going on, he froze on the spot, at first almost embarrassed at the idea he had surprised the partner in such an intimate moment, then, as the amazement passed, leaving room to the impishness, more and more overwhelmed, by his spicy scent, by his soft and hot skin he could already feel under his palms, by his weak moans which, however, echoed already acute in his ears, by his sensual moves he would have sworn he could already perceive against his body, by the memories of the infinite intercourses he had had with him and the fantasies of all the ones he had been longing for: oh, how much he had been dreaming about such an event, how much he had been craving to rub himself against him, how much he had wanted to leap between his open legs to wake him in the best way he knew, and then to make him his in any position he had ever experienced! He had never stopped to desire him, not even for a moment, not disturbed at all by the unusual bump which, in spite of everything, had not undermined his charm, not bothered at all by his unfriendly attitude, and, if he had managed to restrain himself for two whole months, it had been only thanks to the strong self-control which had always distinguished him, supported by the argument that courting him, as well as potentially dangerous for his delicate condition, was also useless, because Frost no longer felt any attraction for him. He had repeated it to himself continuously, while he undressed him, while he looked after him, while he watched him sleeping, always ready to nip in the bud any thought too risqué, always ready to hold back his hands in time to spare himself and the other uncomfortable situations, but now everything had changed, the wall of reticence which had separated them for so long had collapsed, and, perhaps, indeed, it was time for him to change, leaving behind the silly fears by which he had allowed himself to be hassled, and finally finding the courage to dare.
Still too shocked to be able to venture, Pitch decided to take a little break, lying on his back well away from his lover and rubbing his temples to reflect quietly: what would have been better to do at that time? Ignoring Jack and proposing again the matter in the morning, telling him calmly what he had witnessed and discussing about it with him? Impossible: although he adored peeking at him sleeping, he realized that the act itself was pretty disquieting, so he would have only risked to upset him and make him uncomfortable. Throwing himself to satisfy him without asking for permission and drawing him in an embrace before even waking him? Flattering, no doubt, but perhaps too impetuous: although the wet dream he was experiencing was a clear demonstration of the desire he felt, this didn’t necessarily imply that he wanted to fulfill it immediately, nor with him, and forcing him was definitely the worst possible way to find it out. Simply teasing him discreetly, exciting him more and more until he came round and then checking his reaction? Yes, this was an acceptable solution, excellent compromise between action and observation, perfect to participate while, anyway, leaving him his spaces, and to get noticed in a way not too irreverent, and, without any hesitation, the Boogeyman immediately proceeded to put it into practice.

Crawling slowly, he approached his lover, settling a few inches far from him in order to enjoy the warmth of his body without waking him, and he reached out for his cheek; trembling with anticipation, he touched it, almost melting down when he felt it hot under his fingertips, terribly tempted to tighten the grip and demand a kiss, but too respectful to dare, remaining motionless for a few moments to regain control of himself and not to move his hips against his in search of relief; finally, when he was collected again, he allowed himself to continue. Moving at a speed unsustainable low, he moved and uncovered him gradually, brushing his chin and thin neck, sinking into the hollows of his clavicles and therefore redrawing his sternum, warm chills going across his back while the tremors which shook the boy were becoming more and more intense, skipping his new forms in order not to bother him and aiming directly to the groin, and when he reached it he couldn't hold back a groan: even though he had received no direct stimulation, his cock was already hard and fully erect, almost throbbing, and the tense clot of the pants which held it moist of precum.

Refaining himself from cupping his hand on it, Pitch deviated outward, bypassing the protruding pelvic girdle to absently stroke the quadriceps to the knee, then he came back along the inner thigh, again using gentleness, but firmly pressing the palm on his quivering flesh, sure he had played with him more than enough, albeit never satisfied by the inebriating feeling of being able to enjoy the pleasure he felt in its purest form, and, in the end, after insisting on points he know could be exciting for him, he got the desired result.

Moaning and arching one last time, Jack opened his eyelids, blinking with a confused and sleepy expression as he relaxed against the mattress, and he looked around distractedly to familiarize with his surroundings, but, as soon as he met the Boogeyman's irises, he startled, letting out a muffled cry and attempting to withdraw; the latter, for his part, not ready at all to such a reaction, almost became frightened, and he was about to step back, too, but, at the last, he managed to pull himself together and, embracing his partner, to whisper: «Jack, calm down, don't worry! It's just me, Pitch: you have nothing to fear».

Gasping conspicuously, the boy turned his head, trying in vain to cover himself up and demurely closing his legs, and he replied: «Forgive me, I'm sorry, I'm so sorry!»

«And for what?» asked the man, dumbfounded.

After having the back on him, Frost cringed and, stammering, he confessed: «This... all of this, it's so embarrassing, I'm so sorry, I didn't want to...».

Chuckling, Pitch ruffled his hair and teased him: «Why should you apologize? This is not the first time it happens, and I never complained about these episodes». 
Clearly hurt by that statement, the boy let out a sob and murmured: «Those times were different, you were still attracted to me and you liked touching me. Now, instead, it's not like this any more, and with what just happened I only made you uncomfortable, or amused you about how ridiculous I am, I don't know, and I don't care about it».

At that statement, as concise and simplistic as deep and complex was the sense of inadequacy which lurked behind it, the Boogeyman clouded over, cursing himself for having drastically banned any act even vaguely sensual and for not having openly faced the problem with Jack, and, in order to remedy, he hastened to ask him: «Who do you think woke you up with cuddles and caresses, huh?».

«You, out of pity, and I don't want that to happen ever again! You do love me, I know, and I'm so grateful to you, but you can't stand this horrible, deformed body that now I have, and I understand you: I hate it, too. It's okay, you don't need to apologize, it's normal, so don't strive to like it. Go back to sleep, I don't need anything».

The brief outburst, which had soon faded into a feeble and almost sobbing apology, seemed to leave Jack completely emptied, to the point he couldn't even remain crouched and he ended up letting his arms and legs slip on the mattress, and this, for the man, was too much to bear: too many times in the past weeks he had seen him in that position, with no more strength, no more will, simply abandoned to the slow death he had believed to be destined, but which, in truth, he had chosen, he had spent two whole days and immense efforts to light in him that spark of joy of life which had always distinguished him, and he had no intention to let it die.

Setting aside any reticence, he advanced, adhering with his chest to the lover's back and pressing his own erection against his soft buttocks, then he whispered: «I can't control my blood flow, Jack, don't you remember?».

At that gesture so direct the boy gasped, stiffening, but not trying to dodge the contact, and, seeing him docile, Pitch took the opportunity to add: «Let's make things clear, Jack, I'm not trying to force you, nor to convince you, because I would never dare to make you do something you don't want: I'm just proving you beyond doubt that what you just said it's not true. Take all the time you need to reflect, consult me, if you think it could be useful, drive me away if my presence bother you, but, I beg you, do not make assumptions about what I think, because you're not able to: I'm still attracted to you, and I wish you refused me only if you don't want me».

Once he concluded his speech, he crawled back, determined not to push his luck and to leave to the partner his spaces, and he got surprised when he felt the boy holding him by the forearm and turning; intrigued, albeit a little hesitant, he came back close, levering on the left elbow to bend down on his face and study him, not hindered at all by the bluish twilight which reigned in the room and which, for him, was more than enough to see even the most minute details, and when he met his irises he rejoiced: in them, finally, it gleamed a light, made a little cold by the fear and the confusion the boy was still feeling, but also shining with love and trust, and there could be no better start to the path which would have helped him to appreciate himself again.

«Well? What do you want to do, Jack?» whispered the Boogeyman in a warm tone.

He didn't have to wait long for the answer: he barely had time to notice his expression turning from lost to resolute, and within few seconds he felt his arms wrapped around his chest, and his hot lips, already hatched to ask for more, pressed against his own.
¹ The chapter Jack tried to read it's the 94th, titled, as I wrote, “A squeeze of the hand”. In case you never read it, know that with “all that sweet squeezing” I mean the operation with which the spermaceti half solidified was hand-squeezed before being boiled, so as to facilitate the subsequent steps of the refining

NOTE: All the pieces I mentioned here really exist, they've been created by Ludovico Einaudi and their titles are obviously Italian. Since you would have never been able to understand neither their titles' meaning, nor the jokes made with them, I decided to translate them from Italian to English. If you're interested in listening to them here there are the correct titles: “Divenire” (Becoming), “Ancora” (Again), “Primavera” (Spring)

Chapter End Notes

Every comment, of course, is welcome and it would make me really happy. Next chapter will be published on the next Friday. I wish you a nice evening
At first, too stunned to do anything, Pitch just froze on the spot, his back stiffened and his expression almost dazed as the partner clung to his shoulders and courted him with such a passion to scratch him: he had dreamed so much about this moment, and he had then locked up this forbidden fantasy for so long in the remotest recesses of his mind in order not to fall into temptation, that it almost didn't seem real to him it was happening, and that he was allowed to participate. Could he really dare? Could he really let himself go, satisfy his own desires and the other's ones and not worry? Actually a part of his consciousness insisted on saying him no, maliciously whispering him all the possible negative consequences this act would have brought, trying in every way to drag him back into the abyss of fears in which for days and weeks he had drowned, but his heart cried the contrary, the more rational part of his brain did the same, and those sharp teeth which literally sank into his flesh in order to shake him left no doubt: he could, and how he could, and it was also better for him to hurry.

Slightly leaning back his head, just enough to escape the partner's bites and to focus his shadowy figure, the Boogeyman took a deep breath, then he leaped on him, like a panther on his prey, and he didn't care in the least to restrain himself, in order to make sure to show him all the passion he felt: fumbling, he grabbed his wrists, pinning them against the mattress and tightening the grip to sense the crazy throbs of his heart, and, almost growling, he forced him to open his mouth, absently caressing his incisors before reaching his tongue, playing with it to modulate his moans, occasionally brushing his palate when the perceived him losing himself and then weakly scratching his palms to help him recover. He didn't leave him a moment's respite, never satisfied with his sighs, never satisfied with the quivers which shook him, never satisfied with his hot flesh he was literally devouring, so desperately eager to claim him his again not to be touched in the least by the concern he could be chocking him, and in fact he didn't worry about it, going on as long as he could, stopping only when he felt his diaphragm violently contracting to get the oxygen it yearned, and only just enough to let him breathe briefly a couple of times, and immediately after resuming, his own jaw so open to ache and the other's so loose to leave him full and free access: at least for a few minutes he wanted to hold the total control, to sense again the heady feeling which leading had always given him, venting with an act sensual, but not too excessive, exaggerating where he couldn't do damage to be sure to refrain himself after, and so he did, enduring until small, coloured lights began to dance hypnotically on his retina and beyond.

After a few minutes, betrayed by his weakened arms, he awkwardly stumbled on the partner, hitting his teeth with his own and then slipping with his chin on the mattress, and he almost burned up at the prospect his lover could burst out laughing at this ridiculous tumble, but it was enough to him to rise again on his elbows to calm down: Jack was so worn out he didn't even seem to know where he was. His silvery strands disorderly stuck to his forehead, his irises opacified, his blushing cheeks, his moist lips parted and trembling, his neck twisted to the point it revealed every sinew and vein, his chest shaken by cracked rattlings, his limbs abandoned forceless, everything in him displayed how overwhelmed he had been by that attack, everything in him made him look like, rather than on the
threshold of an intercourse, he was already at the end, everything showed the deep exhaustion which had caught him, and yet everything shouted how much he needed to be courted again and again, brought to the limit umpteenth times until he fainted and then held forever in an embrace, and for Pitch it couldn’t exist a better invitation, nor a more irresistible lure.

With an impish grin painted on his face, he straightened his back, crawling slowly to enjoy the sight of his lover at his complete mercy and finally settling on his thighs, then, although tempted to steal his lips again, he decided to leave him free to catch his breath and, rather, to open the way to the goal he craved: shivering, he leaned on his jugular, absentely stroking it before sucking it to leave his mark; then, after decorating his throat with a small crown of red bites, he moved down, jumping the collarbones, which he knew were too sensitive, and going directly to redraw his sternum with his tongue; finally, diverting to the right, he caught his nipple, and, after titillating it a little, he captured it between his front teeth. He played for long with it, sadistically neglecting the other one to concentrate all the pleasure in a single point, almost amused by the boy's pleading whimpers and by his incoherent calls, blatantly ignoring his tugs to continue torturing him and steal other moans while he rubbed his groin against his, the bump, for the first time, almost useful in its encumbrance, because it forced him to arch his spine and, therefore, to compensate for the height difference, but he didn't bear long: those mild preliminary, albeit pleasant, were nothing compared to what he was going to do, nor to what his partner seemed to crave, and, if at the beginning they had been a perfect way to lead, they were now turning out to be an irritating way to take things too far.

After biting one last time his chest, he stepped back, skipping his bulging belly, which seemed immune to any exciting stimulation, and crouching directly below it, and he began to passionately kiss his cock, so impatient not to even trouble himself to free it from his underwear; eager to pleasure him as much as possible he opened his thighs, caressing the inner part from the knees to the groin below the fabric, grabbing his shaft to uncover it and pick at the tip with the thumb, and he almost swooned when he felt it completely wet; finally, definitely annoyed by that ridiculous piece of elastic fabric which now could hardly hide his lover's testicles and which risked just to block his blood flow, he growled and snatched it off, throwing it carelessly behind himself.

He enjoyed the sight of the boy totally naked for short, too hungry for his body to be able to devour it only with his eyes, too greedy to be able not to take all his turgid member in his mouth at once, and he groaned loudly when he succeeded: he had almost forgotten the sense of wholeness which having it within himself gave him, the satisfaction of being able to please him in such an intimate way, the heady feeling of having him at his mercy and, indeed, of making him exactly all he wanted, and when he managed to perceive them again he felt almost overwhelmed.

Rolling his irises back, he started moving, up and down, in a sensual dance, his head tilted in order not to beat his forehead against his swollen abdomen, not surprised at all by the delicate taste of the liquid which his cock oozed and which, he had understood it since the beginning, it wasn't even the serum of his semen, hesitating just a moment when he saw him arching as he usually did when he came, but continuing immediately as soon as he heard him demandingly moaning, and, lost as he was, it took him a lot to realize that Jack was flailing not only for the nice treatment to which he was undergoing, but also for the heavy belly crushing him; eager to ease his fatigue, he grabbed him by the hips, rotating them until the boy laid down on a side and trying to resume his work from where he had stopped, but at that point he himself felt overwhelmed, and, forced to give up, he opted for an alternative which he had thought about for long, and which yet he had never had neither the opportunity, nor the courage, to propose.

Parting his lips, he slowly freed the boy's member, sucking it occasionally, picking at it with his teeth to give him pleasure till the last, and he crawled down to catch his breath, returning immediately to kiss his testicles and the soft area under them to make up for the interruption, then, almost nonchalantly, he went further, sliding his tongue between his buttocks and licking his entrance.
At that unexpected gesture Frost jerked, at first stretching his legs to jump away, then bending them to protect himself, and he exclaimed: «Ah, no, not there!».

Not surprised at all by his reaction, Pitch let him be, giving him plenty of time to pull himself together and stop trembling, then, lying down behind him and wrapping him in a warm embrace, he asked him: «Didn't you like it, Jack? Did it bothered you?».

«No, it's just... it's embarrassing!» replied with difficulty the boy.

Leaning on his ear the Boogeyman whispered: «Is it embarrassing for you, or do you think it's embarrassing for me?».

At that simple question Jack cringed, muttering something unintelligible as he sank his face into the pillow to escape the responsibility to respond, and the man, touched, couldn't hold back a smile: no matter if it had passed a day, a month or a year after their first night of love, somehow the partner always managed to surprise him, mixing sweetness to impishness with amazing skills, showing himself almost embarrassed in front of the most risqué proposals and, few seconds later, giving himself whole hog, and always preserving, inexplicably, that oxymoronic veil of shyness as he let Pitch do everything and more to him.

Shaking his head, he laid down again, snuggling behind his lover and rubbing his forehead against his neck to tranquillize him, then, when he felt him sufficiently calm, he began to go down: inhaling deeply the scent of flowers in his hair he massaged his shoulders, eager to prepare him not only physically, but also psychologically, to the continuation of the intercourse; slipping almost nonchalantly on his spine he began to kiss it, vertebra by vertebra downward and downward, while with fingers as light as feathers he caressed his hips; finally, after nibbling a bit his buttocks to loosen things up, he parted them and slid again his tongue between them. Like the first time he felt the boy flinching and withdrawing, but it was enough to him to prick up his ears to hear him clinging to the pillow and barely holding back a whimper, then, instead of hesitating again, he grabbed him just below the belly and pulled him back, pressing his face against him to reach him more easily, excited by his acutes, licking and kissing his entrance, enticed by his vain squirming, touching every point of that ring of muscles, determined to find its sensitive areas and cause it to hatch, and then, once he managed to, penetrating inside, caressing that flesh so soft as to seem impalpable, and, yet, so tight to smother him, courting him in the most intimate way it could exist and feeling on cloud nine in doing so.

He couldn't say how long he went on, if only for a few seconds or for several minutes, too lost in his work and too happy to get lost to notice the time passing, but at some point he felt a hand pressing gently on his forehead, and, eager not to force the other in any way, he gave him one last, intimate kiss and pulled away. He took a moment to pull himself together, slightly shocked by the room air which, in comparison to the burning heat of Frost's body, felt as cold as ice on his lips, but it was enough to him to rub the back of his hand over them to drive away the annoying sensation, therefore, after climbing up to his lover and hiding his face against his neck, well away from his mouth, he thoughtfully asked: «Are you alright, Jack?».

The boy didn't answer immediately to the question, lingering to settle against the partner and to induce him to hug him, then, without turning, he said: «I want to make love with you».

Pitch sighed heavily at that statement, loosening, without even realizing it, the grip around his partner's chest, and after a few seconds he decided to sit up, but he didn't even have time to rise up on an elbow and lean forward that Frost stopped him, grabbing his stretched out wrist and casting him a glance, if not desperate, incredibly upset and pleading.

«Jack» he reassured him immediately; «Don't worry: I'm not going away. I simply want to open the
night table door and take the argan oil to use it as a lubricant, and no fuss this time!».

It was with a soft chuckle that he greeted his demure shame, arrived timely when Jack realized he had been wrong and, therefore, exposed himself too much, and with a light flick on his cheek that he consoled him, amused by his reaction and, actually, more than happy to know him so eager, because there couldn't be any better confirmation of his good state of physical and mental health, and he almost felt sad when he had to turn his face to look for the oil, but the thought of what awaited him was more than enough to hurry him, and, in fact, he wasn't slow to bend over, stretching his arm over the mattress to reach the night table compartment.

After a minute of frantic rummaging, during which he experienced every possible shade of panic as the number of wrong objects discarded grew and the remaining ones decreased, he finally managed to grab the craved bottle, lifting it proudly above the wood plane as to prove his victory, then he laboriously straightened his back and sat comfortably behind his lover. He took all the time he needed to open the vial, to dip, in sequence, the index, the middle and the ring fingers, to spread the excess of fluid on his own erection and then to place the bottle where he had taken it, well aware that even those apparently silly preambles were an important part of the preparation to the intercourse, and he used all his gentleness to penetrate the partner with two phalanges, but, when he saw him furrowing his forehead into a confused and almost annoyed expression, he couldn't hold back a small smile in front of that déjà vu, and, almost without realizing it, he let the past memories overlapping onto the present.

He perfectly remembered the first time he had used the lubricant to make love with Jack, and, considering what a singular experience it had been, probably he would have never forgotten it: the boy's reactions had been so unexpected, and they had disoriented him to a point, that at that time he had needed a few days to fully pull himself together. Already during Christmas eve, while he guarded him in his sleep, he had regretted he had taken him after such a brief preparation, Frost's grimaces of pain so vivid in his mind to hurt, so, as soon as he had left him, he had immediately started to look for an oil fit for the purpose; he had wandered for long, searching everywhere, reading up, testing different products, and, in the end, opting for a warm and velvety gel, he had come back, placing the jar in a wall cavity easily accessible. At the first available opportunity, arrived just before the New Year's eve, he had courted again his lover, prolonging the foreplay as long as possible, and when he had felt him well relaxed, he had proposed him the lubricant, but the boy hadn't been happy at all about it: perplexed by its consistency and almost upset at the idea the substance should have slid into his body, he had seemed to yield more of courtesy than of actual own will, maintaining a reflective and frowning expression both while the man penetrated him with his fingers and while he took him, and, at the end of the intercourse, he had candidly declared: “I didn't like it, I felt you too little, I don't want to use it any more”. At that statement Pitch had frozen on the spot, embarrassed by the fact his thoughtful idea had been rejected so categorically, and he hadn't had the courage neither to oppose, nor to replicate; in the following days and months, adapting himself to the other's requests, he had resolved to throw away the jar of gel, making sure to prepare the partner at the best to soothe as much as possible the pain due to the penetration and, fortunately, succeeding in it with increasing expertise, thanks to the mutual habit; at this time, however, after weeks of abstinence, with an ongoing pregnancy and thousand fears still lurking in his mind, he didn't feel like renouncing to that small facilitation, anxious to do his utmost to spare unnecessary injuries and sufferance to Frost, and he was infinitely grateful for the docility with which the boy had undergone to that further attention.

Sure to have lubricated him more than enough, the man laid back behind him, allowing him to touch his cock and tear up the cloth of darkness which, actually, he had already lowered, then, taking a deep breath, he got ready to make him his: almost trembling he grabbed his own member, guiding it to the partner's entrance and slowly pushing it inside his body, then, when he found himself with the groin adhering to his buttocks, he paused and exhaled. He didn't remember he had ever done it with him in that position, and, indeed, it wasn't difficult to guess the reason: although it could look very
comfortable, because they were both lying, it was rather unsatisfying, both for the partial penetration and for the significant efforts Pitch had to put to move, overcoming the friction against the blankets, but it was the only one come to his mind which allowed him to hug the partner and leave him completely relaxed, then, at least as a start, he decided it could be fine.

After sliding his right leg under his and bending it, so as to lift his thigh and expose him a little more, he began to thrust, all the while wrapping the other in his arms, kissing his hair and neck, whispering sweet words in his ear, focusing in order not to slip and doing everything to please him in every way, but it didn't take long to him to realize he was failing: the moans he received in response were forced, the contractions weak, the shivers absent, and, although Jack seemed actually happy with the cuddles he was receiving and tried to show it with caresses and kisses, it was obvious that he wasn't feeling sexually satisfied. In a vain attempt to save what he could, the Boogeyman moved his hand on his cock, holding it firmly to steal him a groan, but finding himself groaning frustrated in feeling it completely dry, almost desperate at the idea he hadn't been able to keep up with him, but, at the last, a sudden thought flashed into his mind, giving him back hope and impishness, and he wasted no time to put it into practice.

With a sly grin on his face he grabbed his partner from the waist and he sat up, dragging him with himself while Jack gasped in surprise, and he inwardly rejoiced: that was a solution! He just had to open his legs a little more, as he was doing, to gather the pillows and pile them under Frost's head, as his tentacles of darkness were about to do, to move a little more forward, and here, almost by magic, the boy was in the perfect position, his head and chest comfortably resting on cushions even softer than his skin, his belly protectively shielded between the Boogeyman's wide open thighs, his hips supported by them and his butt, finally, well exposed. The man allowed himself only a few seconds to gaze at him, too excited to be able to refrain himself and too eager to please the other to delay, and he immediately began to thrust, sinking without difficulty in his hot flesh, the first real groans vibrating in his ears, going deeper and deeper, the violent contractions spurring him to do more, moving faster and faster, the shocking chills jumping from his pelvis to the boy's ones and vice versa in a sensual crescendo, rolling his eyes to better enjoy the moment: that, that was what he had coveted for months, that was what his lover craved, that was the embrace both of them had dreamed about, sweet, no doubt, delicate, in some ways, but also and most importantly passionate, because they had always been so, and they had no reason to change, and because they had demonstrated their mutual love in a discreet way too long not to be able to finally let themselves go.

It all happened suddenly, a few minutes later: a spasm more intense, a deeper thrust, and orgasm was just about to come, without Pitch's even noticing. A slight disorientation caught him when he realized he hadn't planned in the least what to do, too busy to satisfy the other and himself to pay attention to that missing piece, but the awareness he didn't want to come inside him, for fear he could hurt or annoy him, was enough to shake him, so he slid his cock out of his entrance, and, after sticking it between his buttocks and thrusting a couple of times, he had a climax. The sensation he felt, of course, was very different from the usual one, the cold air on his skin instead of the other's burning flesh, the void instead of the tight grip of the lover's muscles, but the pleasure was so intense he barely noticed these differences, and, finally free, he simply enjoyed it, arching to better convey it from the lower belly to the rest of the body, and letting out a vibrating moan.

He remained motionless for several seconds, his legs sore and his chest shaken by panting breaths, almost hypnotized by the drops of his semen which, like little pearls, had cutely adorned the boy's back, shining palely under the blue light of the night and slipping slowly between a rib and the other to his spine, then, after summoning a handful of magic sand and cleaning him up, he leaned over him, hugged him and pulled him close, making him sit on his thighs.

«Are you alright, Jack?» he thoughtfully asked.
Frost, in response, smiled happily, nodding absently and stirring a little to open his legs, and Pitch, albeit hesitantly, ventured to lay his hand on his belly and whisper: «And... and the...?».

«Yes, the baby is fine, Pitch» promptly completed the boy, his voice still a little hoarse, but not trembling.

Glad to see his partner serene and perfectly at ease, the Boogeyman relaxed and began to slowly move back and forth to rock him, but after a while he heard him saying: «It's been very different than usual, but I liked it, a lot. You know, I was missing this, I was missing it so much, I had craved it so many times since I stopped having the nausea, but I never had the courage to propose it to you».

The man let out a heavy sigh at that confession, treacherously struck by guilt, and he declared: «Jack, we should definitely talk more».

Jack, on the contrary, didn't get upset at all, and, after throwing his head back to look into his partner's eyes, he replied: «I would say, rather, that we should fuck more».

Surprised by the unexpected joke, Pitch almost didn't have time to understand that he found himself doubled up with laughter, lying on his lover, in conditions not much better of his, as he struggled desperately to hold him in his arms without losing balance, and, albeit with difficulty, he exclaimed: «Jack, where did you learn that word!?».

«Oh, Pitch, I'm not a child!» playfully protested the boy; «I know a couple of things, too! And then, actually, even if I were a child I would know this thing anyway. Have you ever noticed how often, lately, this word is used also by children? And what discussions they end up carrying on? They barely understand what sex is, and yet they always talk about it as great experts, and they can't wait to start having it: it's absurd. Don't they realize they're ruining themselves? Childhood passes, once you grow up you can't go back, and the same goes for the first experiences in love, but, after all, why do I discuss about it? They never talk about love, only about sex, only about "fucks"; it seems it's okay for them having an intercourse with a person they don't love. No, I don't like this word, it's awful, I don't want to fuck, I want to make love, and only with you: sorry if I used it».

Albeit slightly disoriented by that digression, the Boogeyman never lost the thread, attentively following every reasoning and stopping to lull his lover to better focus, then he commented: «Yes, I noticed it, and I worried about it, too. As you know, of course, it doesn't concern me knowing that a child is living their youth happily or suffering, what's enough for me is tormenting them and feeding myself on their fear, but often, with such subjects, I end up failing. It doesn't matter how many tricks I devise and how much effort I put, they continue undeterred to sleep, without dreaming, but also without having nightmares, and I'm forced to walk away empty-handed, but, to be sincere, this is not surprising: neither wonder, nor terror can do anything against apathy. Now, however, don't fret: it's not the right time to worry, and it's not even the case to apologize for a funny joke. I laughed heartily, I tell you, and a single word a bit vulgar won't make me forget you like to make love».

Eager to reassure the partner not only using words, but also gestures, the man helped him to turn around and lie down, then he settled beside him and began to caress his hair and neck, and he rejoiced when he smiled, aware that his silence was worth more than any gratitude; after a while, however, he saw him fret and frown, and, worried, he asked him: «Jack, are you all right?».

Frost hesitated for a moment, trying to settle down again and puffing, but finally he looked at him with an impish expression and he replied: «Yes, but I'm still horny».

A sly smile arose spontaneously on Pitch's lips, while an organ far more intimate, a little further down, did the same, and he exclaimed: «Ah, just look at what I have to do, even working overtime!».
Then, without further ado, nor giving any warning, he slid to the footboard and leaped back between his legs.

The following week, finally, proceeded in the best way: Pitch and Jack had now found their balance, and they didn't hesitate to enjoy it fully, making up for all the time they had so foolishly wasted away. In the morning, indulging in laziness, they got used to remain huddled under the blankets, chatting about this and that they exchanged tendernesses and sipped a cup of tea; in the afternoon, as if they were two children, they pampered themselves in the funniest activities they managed to come up with, scouring the Palace from top to bottom, playing jokes on the poor Yetis busy working, teasing the elves and even playing in the snow, where Frost, albeit quite disgruntled, was forced to wear not only a pair of shoes, but also a scarf, gloves and a hat; in the evening, weary, they committed themselves to quieter pastimes, reading, playing the piano or simply resting a little in front of the fireplace, sometimes alone, sometimes in company of the other Guardians; during the night, instead, they started again to close the bedroom door and, after unclothing each other, to demonstrate the love they felt for each other. They didn't always came to have a complete intercourse, rather, in many occasions they simply stopped at the most innocent foreplays, but they never forget to caress each other, at least for a while, because they had terribly missed each other, because doing it made them feeling good, and because, indeed, although the gestures were now old, Jack's reactions were always new, and for the Boogeyman it was a real joy discovering them and learning how to cause them. As he expected, in fact, the other never managed to really pour his semen, merely getting wet, during the intercourse, with the clear liquid of delicate taste he had already allowed him to sample, but, unlike what he expected, he never managed even to have a normal orgasm: instead of getting more and more excited, having a climax and then completely lose strength, the boy began to feel a constant pleasure, leading to more or less often to some peaks particularly satisfying, but which never went below a certain threshold and lasted even for whole minutes after the end of the stimulation, in a wonderful thrill the man had learned to exploit to prolong the intercourse as long as he could, and which, although he would have never dare to tell him, made his lover more womanly in his eyes.

In this perfect scene, in which they had interspersed tasty and healthy meals and occasional visits to Toothiana's reign, where crowds of fairies were always ready to enthusiastically welcome the pregnant boy, one particular clashed: the relationship between Jack and his own body. Although he didn't feel particularly embarrassed in showing his new forms any more, he hadn't even come to definitely accept them, nor, even less, to love them, and he had often come out with disparaging comments about them, which, albeit uttered in a weak tone, yelled forcefully how uncomfortable he felt about them, and this was not a good thing: although he persisted in reiterating he didn't care about his physical appearance, it was evident that all that contempt wore out both him and those around him, and, in fact, problems were not long in coming.

It all happened during a placid evening in early December, without notice, while everybody, except for the Tooth Fairy, were gathered around the hearth. After managing, thanks to an intense and conscientious work of exhaustion, to persuade North to give him some wood building blocks, Jack had settled on the carpet and started to assemble them, piling them up with no particular order to create high and crooked towers and giggling every time these, invariably, collapsed under their own weight; Pitch, for his part, had decided not to participate, but he hadn't missed a move, following with his eyes his partner's thin hands playing with the little bricks and, periodically, holding his belly when he got up to retrieve them, and eventually, unable to help himself, he exclaimed: «You know, Jack, I don't think your belly will risk to fall down if you don't hold it continuously!».

«And what if it happened?» promptly countered the boy; «What if it fell down and rolled away, and we had to look for it throughout the Palace? Have you thought about this?».
As if to give greater emphasis to what he had depicted, he hugged tightly his own swollen belly and threw himself on the ground, rolling on his back and flailing a little, and the Boogeyman couldn't help but laughing in front of such a ridiculous scene, but Santa intervened, observing: «You know, Pitch, I think he does so because the blouse is too large: don't you see how it swells?».

Hit where it hurts, the man narrowed his eyes and sharply replied: «It swells because under it there's the bump, obviously. It's grown a lot, and I enlarged it in the right measure».

«Blather, it's large!» stated Bunnymund, pointing vaguely at the blouse with the tip of the brush he was using.

«Is there someone else who wants to intervene with unsolicited comments? Sandman, maybe?» snapped Pitch.

Hearing he had been called upon with no reason, Sandy glared at him, crossing his arms to show how offended he felt, but refraining himself from modelling his magic sand to comment, and the master of the house took the opportunity to return to the charge and reiterate: «Pitch, you shouldn't get offended, everyone makes mistakes! Now that the belly is bigger you have to lift the narrow band, not to enlarge it, or you'll end up adding fabric uselessly. Don't you see how saggy the blouse is? It almost seems that Jack has boobs!».

At that statement Jack, who had witnessed the altercation with a confused expression on his face, suddenly turned pale and began to stew: tugging furiously the shirt's folds he took it off, seriously risking to tear it up and throwing it with no grace to a side; then, panting, he began to touch his chest, from the collarbones to the tip of the sternum and back; finally, after casting the presents a look full of despair, he stood up and ran away, hiding his belly with his hands.

«Jack!» called the man, caught by surprise by the sudden flight.

Hearing no response, he resolved himself to follow him, stumbling for the first steps, how fast has been the rush with which he had set off in his pursuit, and then continuing without further hitches around the Globe and along the usual hallway, and when he finally arrived in their room he found him, curled up in the armchair and intent to sob while Tothiana tried in vain to talk to him.

Nodding to the fairy to drive her away, Pitch approached his lover, and, without daring to touch him, he asked: «What's wrong, Jack? Why did you run away?».

The boy, however, ignored him and continued to quietly cry.

Letting out a sigh, the Boogeyman sat on the arm in front of him, then, further softening his voice, he demanded: «Could you, at least, tell me why are you crying?».

«I'm crying because I became a whiner, that's why!» snapped, without warning, Frost, slamming his fist on the seat and raisin with a jerk, his face flushed and streaked with tears; «Hadn't you noticed it? Now I cry for any trifle, it doesn't matter if the world burnt up or if I dropped the fork, it's enough something happens and here come the waterworks!».

Not upset at all by his aggressive attitude, the man let him vent, then he patted his shoulder and commented: «Yes, Jack, I had noticed it, and I had also already explained you the reason: it's all and simply due to the pregnancy. You shouldn't worry too much about these episodes, they're normal and inevitable, and they don't annoy anyone».

«According to your speeches I shouldn't worry about anything, but in reality this pregnancy is changing me completely: in a few months I'll no longer be myself» sadly countered the boy,
snuggling back against the backrest.

Seeing the kind tactics weren't working, Pitch decided to use tougher ones, and, after gesturing Toothiana to discover the bed, he picked up his lover in his arms and took him with himself.

«Pitch, what are you doing!? Not in front of Tooth!» exclaimed Jack, alarmed, struggling in vain to break free.

«I'll show you that it's all right» promptly replied the Boogeyman.

Holding him firmly, he placed him on the mattress, then laying behind him, against the headboard, and pulling him close, so he pressed his palms on his chest and said: «You're flat, Jack, flat as a board, as you've always been. Don't you feel it?».

The boy, who had panicked beyond measure when he had felt himself first be lifted up, then discovered, calmed down a little at his words, but he didn't take long to answer: «Yes, I felt it, but what's the difference? My chest could be flat now, but sooner or later it'll start to swell».

«And for what absurd reason?» asked the man.

«Because it's supposed to do so!» replied Frost, gesticulating; «The child will need to eat once they'll be born, at least in the early times, and how could they manage to if I won't be ready to breastfeed them?».

Finally understanding the reason for the partner's concern, Pitch relaxed, and explained: «Exactly how all the children who, for whatever reason, aren't breastfed by their mother do: drinking formula milk. Not all women are able to produce enough milk for their babies, did you know?».

«But the formula milk is filth» muttered the boy, disgruntled.

«No, not at all» immediately contradicted him the Boogeyman; «If you had said that fifty years ago I would have probably agreed with you, but now it's not so: research has made impressive progress in the meanwhile, and most of the artificial milks are good enough to be used as a substitute for the breast one when necessary, so much that plenty of children have grown up healthy and strong by drinking only that. The only thing that probably they will never manage to replicate is the ability of the breast milk to transmit antibodies and other cells which can protect against infection, but in your case the problem does not arise: both you and the child are immortal beings, therefore already naturally immune to any disease».

Letting out a heavy sigh, Jack closed his eyes, collapsing against his lover's chest and stretching his legs, and he commented: «And now I'm sleepy again. However, boobs or not, I'm appalling».

«Boobs or not, you're beautiful, Jack, and I won't accept objections. I'll never get tired of repeating it, but I really wish you would understand it, because with all this despise you're just destroying yourself. Now, however, if you're tired, it would be better for you to sleep: you had a busy day, and discussing about this subject would only end up wearing you. We'll resume later, okay? Close your eyes, and rest».

Glad to see the boy nodding and meekly obeying the man smiled, placing a little kiss on his temple and starting to caress his head to send him to sleep, and so it was that, focused on his work, he didn't notice Toothiana, who, albeit discreetly and silently, had grabbed a block and a pencil and, peeking at them furtively, had begun to draw.
Weakly stirring, Jack opened his eyes, easily shaking off the sleepiness which had caught him in the evening and wandering the irises to find his lover, then, finding him lying behind himself, in the same position in which he had left him, he said: «Pitch, I'm hungry».

Caught by surprise while dozing, Pitch took a moment to pull himself together, but, as soon as he succeeded, he whispered: «Good evening, Jack. Did you sleep well? You opened your eyes just in time for dinner. Should I prepare you a soup?».

Ignoring the first question the boy answered: «No, I don't feel like eating a soup: I want pizza».

He had spoken in a rush, expressing without hesitation a desire he didn't know he had, and which, indeed, he should have never had, because he had never tasted that food in his life, but at that time he didn't waste time wondering about silly questions: whatever was the reason he wanted pizza, with all his being, and, in one way or another, he would have obtained it.

«Pizza?» exclaimed the Boogeyman, dumbfounded; «Really? I don't think you can: I never tried to make it, and I never saw a Yeti cooking it».

«Are you kidding me!?» snapped Frost; «They knead bread all the day, why can't they make me pizza?».

Quite upset the man hesitated for a few seconds, then he replied: «Look, Jack, I'm not an expert, but I'm quite sure that the bread mixture and the pizza one are different from each other. If you really want it I can go and ask if anyone can cook it, but I can assure you nothing, and, if the answer should be yes, you'll need to wait at least a couple of hours».

«Pitch, maybe you didn't understand» insisted the boy in a firm tone; «I do need a pizza, and I need it now».

Chapter End Notes

Every comment is welcome and would make me happy. Next chapter will be published on Friday 27th, because in this week I'll be busy. I wish you sweet dreams
WE DON'T HAVE TO BE ALONE – CHAPTER 22

«Pitch, maybe you didn’t understand: I do need a pizza, and I need it now». 

At that sentence Pitch felt a shiver of fear going down his own spine, in Jack’s eyes an anger he had rarely spotted, and a determination which brooked no refusals, nor compromises, but it took to him only a few seconds and a shrug to pull himself together and reply: «No, you only and solely need to eat, and you’ll be content of whatever I’ll find in the kitchen!». 

«But why do you have to be like that!?» countered the boy, almost scandalized. 

«But why on earth you have to be like that, rather! What's the matter? I'm fine with you being too hungry to wait, and in fact I'll take care to make you eat as soon as possible, but pizza? It's just a whim, you don't need it, and you can't have it!» retorted the Boogeyman. 

«You're mean, it costs nothing to you giving me a pizza instead of a soup!» accused him Frost, jostling him. 

«I've already explained to you that you can't have it right away, and that, most likely, it won't be possible to have it even by waiting for hours» explained the man, holding himself back to tone down the discussion and induce the other to calm down. 

«It's not true, you cannot know, you haven't even asked for it! The truth is that you don't want me to eat something I need, because you do not care at all about my happiness and health!» reiterated the boy, crossing his arms. 

«Guys, calm down, we can hear you arguing from the Globe hall despite the bustle of the toys running! What happens? I left you less than two minutes ago, and you were sleeping so peacefully, why did you start quarrelling?» demanded a female voice. 

«Pitch is mean to me!» burst out Jack. 

«Jack got crazy!» simultaneously stated Pitch. 

Slightly overwhelmed by the two violent responses, Toothiana stepped back a little, holding onto the
door frame in order not to fall, then, after shaking her feathers, he rushed into the room and asked again: «So, could you, please, seriously tell me what's going on? Jack, would you like to start first?».

Letting out an annoyed snort, the Boogeyman pulled away, settling on the bed edge to leave room to the fairy, who promptly sat on the other side, and refraining himself from expressing complaints about the blatant favouritism, and, getting the jitters, he heard the boy saying: «Pitch is mean to me! I woke up a little while ago, and I itched to eat a pizza, so I asked for it, but he said that I cannot have it and that I have to be content with what he'll find in the kitchen! He said the Yetis maybe don't know how to prepare it, and that, anyway, I would have to wait for long, but I don't believe him, he didn't even try to go in the kitchen, he decided from the beginning he didn't want to give it to me! He doesn't understand me, I do need it, my stomach is already aching and my head is spinning, I must have it!».

«Oh, Jack, you sweet pea!» suddenly exclaimed the woman.

Barely leaving him the time to conclude his botched explanation, she threw her arms around his neck, smacking a kiss on his forehead and then starting to rock him and to stroke his hair and back, then she raised her head toward the man and commanded: «Pitch, go and get him a pizza».

Pitch, who, ever since his lover had made him the strange request, had been dumbfounded, and had got greatly disappointed in seeing him becoming aggressive about it, widened his eyes at that order and, shocked, he yelled: «Are you crazy, by any chance!? I have no intention to undergo his whims!».

«Oh, Pitch, don't be silly» intervened Toothiana, keeping pampering the boy; «These are not whims, they are cravings, and they must be satisfied».

«They aren't neither whims, nor craving, I just need a pizza!» insisted Frost.

«You heard what your wifie said? You'd better obey» inserted a fourth voice.

Taken aback, the Boogeyman turned, making his eyes wander around the room until he spotted Bunnymund's muzzle peeping from the footboard, his emerald irises shining with a spark of insolence so irritating to get on your nerves only with their presence, and, baring his teeth, he hissed: «I don't know what you're doing here, nor why you felt empowered to intervene in the discussion, but be sure that at the next idiotic comment I won't hesitate a moment to serve Jack rabbit stew!».

«Pitch» murmured the fairy, nipping in the bud the Pooka's protests; «It's totally useless for you to take it out on Bunnymund: Jack needs a pizza, and, whether you like it or not, you have to go and get him one».

She uttered every word in a phlegmatic tone, the feathers on her chest slightly raised to give the boy a soft cushion against which he had curled up and her hands relaxed as she continued to fondle him, and when she ended she lifted her face in a smug and almost mocking expression, as if she was already certain of her victory and proud about it, and the man, narrowing his eyes, thought: “We'll see who'll have their way, little fairy”.

Flattening as much as possible against the wall, Pitch crept to the pizzeria back door, then, after making sure that no child was nearby, he reached the window to peer inside. The fact dynamics weren't clear to him yet, nor how Toothiana had managed to hold her own, nor how Bunnymund had been able to push him out of the room and make him obey, nor how the gold coin he was still clutching had got into his fist, but he was certain about one thing: in one way or another he had been
defeated, and, as was his habit, once he had realized he had no escape route, he had turned that failure into a personal victory, claiming he decided to yield only for pity and throwing himself into a mission far more challenging than necessary. Sure that the Yetis hadn't the necessary skills to satisfy him, he had categorically refused to consult them, readily evoking Voluptas to go in search of a restaurant fit for his purpose, but he hadn't contented himself with the first he had found, nor, least of all, seeking it as close as possible to North's Palace: as the perfectionist he was, he had headed without hesitation to Italy, in the heart of Naples, where there was a small pizzeria as much vaunted as anonymous. He had discovered it years before, following the footsteps of the owner's many children, and, at that time, he had obviously noticed the numerous clienteles, and the compliments about the products yelled both by the cooks and by the patrons, and never as this moment he felt grateful to his good memory: judging by the aggressiveness with which Jack had made his request, it was probable the boy would have not be content with any pizza, therefore there could be no better solution than bringing him the best in the world.

Looking hard, the Boogeyman swept the room with his irises, carefully studying the tubs where the dough was left to rest, the mozzarella bins and the tall stacks of tomato sauce cans, and, in the end, right next to the two wood ovens, he found what he was searching: a row of open boxes, ready to welcome the steaming pizzas and be shipped to every corner of the city.

«Gnnà!» suddenly yelled the owner, busy spinning a disc of dough over his head; «È priparat a pizz p Carmel? Guard che o compleann suoj, adda vní bon!».

«È bon, è bon!» answered him the boy tinkering with the peel; «È a marnar, chell'original, l'agg priparat ij, comm nun po esser bon? Aiccan, appen sfurnat, puortancell!».

«Faccj ambress, vir tu o magazzin mentr sto 'ngopp!» ordered him the first. ¹

Sure he had hit a bull's eye, Pitch didn't lose sight of the pizza in question, following it with his eyes as it was pulled out the oven and memorizing the position of the box in which it was placed, and, once this was closed, he acted: fast as a lynx, he dematerialized himself into a stream of magic sand and crept into the ventilation channel, travelled in few seconds along its twists and broke through the suction grate, then, after ensuring to crash a shelf full of various ingredients, he leaped toward the counter, grabbed his trophy and, leaving the gold coin as a reward, walked away undisturbed through the back door.

«There's a delivery for Jack Frost!» announced in a booming voice Pitch, theatrically thrusting open their room door.

As he expected, the partner greeted him enthusiastically, clapping and letting out some excited, little cries, and it was with genuine relief that the man saw him kneeling down and pulling towards himself a tray already set: to accomplish that mission he had made him wait for almost half an hour now, and on the back way the pizza, despite the precautions he had taken, had started to cool down, so it was better for the boy to eat it immediately.

Keeping his head raised, he strode forward, shifting the plate and the glass with a simple gesture to make way to the box, then, after placing it on the tray, he opened it and said: «Here's your pizza, freshly baked by the best Italian pizza maker just for you».

Hearing that description, Frost got even more excited, rubbing his stomach to prepare it to the lavish meal and almost hopping on the spot so impatient he was, but, as soon as the dish so desired was uncovered, he froze: dumbfounded as never before, he stood motionless for some time, scanning the garnished focaccia with an almost shocked face, and turning his expression from puzzled to annoyed
when he bent down to smell it, and finally he asked: «Pitch, what did you bring to me?».

«The best pizza in the world, of course» promptly replied the Boogeyman.

The boy looked at the dish for a few seconds, then crossing his arms and declared: «I won't eat it, I don't like it».

Wincing for that refusal, the man instinctively exclaimed: «But why shouldn't you like it!? You haven't even tasted it!».

«I don't need to, it reeks!» replied Jack, pushing away the offending food.

«That's not reek, it's the smell of the herbs and spices with which the pizza was garnished» explained the man.

«That's reek, and I don't eat stuff which reek» insisted the boy, turning his head away.

«Jack, be reasonable» tried to convince him Pitch; «You haven't even tasted it, you don't know what its flavour is, so you don't know if you like it or not: at least give it a chance».

«No!» dug his heel Frost.

«You're nothing but a capricious and spoiled child!» insulted him the Boogeyman, now beside himself.

«Pitch, calm down, calm down» intervened Toothiana, who, until that moment, had kept aside in the armchair; «Don't get angry, it's useless. Let's, rather, analyse the situation from an objective point of view: there's some garlic on this pizza, am I wrong?».

«Judging by the smell I would say so» sharply answered the man.

Flying up beside him the fairy put a hand on his shoulder and whispered: «Well, you see, Pitch, garlic is a very strong condiment, loved by few people, and moreover there's a lot of it in here: I'm not surprised that Jack feel repugnance when he smells it. Besides, have you looked at the pizza? It's so red, all covered with tomato sauce without even a piece of cheese, it's not particularly inviting, is it?»

«But this is the authentic and original pizza, handmade in Italy from the best pizza maker, it must taste good!» protested Pitch.

«And I am absolutely certain that it's a delicacy» humoured him the woman; «But for an adult, not for a child, and you know how childish Jack is about food. For him it would be better a different pizza, with a lot of cheese, condiments more sweet and delicate, ...».

«Okay, okay, I got it, let's go into the kitchen to modify it» conceded the Boogeyman, anxious to get out of this unpleasant situation as soon as possible.

«Pitch» disconsolately said Toothiana; «Removing the garlic and the tomato sauce and covering the pizza with cheese won't be enough to remove the smell, nor to make the dish more palatable: you must go and get another one».

Growling, Pitch walked into the narrow alley he had visited less than an hour before, and, for the second time during that night, he headed toward the back door of the pizzeria that had found. He
didn't bother himself to hide his arrival in any way, indeed unleashing his wildest shadows to clear the road from the pathetic children who had lingered there to play with some firecrackers, and letting them interfere with the electricity grid to the point all the lights in the neighbourhood started to throb, and when he reached his destination he struggled to refrain himself from crashing the whole building: rarely, in his long existence, he had felt so frustrated and irritated. He, the King of Nightmares, one of the oldest and most fearsome creatures on Earth, forced to act as a delivery boy for a capricious spirit! It was nothing short of unacceptable! How could all of this happen? Since when he had sunk so low?

After venting his anger with a scream to the sky and a well-aimed punch to a nightmare which had made the mistake of getting too close to him at the wrong time, the Boogeyman shrugged, exercising all his self-control to dominate himself and focus, and when, in the end, he succeeded, he heard two voices discussing inside the kitchen.

«Disgraziat, ch fin a fatt a pizz p Carmel?!» yelled the elder.

«Nun o saccj, l'er mis proprj ca, pó o scaffal è carut e quand so turnat er scumpars! E vist sta munet? È a toj?» replied the younger. ²

Ignoring their dull discussion, he plumbed with his eyes the whole room, whose two main counters had now been invaded by open boxes full of pizzas of all kinds and sizes, and, after a minute of research, he spotted a suitable one: not too big, but not too small, it was covered by a thick layer of soft mozzarella, topped with ham and artichokes and still steamy, and it seemed made especially for Jack.

Oblivious to any forethought, the Boogeyman opened the door, breaking into the room like a fury and absorbing with a triumphant smile the pure terror emanated by those present, who, albeit unable to see him, had noticed his presence, and he took all the necessary time and even more to place the old box on a shelf and grab the new one, extremely amused by the two humans' ruffled squirming and intrigued by the red horns they had detached from the wall and lifted up to him; he stood there, the pizza in his hand to let them understand where he was, for a few seconds, then, when the youngest gathered enough courage and threw him the gold coin, piercing through him, he decided to turn and leave, burning all the kitchen lamps to enjoy till the last his vindictive foray.

Swooping in on their room in North's Palace without announcing himself, Pitch covered in a few seconds the distance which separated him from the bed, then, after rudely slamming the box on the tray, he blurted out: «Here's your pizza, princeling, I hope it'll be your liking this time!».

Jack, who, in the meantime had completely wrapped himself in the soft cashmere blanket the Boogeyman had worn during his convalescence, peeked from under its edge, moving his watchful eyes from the box to the partner and back for several times, then he crept up to it and, once he had opened it, he observed: «It's very different from the first one».

«Obviously, the first one had disgusted you, to say the least, it wouldn't have made sense bringing you a similar one, would it?» barked the man.

Slightly wincing at the rude answer, the boy moved, placing himself at the edge of the tray to stay as far from his lover as possible, and Pitch, partly exasperated, partly still eager to put him at ease, gave his back to him, studying the fireplace flames to pretend to be busy; taut as a violin string, he stood motionless, his head tilted to better catch every sound in the room and, therefore, guess the other's movement, and, after a few seconds of confused scraping and mumbling, he heard him murmuring: «Pitch?».
«What's wrong?» he sharply replied.

«It tastes so good» whispered Frost in a faint voice.

Taken aback by that statement, the Boogeyman turned, and he found himself in front of a scene as unexpected as sweet: the boy, still partially wrapped in the camel coloured blanket, was sitting cross-legged on the mattress, his left hand protectively placed on the swollen belly, his right one raised to hold a rough slice of pizza already bitten, and his irises were so full of ecstasy and gratitude to seem shining in their own light.

Touched both by his reaction and by his pose, the man melted a little, relaxing his shoulders and reciprocating that broad smile which, indeed, was a reward more than sufficient to the work he had to do in the previous hour, and, noticing that Jack's eyes had become wet, he commented: «Now don't tell me you'll start to cry, huh, Jack?».

As beckoned by that question, a tear escaped from the boy's eyelids, slipping silently down his cheek and stopping just before the lower jaw, but he didn't change expression, nor attitude, and Pitch, guessing this was just another demonstration of the immense joy the other felt, shook his head and walked over to sweep it up; Frost, for his part, did his best to welcome him, pulling away the blanket to let him sit beside himself and allowing him to rub his thumb against his cheek until the skin was dry, never stop looking at him, and, when the man finished, he offered him his right hand and asked: «Would you like a taste?».

The Boogeyman pondered for a second, studying the bite with a thoughtful expression, then he answered: «No, thanks, I prefer a taste of you».

Without warning, he bent over him and stole him a little kiss, chuckling at the floury texture of his lips and, soon after, at the amazed grimace the partner did for the unexpected attack, and he exclaimed: «Mh, this Jack Frost tastes good!».

At that joke the boy blushed, letting out a chuckle while he placed the slice of pizza on the box and took refuge against his chest, and, after a few seconds of endearments, he whispered: «Pitch, I'm so sorry I've treated you bad before. I didn't mean to, really, I was so sad as I was doing it, but I couldn't stop, because I was already feeling sick about not being able to eat a pizza, and I was terrified I would have never been able to have it».

Not surprised at all by that repentant attitude, the man took his beloved in his arms, closing his cupped hands on his belly and caressing it a little through the blouse fabric, then he replied: «Apology accepted, Jack, but I want you to make me a promise: no more scenes. It's no big deal for me to get you a food rather than another, and starting cooking at crazy hours doesn't bother me at all, but only if you behave: cravings are out of your control, but education is not, and there are ways and ways of asking».

«It won't happen any more, from now on I'll ask everything always kindly» vowed Jack.

Glad to hear him docile again, Pitch rewarded him with a second kiss, then he urged him: «Come on, Jack, eat, or the pizza will cool down. I'll cut you new slices, so you won't have to work».

Moving behind his partner, in order to continue to hug him without annoying him, he went to work, grabbing a knife and a fork and beginning to calmly cut the remained pizza, and when he reached its half he heard him whispering: «Pitch?».

«Yes, Jack?» he asked, pressing his wrist on Jack's chin to make him turn.
«I don’t like these green pieces» confessed the boy.

Bending his lips into a grin, the Boogeyman cast him a sweet look, then, with a gentle tone, but which brooked no argument, he murmured: «Keep eating».

And without waiting for an answer he resumed to cut.

It had now been a week since the pizza episode, and the situation was finally back to normal. The days had followed one another lazily, the meals had grown more lavish, the activities quieter, the trips out of the Palace rarer, in perfect concordance with the gradual increase of fatigue which Jack, as the pregnancy progressed, was experiencing, but not a moment had been spent in boredom and apathy, and the boy couldn't be happier about this: after all, what he cared about was not embarking on daring adventures, but serenely living his life beside Pitch, and never before their relationship had been more balanced and intimate. They never separated, neither during the day, nor during the night, not because being together was a need or an obligation, but because they felt such a pleasure in doing so that the thought of parting company didn't even touch their mind, they talked naturally for hours about any subject, from the last book read to those strange, inexplicable snowstorms which struck the northern hemisphere with increasing frequency, they cooked together, they had fun, they exchanged kisses and sensual attentions and, when they felt the desire to, they sat side by side, devoting themselves to different pastimes, because it was important that each of them carved out a small space for himself and his passions, but there was no reason not to share them, and every moment was good to do it and drive away the horrific memories of the previous month. Unfortunately for him, in fact, these often came back to haunt him, both when he was in a good mood and when a sluggish and apparently unjustified melancholy took him, blinding him with the bloody images of the mad act he had done and making him drown in guilt, and often neither a laugh, nor a reassurance from the Boogeyman, were enough to shoo them, therefore Frost had decided to do everything possible to prevent them coming to the surface: he was already suffering enough for the pitiful condition of his body, which he couldn't fix in any way, thus, about the rest, he was not willing to cry more than necessary.

«Jack? Are you all right?» suddenly called him Pitch.

Gasping in surprise, the boy shook his head, suddenly rousing from the long reflection he had let himself go into, and he promptly answered: «Yes, yes, I'm fine, I was just thinking about how to continue the construction. Do you like how it's turning out?».

After carefully closing the book he was studying, the Boogeyman joined him, bent over the tower which Jack had started to build about ten minutes before and observed: «You've become good at it, Jack, you even built the inner stairs! Since when do you have those red pieces?».

«Since when North left them unattended on the Guardians' table» candidly explained the boy.

They laughed in unison, one holding his belly and hoping the joke hadn't bothered North, the other pressing a hand on his chest and probably praying the opposite, and when they managed to pull themselves together they exchanged a malicious glance, but just when the man was about to speak someone knocked at the door.

«Come in» conceded Pitch.

After gently opening the wood, Toothiana peeped out from behind it and exclaimed: «Oh, wonderful, you're both here, and you're still awake! Jack, have you got a minute? I brought you something, and I'd like to show it to you». 
«Of course!» readily agreed Frost.

Accepting more than willingly the arm the partner offered him, he stood up, took a few seconds to settle down and then walked behind the fairy, ogling the bulky object she was carrying; once she reached the bed, curious as ever, he went beside her, helping her to place it on the mattress and wondering what it might be, considering that its flat and wide form reminded him little or nothing; finally, receiving the permission, he grabbed a corner of the sheet which covered it, and, as soon as his eyes fell on what laid beneath, he froze on the spot.

The mysterious artefact was nothing but a canvas, painted with such skill to seem a window overlooking a parallel world, and represented Pitch and Jack lying on a bed, the first comfortably resting on a pile of plump pillows, the second limply leaning on the first, both naked, both awake, and both so enraptured to appear like two creatures suspended in time. The man, whose slender, but statuesque, body had been reproduced with absolute precision, was sprawled almost from side to side in the scene, his calves overlaid on his lover's ones, his thighs slightly parted to leave him home, his torax semi erect to support him, and his head imperceptibly bowed toward his; the boy, on the contrary, softened by the pregnancy gentle forms, was in a more crouching pose, his legs lightly bent, his torso twisted to the point the back almost laid against the other's chest, his shoulders closed, but his neck stretched toward the partner, in a moving tension the viewer could feel distinctly, and in an ecstasy so filled with love to move them to tears. There was nothing, in that context, which wasn't perfect, not a muscle, not a hair, not a fold, every particular so well-finished to look real, every detail so carefully arranged to seem part of a larger project, and, indeed, it didn't take long to Frost to realize that it was so: the light, weak at the edges, sloping in infinite shades of silver on the blankets and the walls and bright as snow on the pregnant boy's skin, the perspective lines, the drawing realism increasing, the two lovers' arms intertwined to form a circle, the Boogeyman's gaze, even the texture fineness and the thickness of the paint used, everything brought to the centre, everything was pointing inevitably to the belly, and in such a way to make it not only an element nice to see, but the sole, true protagonist of that composition, without which this would have no longer had any sense or meaning.

Jack stood motionless for long, his back stiff, his eyes wide, unable both to speak and to move, feeling himself literally sucked into the canvas came from nothing to show him what he had never been able to see, and after a few minutes Toothiana said: «Jack, if the canvas upset you, you can tell me, and I'll throw it in the fire».

«No!» cried the boy.

In an instinctive attempt to save the painting he jumped on the mattress, pulling it close and covering what he could with the drape where this had previously been wrapped; then, however, realizing he had overreacted, to say the least, he composed himself and simply whispered: «No, I don't want it to be destroyed».

Laying a hand on his shoulder the woman whispered: «From now on this canvas is yours, Jack, and you have the right to do whatever you want with it. Take all the time you need to decide, and, when you'll manage to, don't trouble yourself to tell me. Now I'll go, so you could spend the rest of the evening with Pitch and then go to sleep. I wish you good night, Jack».

Without waiting for an answer, she moved away a few strands from his front and there placed a gentle kiss, then, after taking leaving of Pitch, she flew to the door and closed it quietly behind herself.

Hearing the soft hum of her wings fading and, finally, disappearing, Frost calmed down, letting out a sigh as the tension gathered in his muscles slowly melted, and in a faint voice he declared: «I want to
hang it».

The Boogeyman, who, until that moment, had respectfully kept aside, leaving him all the time and the room he needed to pull himself together and ponder and twisting a thin tentacle of black sand around his calf to let him know he was close, came beside him and replied: «Sure, Jack, we'll do it right away. Where would you prefer to place it? There are many suitable corners in this room».

«No, I don't want to hang it in this room: I want to hang it in our real room» countered the boy.

For a moment he feared the other would have protested, complaining of the absurd request and categorically refusing to embark on the long journey to his lair, moreover at this late hour, and he almost fell into panic at the thought he might have had to leave the painting so close to the other Guardians, but the man, who had always had the gift of understanding him and who, lately, had got on the same wavelength with him even more, wasn't slow to concede: «Then let's hang it in our real room. Follow me, the passage is back there».

Dumbfounded by that statement, Jack stood up, helping the partner to grab the canvas and meekly following him up to the cabinet, and he almost couldn't believe his eyes when he saw him shifting it, revealing the opening of a tunnel, but he didn't hesitate to enter it, placing the palm on Pitch's back in order to not get lost and plunging into a complete darkness; confident as ever he heeled his lover without questioning, turning whenever he turned, slowing down when he slowed down and patiently waiting when he stopped, and he got distracted only for a few instants when he glimpsed, on his right, the huge central hall and the iron Globe adorned with thousands of pulsating lights; finally, after walking down the short and familiar stone corridor, he accessed the room where he had lived for months, and which, for months now, he haven't visited.

He felt a little pang when he laid his irises on its bare and dismal furniture, the memories of afternoons of rest and nights of passion that slowly re-emerged in him, but he wasn't caught by nostalgia, because what he had always loved about that place was not the room itself, but the fact that his partner slept in it, and because nothing forbade him to perpetuate them in the future, and it was with perfect lucidity that he raised his arm in front of himself and said: «There, where the wall curves inward: I want to hang it on that point».

After nodding, the man walked toward the spot which had been indicated to him and summoned a generous handful of magic sand, using it first to pluck out of the ceiling the two chains hanging in front of there, then to clean up the wall from the dust, so, using a nail already present, he hung the painting. He studied it for long, tilting his head first on the left, then on the right, and adding every time the curtains of a large drapery which came to protect it from all sides and which seemed in every way the continuation of what was represented therein, and when he was satisfied he stepped back and demanded: «Is that okay, Jack?».

The boy didn't answer, too lost in the representation and too enraptured by the main subject of the canvas to concentrate on something so silly, and, almost without realizing it, he asked: «Pitch, am... am I really so beautiful?».

Casting him a moved glance, Pitch replied: «The picture is a beauty, but it doesn't do justice to you: you're a thousand times more ravishing».

«You're always so over the top!» snapped Frost, embarrassed and confused.

The man, in response, knelt in front of him, staring at him quietly while he lifted his blouse and hugged him, and starting to kiss his belly with such a sweetness to make him shiver, and the boy, in the end, after months of suffering, tears and despair, after having touched the bottom of hell and laboriously climbed all its circles, emerged to the pure light and air, really taking a breath for the first
time, and succeeding, with a joy so immeasurable it could be expressed only with silence, to look at himself and thinking: “Yes, this is me, and I'm perfect as I am”.

¹ «Gennaro!» suddenly yelled the owner, busy spinning a disk of dough over his head; «Have you prepared the pizza for Carmela? Don't forget it's her birthday, it must turn out well!».

«It did, it did!» answered him the boy tinkering with the peel; «It's the marinara, the original one, and I prepared it with my own hands, how couldn't it turn out well? Here it is, freshly baked, go and bring it to her!».

«I'll be fast, look after the store while I'm upstairs!» ordered him the first.

“Gennaro” and “Carmela” are two proper name, widely common in the southern part of Italy. Please notice that “pizza” and “original” are written and sound in the same way both in English and in Naples dialect, so, even if he didn't manage to understand the whole conversation, Pitch could grasp them and, therefore, find what he was looking for.

² «You wretched, what happened to Carmela's pizza?!» yelled the elder.

«I don't know, I had put it right here, then the shelf fell and when I came back it was gone! Have you seen this coin? Is it yours?» replied the younger.

New fanart by Fridarush!

[Link to new fanart]

Chapter End Notes

As always, every comment is welcome and would only make me happy.
I received many other fanarts by various, gentle fans: you can find them at the end of chapter 11, 13, 17, 26 e 27 of “What goes together better than cold and dark?”, and of chapter 12, 16 and 19 of “We don't have to be alone”, or, otherwise, on my tumblr (check the section "My blackice fanfiction").

Next chapter will be published on the next Friday. I wish you a nice evening
Moving the muzzle close to the small wooden wagon up to almost touch the surface with his impalpable whiskers, Bunnymund studied it, following every veining and adornment with a concentrated and thoughtful gaze; eventually, holding his breath, he placed the brush tip on it and began to draw a thin meander.

It had been several weeks since he had volunteered himself as a temporary assistant to North, lending himself to any little and big task in which he might need help in order, at least, to ease him the fatigue, and never in his life the Pooka had been so grateful to his own foresight for taking this decision: nothing on Earth was able to drive away the bad thoughts like hard work, and, in a period like that, where bad thoughts were the order of the day, hard work seemed to have become the only lifeline. Brushes and colours had bloomed as if by magic in Santa Claus' personal laboratory, growing beyond measure up to cover the massive table and part of the floor, toys of all kinds had appeared on the shelves, stolen here and there to benefit from an artistic touch, and playthings now ready had been carelessly abandoned in any available corner, piling up while waiting to be picked up and wrapped, but, as the stacks of objects increased, the restlessness which harboured in the Easter Bunny's heart did the same: it didn't matter what North repeated him, it didn't matter what Toothiana tried to explain to him, it didn't matter what Sandman persisted to send him in dreams just to be heard, the situation in which Jack was was nothing short of desperate, and for Bunnymund it was more and more clear that Pitch was the only and sadistic responsible. He had never swallowed the story about the Man In The Moon's intervention, too respectful of the Guardian of the Guardians to even think he would have stooped so low as to commit such an act, and too confident in his goodness to imagine his betrayal, and he had soon convinced himself that the vision had been caused by the Boogeyman himself, so as to divert suspicion and generate hatred and discords within a group which, otherwise, would have been very close, and from there, of course, the step towards the worst had been short. What if the man, actually, enjoyed the boy's sufferance? What if he had deformed him specifically to destroy him, breaking his undaunted soul to reduce him to a mere puppet in his hands? What if, indeed, his purpose was even more cruel and sombre, and it required the birth of a dark heir ready to back him up in the final battle against the light? This and other questions crowded the Pooka's mind, stifling its most rational part to feed the instinctive one, piling up one on another in a crescendo which not only raised the tone, but also the bets, and occasionally reaching peaks so wild to induce him to be ashamed of himself and of his mistrust, but repentance had never lasted more than a few seconds, as well as doubt: the one he was talking about, after all, was and remained the King of Shadows, a creature born to make nightmares real and who drew from manipulating others' lives his greatest sustenance, a beast smart and impossible to control, and on which monitoring was necessary in any case. Between being vigilant and taking action, however, there was a clear line of demarcation, and the Easter Bunny, back from the life lessons learned in the previous months, had made sure not pass it: unfortunately, although Frost had repeatedly showed physical and psychological discomfort about his pregnancy, he had never openly complained about it, nor expressed the desire to punish or dismiss his lover for his behaviour, so Bunnymund had had to resign himself and undergo his will. He hadn't tried to move him with harsh words when he had seen
him sad, sure that trying to talk some sense into him when his mind was elsewhere would have been detrimental for both of them, he hadn't intervened when he had completely leaned on Pitch, worried that a violent argument could have caused a worsening in him, he hadn't protested when he had drove him away, afraid to bother him: although he had struggled, he had never been able to determine with certainty whether the boy was dominated by the partner, or simply in love with him, nor to demonstrate irrefutably that the latter had had intentions, hampered by the expressionless and misty eyes of the first and the hectic, diligent bustling of the second, and, as the fairy had repeatedly suggested to him, he had resolved himself to accept the situation, praying it was better than he imagined and guarding from afar. A decidedly difficult task for a creature impulsive like him, annoying, consuming, but doable, if interrupted by a good number of breaks dedicated to pleasant pastimes, and, no doubt, helping North to realize Christmas gifts and inserting in each of them a tiny Easter detail to remind children that the spring feast would have soon arrived was one of the best.

Chuckling, the Pooka finished decorating, gazing for a few seconds the little egg he had slyly tucked between the spirals of smoke painted on the wagon side and congratulating himself for the trick, but just when he was about to reassemble the train, someone knocked at the door.

«Come in» he conceded.

After a few seconds a plumed head peeped from the entrance, and a female voice whispered: «Good morning, Bunnymund. How do you feel?».

Put in trouble by the simple question because of the risky reasoning he had let himself go into, the Easter Bunny began to tidy up and rudely answered: «Why do you ask? Not that I haven't been well lately».

Toothiana, who, meanwhile, had quietly opened the door and reached the table, replied: «Said by someone who has spent more than a month secluded in a laboratory, busy sulking and working from morning to night for a person he has always been in competition with, it doesn't sound so credible, you know? I'm glad you've become friend with North to the point you're willing to help him, but it's clear that yours is not only and pure generosity, and I'm starting to get worried».

«There's no need to worry, I'm fine, I'm just busy with this work» stated Bunnymund in a sharp tone.

«And with all the thousands of anxieties and assumptions crowing your mind, right?» added the fairy.

Hit where he felt weaker, the Pooka lowered his ears in a threatening behaviour and snapped: «Don't tell me you came here just to continue the discussion! I don't care about what you say to defend him, Pitch is the sole responsible of this situation, I am sure, and nothing will ever convince me otherwise!».

Letting out a sigh, the woman countered: «No, I didn't come here for that. I decided not to bother you about that topic any more, if this can make you happy: it's obvious that I can't convince you, then insisting is point less. No, Bunnymund, I'm just genuinely worried about you: you've been locked in this room for weeks, coming out only for a few minutes a day to retrieve new toys to decorate, you slept little or nothing and you've never talked to anyone, and that is not good. Haven't you looked at yourself in the mirror? Your fur is ruffled, your eyes red, your back bent, you're not fine, and then, didn't you notice that this room stinks of fug and paint fumes in an unbearable way? You're ruining your health, and for what?».

Narrowing his eyes, the Easter Bunny turned to his interlocutor and hissed: «Don't you get it? You asked me many times to behave and not to annoy Jack and the others with my inappropriate observations, and that's what I'm doing! It's hard for you to be reached by my comments if I'm
locked in here, don't you think?».

At that statement Toothiana winced, turning her expression from harsh to contrite, then, laying a hand on his shoulder, she said: «You know well that neither I, nor the others, have ever wanted to drive you away just not to argue with you. We would have gladly fought every day, rather than seeing you abasing yourself in this way».

«Jack didn't» objected Bunnymund.

«Jack didn't» answered back the fairy; «Not really, anyway. He drove all of us away because he couldn't stand to be treated like a sick person and to see us giving more attention to his bump than to him, but he repented almost immediately. Bunnymund, let's be honest, we all made mistakes, the four of us, Pitch and Jack, because we found ourselves in a situation unexpected and difficult to handle, but clamping up is not the solution. Pitch and Jack, working little by little, managed to resolve it and get back close and serene, Sandy, North and I started to chat and spend time with them, now it's up to you. You have to visit them, talk to them a bit, reconnect with them, you can't cut ties with them, and especially with Jack. He's asked so often about you, how you were, where you were, if you were so busy you couldn't even visit him, and he got sad when he realized you've always been here in the Palace, but hidden: he misses you, a lot, and he's starting to think he offended you irremediably».

«No, not that!» exclaimed the Pooka, his voice shocked and cracked with grief.

«Then show him it's not so!» urged him the woman, grabbing him by the shoulders; «Go visit him, even just for five minutes, and have a few words with him: you'll light up his day, and I'm sure you'll light up even your one, because Jack has improved a lot lately, and you haven't had the opportunity to fully realize it».

Biting his lip, the Easter Bunny turned his muzzle away and commented: «Maybe my days never brighten up because there's always a lurking shadow ready to obscure them».

Flashing a sly smile, Toothiana countered: «Don't tell me that a strong and combative Guardian as you is afraid of the Boogeyman, huh? Come on, don't let that get to you. I have a perfect task for you to make you get out of here: I'm getting ready to leave North's Palace for a couple of days, so as to check and fix all the structures in which I keep the caskets and to collect as many teeth as possible before Christmas Eve, and I need help to inform everyone. Can you notify Pitch and Jack? The news is quick and easy to be told, and, since it's evening, they're very relaxed: a perfect opportunity to start spending time with them again without exposing yourself too much, a bit as you did a week ago, when you came to keep us company in the Globe hall. You can find them in their room, and, please, once you leave them, do not return to lock you up in here! You can paint, but go do it in front of the fireplace, in company with the Yetis».

In response Bunnymund rolled his eyes and replied: «Okay, Mom, okay, later I'll go out to play».

At that exclamation the fairy softened her gaze and, taking his head in her hands, she confessed: «Oh, you have no idea how much I'd love having a child or more to look after, it's always been one of my big dreams! I must admit it, sometimes I feel a little envious towards Jack. Come on, let's not waste time chatting, go to visit him! See you in a couple of days, and make sure to recover, because, if when I get back I'll find you in the same condition as now, I'll haul you over the coals!».

Then she smacked a kiss on the tip of his nose and, without further ado, she disappeared in a flutter of wings.

Taken aback by that sweet and intimate act, the Pooka froze on the spot, dropping arms and ears as
he realized he had been tricked, and he stood still almost for a whole minute, staring at an indeterminate point on the wall, but in the end, heartened at least in part by the fact he hadn’t been seen by anyone but the woman, he managed to recover and retort: «It could be one of your big dreams, but don’t hope that, to let you realize it, I'm willing to act as your surrogate son!».

He didn’t care about the fact he was shouting to an empty room, too eager to have the last word about a speech so embarrassing, and too needy to vent somehow to dispel the discomfort, and he took all the time he thought necessary to clean his muzzle, terrified that the kiss could have been left impressed on it in some way, but in the end, after carefully scrutinizing himself in a mirror spatula, he had to admit that it was all right and get ready to fulfil his task.

It was not easy, for him, leaving the room which had become his personal refuge and enter the Globe hall, its high and open ceiling too little protective compared with the looming and low one he had got used to, and its incessant cacophony almost deafening to his ears now accustomed to silence, but to the Easter Bunny it was enough to take some steps in order to feel at ease again: being finally able to breathe fresh air instead of paint fumes was a real pleasure, as well as stretching his legs and exchange greetings with the Yetis therein, and the memory of the weeks spent in almost complete seclusion didn't get long to become annoying to him.

Making his eyes wander in every direction, both to fully enjoy the sight of the Christmas decorations recently replaced and of the toys running and to distract himself as much as possible and, therefore, remain relaxed, Bunnymund zigzagged between the tables lined along the impressive Globe and went down the short corridor leading to Pitch and Jack's room, and, after reaching the door, he opened it without knocking and muttered: «Tooth's going to...».

He never managed to finish the sentence, neither verbally, nor mentally, because the scene which appeared in front of him left him stunned: the boy, naked and lying on the bed, his eyes closed and half hidden by the wrist and his cheeks flushed, his back arched and his legs spread, and, between them, the man, kneeling on the floor and bent over his partner, his forehead pressed against his swollen belly and his mouth busy in a little chaste occupation. A scene unexpected, intense, decidedly risqué, despite the lovers limbs providentially bent in positions covering the focal points, a scene too strong so that the Pooka could bear it, and in fact he could not.

Shaken to his core, he turned and pulled the wood behind himself, causing it to accidentally bump on his own heel and, thus, closing it without producing the slightest noise, then, as if to seal forever what was behind it, he flattened himself against it, panting: he couldn't believe what he had just seen. He had looked only for a split second, just long enough to realize what was happening, and yet that upsetting image had got literally etched in his retina, flashing in negative colours in front of his irises against the corridor wall, impossible to be driven away even by blinking or rubbing the eyes: he couldn't believe what he had just seen! He had always known that the two lovers, in addition to exchanging endearments, indulged in far more intimate acts, including complete intercourses, but one thing was being aware of this, another witnessing it, and never in his life he had wanted to catch them in flagrante. Really, seeing Frost in that state, worn out, excited, his thighs wide open without any shame, and in front of him the Boogeyman, the Boogeyman... actually busy doing something which, at a guess, seemed to be quite generous. Why was he giving without taking anything for himself? And why didn’t he seem bothered at all by the presence of the cumbersome and, to be honest, grotesque belly? Maybe he really loved the boy, and he cared about him to the point he was willing to please him regardless of his physical appearance and of getting a reward? Or, simply, his was a disgusting perversion and, after that little gift, he counted on making him return the favour with interest?

A discreet flutter of wings interrupted his rambling reflection, penetrating with difficulty in his mind deafened by a thousand thoughts and being barely heard, but, where this failed, a female voice
succeed, shaking it as it trilled: «Oh, you 're here! I'm still looking for North, it seems he vanished into thin air! How did it go with Jack? Bunnymund, are you okay?».

Startling so blatantly he threatened to headbutt the door lintel, Bunnymund began to fidget, turning his face in any direction to locate the source of the noise which had frightened him, and when he finally managed to focus his eyes on a well-known plumed figure, he exclaimed in a choked tone: «T-Tooth!»

The requested, from her part, frowned and looked at him, clearly puzzled by his attitude, but soon he took his head in her hands and murmured: «Hush, Bunnymund, hush, I'm here with you. What happens? Going out of the laboratory scared you? Are you afraid to go in and talk to Pitch and Jack? Do you feel under pressure? Tell me, tell me everything without shame, I am here just for you and I'll do anything to help you, just explain me the problem».

The Pooka, however, wasn't lucid enough to be able to follow such a long speech to the end, and after falling further into panic in hearing the two lovers' names, he only managed to shout: «No, you can't go in!».

Keeping perfectly calm, the woman stroked his forehead and asked him: «And why can't we go in? Do you think Pitch would drive you away? Or are you afraid you could disturb Jack?».

Stumped by the specific and inappropriate question, the Easter Bunny struggled greatly to refrain himself from replicating it was not her business, and finally he stammered: «You can't because Pitch and Jack are... are having a baby!».

Upset by that statement, Toothiana gasped and, grabbing him by the shoulders, she exclaimed: «They're having a baby!? Is Jack already giving birth to them? You must let me pass, he needs help!».

Pushing her away, Bunnymund countered: «No, no, not that one, another!».

«Another!?» demanded the fairy, now definitely lost.

Overwhelmed with embarrassment, the Pooka started stuttering again, cursing his bad luck, the woman dullness and the excessive libertinism of the couple he had come to visit, but in the end, he couldn't say if fortunately or unfortunately, something interrupted him and spared him the unpleasant task of responding: something strong, violent, which opened the door unceremoniously upending him against the opposite wall and which promptly hissed: «May I ask why you've gathered outside our room to yell!?».

Propping himself against a cupboard to avoid the risk of slipping, the Easter Bunny stood up, visibly staggering, but succeeding not to fall, and, albeit still stunned, he clearly heard the fairy whispering in a calm tone: «Excuse us, Pitch, we haven't realized we had raised our voice. Is Jack already asleep?».

It was enough to Bunnymund to glance up to realize that Toothiana had already understand everything, her fuchsia irises brightened by a spark of fun, too sly not to have spotted a revealing clue, and her smile too wide not to mask a sly expression, but Pitch didn't seem to realize it, and, growling, he answered: «Yes, obviously, it's late».

Grinning, the fairy replied: «So better for him to keep resting. Bunnymund and I are going away, you'll meet tomorrow, good night!».

The Pooka didn't even have the time to realize what she had said that he felt her grabbing him by the
arm, and, unable to do otherwise, he let himself be dragged along the corridor, torn between the temptation to insult the woman for the situation she had put him into and to thank her for her providential rescue, but she anticipated him, asking him with a teasing voice: «Having a baby, right? You couldn't say they were having...».

«Do not say it! I'm already traumatized enough!» interrupted her the Easter Bunny, still upset.

«Maybe it might be the right time to learn to knock before breaking into a room?» demanded him Toothiana.

«It might» conceded Bunnymund, finally straightening his back to keep pace with the fairy.

A beam of blinding light, then darkness. A dilapidated room, with no doors, the ceiling sagging and the paint peeling. An ampoule, then a syringe, white powder, black bindles. Bodies, bodies everywhere, some stirring, some still, all deformed, all filthy. A laugh, a cry, then a blood-curdling scream, and two eyes of flame.

Letting out a gasp so strong and sudden to risk choking, Pitch sat up, stretching out his arms in front of himself as if to grab the enemy, but he felt nothing under his fingertips, except for a soft blanket which covered his legs, and after a few seconds he remembered: he was not in a ruined building surrounded by strangers about to become corpses, but in his room in North's Palace, warm and safe in the company of Jack, and he had nothing to fear about.

Panting, he turned to the left, checking with his eyes that the partner was still lying at his side peaceful and healthy, and he sighed with relief in seeing him breathing quietly, but the happiness didn't last for long: unfortunately, even if what he had just experienced might seem like a dream, it had actually been a vision of a real event, and if it had come to him there had to be a serious reason, which he should have dealt with immediately.

Being careful not to wake his lover, the Boogeyman laid back and breathed deeply for a few times, so as to dispel anxiety and relax as much as possible, then he closed his eyes and, almost instantly, he let out a moan. The two eyes of flame were still there, in front of him, brighter and sicker than ever, accompanied by a mouth bristling with teeth and an anorexic figure impossible not to recognize, and an endless human cry could be heard in the distance. Another guy who would have never come back, another immortal Nightmare to tame, again pain and pleasure merged in a disgusting and tempting mixture, which, however, at that time he found just incredibly annoying, because it forced him to move away from Frost just when he had begun to enjoy again the relationship with him, and especially when the boy needed his support the most, because the shadow of the past experiences hadn't yet disappeared from his sapphire irises, and melancholy and weakness could catch him at any time, dragging him back into the abyss. No, damn it, no, it was too early to leave him completely alone! How could he have checked his physical and psychological health without being at his side? Leaving there Voluptas and using her as a means to monitor him from afar could seem a good compromise, no doubt, but establishing a constant mental connection required energy and concentration, and he would have had very few available, given the task which awaited him. And what about giving up, delaying the odious duty to a quieter period? Impossible: the beast newborn from the drug horrid hallucinations would have not waited and, using its immense powers, it would have started to spread panic everywhere, indiscriminately attacking adults and infants and causing permanent damages to the weakest ones' brain, and he couldn't absolutely let this happen. No, it was not feasible, he had to leave and tame it quickly, and, if that's the way, better now than later, to hope to find it still confused and overwhelm it easily: in the mean time, someone else should have taken care of Frost.
Not satisfied at all with the solution he had found, but well aware he couldn't do otherwise, Pitch resigned himself and got ready to go out: first, crawling slowly in order not pull the blankets, he slid off the bed and reached the bowl of cool water which was now permanently positioned by the window; then, wetting his hands and grabbing a bar of soap, he thoroughly washed himself, removing all the traces of sweat from his body and then dressing up; finally, after heading back to Jack and placing a gentle kiss on his forehead, he turned to the door and walked away.

He strode down the maze of hallways which separated him from his destination in a rush, preferring this to the shortcut through the Globe hall, since he was not in the mood to meet Santa's helpers and zigzag among unstable piles of toys, and he prayed with all his being to find Toothiana by the hearth where the Guardians used to meet, but when he broke into that little, peaceful corner, the only creature he spotted was Bunnymund, lying on the carpet and busy painting a wooden toy soldier. He winced as soon as he recognized him, partly surprised to see him back around, partly dumbfounded by the absence of the fairy, and when the Pooka did the same, flashing an expression half stunned and half terrified, he couldn't decide whether to feel proud of his own frightful presence or suspicious about what had happened the night before, but in the end, focusing on his goal, he questioned him: «Where's Toothiana?».

Rolling his eyes, perhaps offended by the fact his interlocutor haven't even greeted him, the Easter Bunny resumed his work and answered: «In her Palace to fix the structures where she keeps her caskets, or in some room to collect teeth».

Taken aback, the man swore to himself, allowing himself a moment to reflect on what to do, then, resolving that the Guardian of Dreams could serve as a good substitute, he asked: «What about Sandman?».

«In his ship heart to fortify himself» explained Bunnymund, continuing undaunted to decorate.

«North?» demanded Pitch as his last hope.

Violently slamming the brush in a plate, the Pooka turned and replied: «In his personal laboratory, working like mad and completing preparations, as it's obvious since it's the night between the 21st and the 22nd of December! Are you done with the questioning or do you want to know their movements in the last twenty-four hours? You need something, by chance?».

Pretending not to have noticed the other's rude attitude, the Boogeyman frowned and admitted: «Yes, I need a favour».

«I had not the slightest doubt» commented the Easter Bunny, bitterly staring at him.

Definitely bothered by the treatment he was receiving, the man snapped: «And I had not the slightest doubt that you would have been so rude! Don't worry, I hadn't even considered the idea to turn to you, keep lounging about, I'll get by by myself, as I always did!».

Theatrically drawing the right hem of his robe, in order to not trip over it, he turned and headed away, cursing his bad luck while he racked his brain to find an alternative solution to his problem, but he almost didn't have time to take a few steps that the interlocutor called him back, shouting: «Hey, Pitch, wait!».

«What do you want!?» barked at him Pitch.

Albeit hesitantly, and maintaining a rather disgruntled expression, Bunnymund murmured: «Yes, I admit it, you're right: I've been rude, and with no reason. I'm sorry. If you need help you can ask for it to me».
Hearing those excuses the Boogeyman froze on the spot: since when had the Pooka learned some manners? Had Toothiana finally managed to train him? And yet, even if it was so, how could she have taught him also to pay respect to his enemy? Wasn't it more likely that the rabbit had simply taken a blow to his head, or that he had been dulled by the smell of the paints with which he had surrounded himself? Whatever the reason was, he had neither the time, nor the ability to find it out, and, indeed, not even the need: what he needed was receiving help for Jack, not getting lost in pondering on why this had been offered to him by a creature who used to hinder him for every trifle, so it was better for him to hurry and accept until the interlocutor was the right mood.

«I'll be concise, I have to leave to tame a Nightmare and I need someone to keep an eye on Jack in my place» he briefly explained.

As soon as he heard him mentioning one of his beasts, Bunnymund clouded over, narrowing his eyes and bristling his hair, and, almost talking over him, he asked through his gritted teeth: «Are you seriously asking me to hold Jack by the leash while you go out and have a good time? Is it this the help you need?».

At that insinuation so well aimed, a rage blind and impossible to be held back pervaded the man's mind, and, giving up to overcome it, he let it break out freely, and yelled: «The help I'm asking you for is not for me, fool, it's for Jack! In this last month he has suffered more than you've done in a whole lifetime, he hit rock bottom several times, he came to hate himself and not to be able to think lucidly, and now that I managed to help him rising I'm not willing to see him falling again! He's still too weak and worn out to stay alone, at certain times of the day he tends to grow sad and clam up, and I want next to him someone ready to step in and bring back the smile on his lips! If only I could, I would do it by myself, but the Nightmare which was born this night is a beast too dangerous to be left free to roam, then, whether I like it or not, I have the duty to reach it and tame it, and I assure you that, in this moment, I don't like having to do it at all!».

The Pooka, in contrast to what the Boogeyman expected, ignored him during the outburst, turning his muzzle away and lazily scratching his shoulder, and for an instant he seemed about to resume the decoration he had left incomplete, but eventually he cast him a pitying glance and said: «I will take care of Jack while you're not here. If you have some specific needs, just ask».

Swallowing the anger for Jack's sake, Pitch refrained himself from any comment, and he replied in a sharp tone: «Jack needs to eat at least three times a day, and he follows a specific schedule: breakfast at nine in the morning, lunch at one, dinner at eight in the afternoon, plus possibly a light snack around four pm. In the morning, usually, he shows himself lazy and indolent, because he often feel tired; in the afternoon, however, he recovers energy and becomes more active, until about ten pm, when he begins to sleep. In all this, what you have to do is just keeping him company: stand by his side while he prepares the meals and make sure he eats enough fruit and vegetables and he don't get burned with pans, help him to make the bed and stoke the fire, play and walk with him, listen to him and chat a bit. Do not force him to do something he doesn't feel like doing, but take care to keep him busy, obviously with pastimes not harmful to his pregnant state, and if he starts looking dull or sad not hesitate to intervene, offering him a treat, telling him an interesting anecdote or proposing him a fun game. I think it's better informing you that he's usually caught by melancholy shortly after breakfast and in the late afternoon, but I urge you to always remain vigilant, because every day is different, and this will be so even more than usual. Obviously, I'll do my best to get back as soon as possible, but it's impossible I'll be able to finish this work before lunch, and improbable before the snack, so don't dupe him and simply tell him I'll join you for dinner».

«I will» promised the Easter Bunny.

Hardening the look, the Boogeyman concluded: «You better, because if you make even just a little
mistake, you'll pay for it. I'll leave here Voluptas, just to make sure you walk the line. Don't make a mess».

Then, without waiting for an answer, he dissolved into a changeable stream of magic sand and disappeared through the circular opening in the ceiling. Obviously, as the apprehensive person he was, once he reached a hidden position, he wasn't slow to re-materialize and look out the hole over the Globe hall to check the situation, while evoking Voluptas to send her to work immediately, and it was with a frown that he observed Bunnymund getting up, quickly putting aside paints and brushes and heading towards the room where Jack was resting, but in the end, even if reluctantly, he had to admit it: the Pooka was irritating, obnoxious and surly, but also combative as nobody else, and incredibly fond of Frost, therefore there was a real possibility he would have been for the latter a better protector than the other Guardians.

Although it had been incredibly difficult for him behaving with Pitch, refraining himself both from expressing comments too sharp and from driving him away, Bunnymund never regretted having kept calm and accepted the task the other had proposed him: helping Jack was and would have always been a pleasure for him, especially considering how much he had neglected him lately, albeit with good intentions, and especially considering how needy the boy seemed to have become. Since the awakening, happened rather abruptly, Frost had shown himself melancholy and moody, refusing both to get out of bed and to talk and turning to stare at the window with tears in his eyes, and the Pooka, who, at first, had considered excessive the Boogeyman's apprehension, had worried not a little in front of that closed and surly behaviour; after disposing of the initial amazement, however, he had mentally rehearsed the advice received and he had applied them in sequence, first offering to Jack a slice of fruitcake and cookies, then telling him funny stories and trying to engage him in conversation; finally, after about two hours of hard work and endless patience, he had managed to breach through his wall of silence and talk a little with him. It hadn't taken long until the boy opened up and confessed his discomfort, sure that he had offended the Easter Bunny beyond repair and that now he was only an annoying burden for him, but fortunately a few well-aimed phrases had been enough to reassure him and bring a smile on his lips, and, at that point, keeping up with him had become almost a feat: despite the heavy and bulky belly, Jack hadn't stopped even for a second, hopping from room to room to bother the Yetis, climbing on the kitchen shelves to filch exotic ingredients, sliding down the handrails to chase the elves, crawling under the tables to retrieve the blocks of the buildings he erected and promptly crashed down and changing mind and activity so often to confuse even himself, and Bunnymund had soon found myself running after him, apprehensive as a mother with her child who has just learned to walk and terrified that he could get hurt. He had had to hold on for nearly eight hours, worried and unheard, eight hours as long as eight days and maybe more, but, in the end, the fatigue had got the better of the exuberant boy, forcing him to slow down, and so the Pooka had been quick to bring out eggs, brushes and strictly natural temperas and convince him to paint a bit: a pastime much more quiet and safe, interesting and fun without being daring, which, fortunately, Frost had immediately appreciated.

«So, do you like this?» suddenly asked the boy.

Shaking his fur to put aside the reflections which he had let himself go into, the Easter Bunny raised his muzzle, preparing to observe a job done with as much love as much inexperience, just like the first two he had already checked, but, as soon as he saw it, he froze on the spot: the egg Jack was offering to him had been, no doubt, sponged roughly, the paints white and blue stained more than shaded, but the side had a decoration shaped as a snowflake so precise and detailed it looked like real frost.

«You cheated!» he instinctively exclaimed, overwhelmed by such a skill.
At that accusation Jack, who had already started to swell his chest with pride, pouted and blurted out: «Said the Guardian who, instead of painting his eggs one by one, uses rivers of tempera to colour them and tendrils to decorate them! You're really the worst!».

Realizing he had exaggerated, Bunnymund composed and corrected himself, clarifying: «Oh, no, no, I'm sorry, I didn't explain myself well, I didn't want to criticize you, I was just amazed because... you used your powers, didn't you?».

Sporting a smirk, the boy promptly forgot any rancour and answered: «Yes! It was a good idea, isn't it? Hoar is slippery and repels tempera, it's been enough evoking a little of it to protect the egg where I wanted in and leave it clear while the areas not covered absorbed the paint!».

Amazed as never before, the Pooka nodded and commented: «Yes, it's definitely a wonderful idea, the result is beautiful, but how did you do it? I thought you had lost your powers».

«Oh, no!» countered Frost, grabbing a thinner brush to put the finishing touches to his work; «They didn't disappear, they're just, how can I say?, sleeper. Pitch explained to me that the child interferes, probably to protect themselves, perhaps because they're not compatible with my powers. Whatever the reason is, however, it prevents me from fully exploiting them, but not to use a part of them: I can't fly, nor conjure storms, but I can still create frost, and I really enjoy using it to decorate the windows, or also to freeze the floor, you can't imagine how funny is watching Pitch getting out of bed and crying for the cold! When will he be back? I'm worried, he's been away for a long time, what if something went wrong with that Nightmare? I had seen one at the rave, and it was really scary».

Slightly taken aback by the change of subject, the Easter Bunny blinked a few times, then he replied: «Don't worry, Jack, I'm sure he's fine: he has been dealing with those evil beasts for centuries, now he knows how to control them. However, what did you say? “Wryve”? What is it?».

«Nothing!» exclaimed the boy.

Bunnymund obviously didn't let himself be deceived, and, in order to make him confess, he began to gaze at him, enjoying his growing blushing and the strange, ridiculous jolts he had started to do; he went on for almost a minute, then, when he saw him close to the limit, he teased, observing: «You know, blushing is a normal reaction when you're hiding something, but I would have never imagined that silence could even cause hiccups!».

Dropping the egg and the brush on the floor, Jack snapped: «I'm not hiding anything! Instead of accusing me of absurdities, make yourself useful and come here to help me, this hiccup is strange, it seems it comes from the stomach, or maybe even further down ».

Keeping chuckling, the Pooka put aside his tools and walked over to the boy, not a little amazed to see him lifting his shirt without shame, and feeling a little embarrassed at the sight of the swollen and perfectly spherical belly, but soon he had a bigger problem to think about, because something, from the inside, deformed it, lifting the tense skin right next to the navel: something small, but strong, which endured for a few seconds before disappearing again, and which had clearly the shape of a foot.

«So? What is it? You can check it more closely, if you need to» demanded Frost.

Albeit vaguely frightened by the situation, the Easter Bunny gathered the courage and reached out a paw towards his belly, wincing in perceiving its consistency he couldn't even define, turgid, throbbing, as if it had a life of its own, and something melted inside him when, from the other side, a small hand reached him, even a fist, pressing with conviction, in an energetic attempt to get in touch with the world in which still was not allowed.
«Jack, it's... it's the baby: they're moving» whispered with difficulty Bunnymund, excited as ever.

But the boy, unfortunately, didn't react as he expected. Widening his eyes in an expression of sheer terror, Jack began to fidget and pant, clearly struggling against a panic attack, and finally he hissed: «Make them stop».

Dumbfounded, the Pooka replied: «But Jack, it's just the baby, they're doing nothing strange, and then I don't know how to...».

«Make them stop!» screamed Jack in a choked tone.

Taken aback by the twitch with which the boy leaped toward him, the Easter Bunny lost his balance and couldn't help but letting himself go, collapsing with a grunt against the armchair behind him and holding back a moan when his friend snuggled against him, pulling his hair, however he didn't get discouraged and, after thinking a bit, he shouted: «Voluptas! Where is that stupid horse!? Voluptas!».

He called again, again and again, compulsively caressing Frost's back to calm him while the boy sobbed against his stomach and trying to show himself as calm as possible, but just when he was about to get up and run out of the room to look for beast in question, this, fortunately, arrived.

Trotting quietly, Voluptas burst into the room, heading quickly toward the suffering Guardian and crouching in front of him, and she began to lovely lick his belly: from bottom to top, from left to right and vice versa, she never stopped, covering every inch of that hyaline skin with a thin layer of sand and evoking tiny magical tentacles to embrace him, as the Nightmare of fear and ice had done more than a month before, and, as these were absorbed, starting over, continually going to meet that unknown soul struggling to assert themselves even before birth and slowly soothing them until she calmed them altogether.

Perceiving Jack going limp, Bunnymund grabbed and held him, but, before he could open his mouth to speak, he heard him whispering: «I'm sorry, I'm so sorry, I didn't want to, I know it's a beautiful thing, but it weirded me out so much ...».

«Never mind, Jack, don't worry» reassured him the Pooka.

Perhaps convinced by his words, perhaps just too worn out to protest, the boy nodded, letting himself go against the other's chest and dropping his arms, and soon he asked: «What would have you done in my place?».

Trying to settle the friend as best as he could, the Easter Bunny answered: «I would have definitely got scared».

«No» interrupted him Frost; «I wasn't talking about now, I was talking in general about the pregnancy, I was wondering how it would have been for you, and how you would have dealt with it».

Well determined to support the other, Bunnymund reiterated: «We are male, we're not born with the idea that, one day, someone else could grow within us, and obviously we don't want it: I would have definitely got scared, as I told you, and I don't think I would have dealt with it much better than you. Moreover, I am a rabbit, then I would have had at least three little puppies kicking in my belly, can you imagine how bothering it would have been?».

The boy chuckled wearily at that image, arching his back a little and throwing his head back to dispose of hilarity, but then, turning serious, he demanded: «But then, wouldn't have you been
happy? Wouldn't have you liked having someone in your warren to keep you company, someone who slept with you every night and whom you embraced and who made you feel loved?».

Wincing, the Pooka stiffened, feeling a pang in his heart at the thought of the endless nights spent in solitude in his warren, awake, apathetic, torn between the desire to relive the memory of his own kind in the attempt to feel again a spark of life within himself, and to bury it forever in his mind in order to not suffer, and he admitted: «Yes. Yes, I would have liked that».

Resting his face against his soft chest, Jack sighed, and he murmured in a faint voice: «You know, when they're born, the child will also be yours, and you could invite them to your warren whenever you want».

Then, too tired to endure, he closed his eyes and fell asleep, and so it was that he never saw the tears of emotion which silently slipped along the Easter Bunny's cheek.

Hastily dismounting from his horse, Pitch let it dissolve in a curl of magic sand, then, almost growling, he walked towards his room. He had spent far from the Palace a whole day, from dawn till late night, busy chasing the newborn and rebellious Nightmare all over Europe, caging its bony body in a special and invisible prison which would have left it free to move, but perpetually tied to the boy who had generated it, and subjugating its sick mind, and now he felt exhausted and enervated: despite the effort and the will of steel, he had failed to keep his promise to his lover, missing both dinner and the indolent hours before the night's rest, and this fact, as well as making him fear he could have disappointed his partner, had also deeply saddened him.

Speeding up his pace, he entered first the hallway leading to their bedroom, then the entrance of this, avoiding knocking since it was late and since he had noticed the door was already open, and when he broke into it he had to press a hand on his mouth in order not to burst into laughter: in front of him, on the bed, laid Frost and Bunnymund, the first blissfully asleep, the latter wide awake, one on his back, busy snoring and pulling his friend's ear, the other crouched and suffering, his muzzle sunk into the blankets to prevent any lament to escape.

«Free me, instead of staring at us, you idiot!» hissed the Pooka.

Still chuckling, the Boogeyman approached them, caressing a little the boy's hair and neck to calm him and make him unclench his fist, and when he succeeded he got ready to utter a derisive comment, but in the end, touched by the affectionate kiss Jack had placed on his wrist while sleeping, he let himself be distracted, and the Easter Bunny anticipated him, snapping: «He's been faster than a viper, a second before I was placing him on the mattress, and a second later he had already grabbed my ear, and even with an iron grip! How the heck could you sleep with him?».

«Patience and hard training» answered the man; «I needed much of both of them to get used to him, and to make him get used to me, but in the end, after a couple of months, I succeeded to. Now, to be sincere, I think he's so accustomed to sleep in company he can't stay alone. What's on the night table?».

«Eggs» promptly explained Bunnymund, rubbing his injured ear; «Jack decorated them just for you, in one of those few moments in which he decided to behave and commit himself to a peaceful activity ».

Frowning, Pitch began to briefly scrutinize the three eggs, recognizing the rough outline of a Nightmare in the first, the perfect shape of a snowflake in the second and the fusion, as confused as sweet, of dark blue tentacles and light-blue gusts in the third, and he couldn't help but smiling at that
sight, but then, fearing to be seen, he turned serious and asked: «So, how did it go? What did you do?».

«I think it would be easier telling you what we didn't do: Jack has been literally unstoppable. It took a bit to him to get going in the morning, but already a few hours after the awaking he was as lively as a child, and, I would add, even as infantile as a child: he bothered Yetis and Elves all the afternoon, he stole new building blocks, he played hide and seek, every second he came up with something new, and only late in the evening he got tired enough to resign himself to calm down. He ate well, not exactly at the times you told me to, but close enough, and, even if he stirred a lot, he didn't fall, nor he hurt himself. Oh, right, I almost forgot this: about half an hour ago the baby moved, and Jack wasn't enthusiastic at all about it. He didn't really have a panic attack, but he got close to it, and when he recovered he explained that feeling the movement had quite scared him. I think it's better for you to leave Voluptas always with him, so, if it happens again, the beast will take care to calm the child.»

Amazed, the Boogeyman gasped, instinctively lowering his gaze toward the belly and feeling weird in front of the novelty of which he didn't even know what to think, and while still trying to ponder, he heard the other declaring: «Well, my job is done. If you don't need anything else, I'll go back to paint in front of the fireplace».

«No, I no longer need anything, you can go» hastily replied the man.

Pretending to be busy with his lover, he pricked his ears to follow every movement of the Easter Bunny, hearing a soft rustle at first, then imperceptible thuds, and, just a second before they disappeared into the hall, he called suddenly and almost with despair: «Bunnymund!».

After stopping, the interlocutor answered: «Tell me».

Pitch hesitated a long time before speaking, torn between pride and the desire to finally lay down his arms, and, in the end, after a long sigh, he stated: «You did a good job».

And, even though he never had the courage to turn around, and no answer reached him, he knew instinctively that the Pooka had been moved by the compliment.

«Pssst» heard Pitch half asleep, rousing just enough to startle, but not to wake up.

«Pssst» insisted the voice, penetrating annoying in the Boogeyman's ears and causing him to grunt.

«Pssst! Are you here or not?» snapped the unidentified gadfly.

Now finally exasperated, the man snorted, rolling somehow off the bed and limping toward the source of the noise, and, with his tongue still furred because of tiredness, he demanded: «Who's there? What's wrong? What are you doing here at this hour of the night?».

«It's Bunnymund, I came here to let you know that North is about to leave, if you want to say him... did you really have to get out of the bed naked?» sharply asked the Pooka.

Dumbfounded, Pitch lowered his irises, fully realizing only in that moment that, indeed, he was completely naked, and to defend himself he declared: «And so? This is my room, I have the right to do what I want here».

«This is North's room and, anyway, even if it were yours, you could at least pretend to behave in a civil manner in front of the others, if I invited you in my warren I would never appear in front of you in this state!» countered the Easter Bunny.
«This is the room North gave me to sleep, so, indeed, my room» insisted the Boogeyman; «Anyway, don't make me laugh, you always walk around naked! What's wrong? Does seeing me “in this state”, as you said, annoy you?».

«You know, I never had any particular interest in looking at your privates» replied Bunnymund, visibly irritated.

«Oh, right, my privates, you had problems with yours, right? After all this time you still haven't confessed if you have them or not» teased him the man with a grin.

Quivering with rage, the Pooka rose on his hind legs, his ears pricked and his chest swollen to look more impressive, and, in a menacing tone, he hissed: «I assure you that my privates are every bit...».

«I swear on my staff that if you start vie with each other to establish whose is longer or bigger, I'll freeze you on the spot, and without thinking twice! I have no words to comment your discussion, you should be ashamed! And you, Pitch, put some clothes on!».

Wincing in unison with his interlocutor, Pitch stumbled, hastily evoking the robe with the side slits and allowing himself a moment to settle it, then, simulating calm, he turned to Jack and said: «I'm sorry Bunnymund woke you up: do you want to go back to sleep?».

Still outraged by what he had heard, Jack glared at both of them, clenching spasmodically his fists around the edges of the sheet to hold back his anger, but eventually he cleared his brow and answered: «No, it's useless now, I'm wide awake and I won't be able to fall asleep. Why did you come here, Bunnymund?».

«I wanted to tell you that North is completing preparations and within half an hour he’ll leave to bring presents to the children. If you want to say goodbye to him you can go down to the ramp, or even just watch him from the window, but if you're tired just stay here and rest» explained the Easter Bunny, still tense.

The boy brightened a little at the news, and he concluded: «No, as I told you I'm no longer tired, and I'd like to come and say goodbye to him. I'll dress up, wait for me out here».

Not daring to protest, the other two obeyed, turning and heading toward the hallway, and when Bunnymund closed the door behind himself, he cried: «“I'm sorry Bunnymund woke you up”? Are you kidding me?».

«It's all your fault, you can't deny it» immediately cut short the Boogeyman, crossing his arms.

«You'll never change» commented the Pooka, rolling his eyes.

Walking slowly, Pitch reached the door of their room, then, after opening it, he led Jack inside. The last half hour, albeit brief, had been particularly intense, animated by the Yetis' diligent working, by the Elves’ chaotic excitement, by the Guardians' cries of exultation and, in general, by all that irrepressible Christmas enthusiasm which the Boogeyman had always found incredibly annoying, and the boy, worn out both by the big cheer he had made and by the long path he had followed to get back, was now staggering with tiredness, struggling to keep his balance and offering a performance nothing short of hilarious as he limped from a piece of furniture to the other.

«Come on, let's go to bed» urged him the man, chuckling.

«Yes, we have to take away our clothes, we cannot sleep all dressed up» confusedly stated Frost.
Faltering to the bed, he untied his trousers and dropped them on the floor along with his underwear, miraculously managing not to trip over them while he left them behind, but when the turn came for the blouse, he failed miserably, and Pitch, fearing the partner could fall, hastened to rescue him, freeing him from the tangle of dark cloth and exclaiming: «Well, now you're ready to sleep, get under the covers!».

The boy, however, didn't listen to him, and, instead of taking refuge under the blankets, he turned and, eyeing him from head to toe, he pointed out: «You know, Pitch, you're really sexy».

Wincing for that unexpected compliment, the Boogeyman replied: «All right, thank you, but now we'll go to sleep».

Sporting a wide grin, Jack replied: «No, I want you, let's make love».

Without even allowing him time to realize what he had just said, he leaped on him, throwing his arms around his neck and pressing his belly against his chest, and the man, taken aback, contested: «No, Jack, damn it, it's not the right time, you're already sleeping and moreover Toothiana is still around, you asked her for a chamomile before heading here, she'll arrive any moment now!»

«I'll be quick, come on, please, just once» begged the boy between a kiss and another.

«No, no way, get under the covers before she discovers us!» snapped Pitch.

Using both harsh words and delicate shoves, he tried again to drive him away, but his protests had no effect, and, after a few seconds, he realized they had now become completely pointless: it was enough to him to turn his face towards the entrance to spot Toothiana, as red as a beetroot beet, but clearly amused, busy looking elsewhere and stepping back while holding a wooden tray, and at that point he could no longer react, and he didn't get further embarrassed when his lover started to undress him and bit him, stealing him a groan.

New fanart by HeilyNeko!

http://it.tinypic.com/view.php?pic=2qbf6vb&s=8

Chapter End Notes
I hope you liked this chapter and I would be happy to know your opinion about it. Next chapter will be published on the 21st of March, because I'll be busy and I'll also attend to a big con the next weekend.
Inhaling deeply, Pitch settled back on the sofa, then, parting a bit his legs, he exhaled and fell back against the seat back, bending his lips into a sly smile.

He perfectly remembered everything that happened a few hours before, the ardour with which Jack had literally ripped off him his clothes, carelessly throwing away their shreds, the stubbornness with which, disobeying him, he had knelt in front of him to court him, having at least the good sense not to take the whole cock in his mouth, but anyway licking it, massaging it, nibbling at it and rubbing it against his cheek in such a sensual way to bring him to the climax in less than a minute, the impishness with which he had grinned when the Boogeyman had accidentally wet part of his face with his own semen, the naturalness with which he had sat in his lap, his back against the man's chest in order not to compress the belly, and he had prepared himself to the penetration, the passion with which he had moved his hips as he let himself be taken, the gentleness with which he had then dozed off a few seconds after causing him a second orgasm, and it was impossible for Pitch to drive out both these memories from his mind and the pleasant feelings they arouse from his body. He had tried for a whole hour, moving almost an arm's length far from the partner, trying to clear his mind and breathe slowly, but those risqué thoughts just had not wanted to disappear, arrogantly showing up to his eyes when he was sure he had permanently closed them in the past and accelerating his heartbeat to the point the made him groan, and it had been so that, sore and hot, he had resigned himself to get up and change room, both to let his lover sleep and to escape the torment of his kicks and of his loud snores, and he had found himself in the Globe hall, incredibly empty, in the company of those exciting memories and a blanket to hide himself. Perhaps, if he had thought a bit more, he would have never gone there, and he would have, instead, taken refuge in the attic, perhaps, if only he had been a little less stubborn, he would have satisfied himself before exposing himself, and he would have made sure he had no longer desires to conceal, but indulging in those aftermaths of pleasure was something he had always loved, a temptation which it was impossible for him not to give in, and in fact he had conceded himself to it without hesitation, and he never went back on his decision, an impish expression on his lips as he draped the blanket one last time and fell asleep.

Frowning, the Man in the Moon bent over the revealing water, which, in the previous months, had become his most exploited means and most reliably partner, then, seeing Pitch snorting and going out of the room he shared with Jack, he smiled.

He was the one who had provoked the boy just returned from a visit to the sleigh ramp, who had pushed him to seek his lover's company, who had made sure, without looking, that the evening worked out the best, who had continuously tormented the Boogeyman with the memories of it, and, now that he had finally managed to separate the latter from his better half, he could finally tee off the event he had dreamed about for centuries, and which he had been organizing almost for a whole
He stood still, observing, for a while, just to give Pitch time to get far enough, then he touched the liquid surface right on Frost’s swollen belly and, without waiting for the image to become clear again, he walked away.

A creak echoed in the room, faint, actually, but so shrill in comparison to the hushed silence which prevailed therein to penetrate through the layers of dreams in which Jack was lying, and, perceiving it, the boy woke up.

It took him a few seconds to open his eyes and focus the scene, glimpsing a dark and lanky figure stealing away through the door, and almost a minute to pull himself together, but in the end, when he managed to clear his mind enough, he realized: he was in his room in North’s Palace, as always for months now, and Pitch had just gone away, leaving him alone. Indeed, on second thoughts, it wasn’t difficult for Frost to understand the reason, the hot and twisted sheets blatant evidence of how much he had stirred in his sleep, disturbing the partner and probably even kicking him, and the itching at the nose suspect clue of a loud snoring which could have left no peace to his poor ears, and for a moment the boy felt ashamed for having forced him to flee to find relief, but then, remembering the umpteenth, sweet words the other had told him at every occasion in which he had seen him in a funk, and the reassurances he had never failed to give him, he shook himself: he would have preferred to stay quiet and not to bother him, but he had not the slightest possibility to control his movements in his sleep, therefore it wasn’t his fault, and it was not the case to get sad.

Heartened by this awareness, Jack sighed, glad that his lover, for once, had put his own needs before his, and, at the same time, hoping that he would have promptly appeared in the morning to wake him up by cuddling him, and he nestled better among the covers, determined to fall asleep as soon as possible to rest well and be ready for the morning; just when his consciousness was about to shut off, however, the baby kicked him, and, wincing, he trembled and whimpered in pain.

Faintly sighing, Pitch roused from the sleep he had finally managed to slip in, then, keeping his eyes closed, he smiled and decided to indulge in for a few moments. Only a year before, he would have not waited a second to get up, too angry with the world to refrain himself from weaving against it all the available time, and too terrified by his own Nightmares to risk being caught off guard, but now, after months spent rediscovering himself and all the wonderful pleasures, little or big, that life could offer, he had not the slightest difficulty to bask in that limbo between unconsciousness and lucidity: languidly reclining in the soft and warm nest that his mind had created, he delighted in his own laziness, slowly stretching his limbs restored by the long sleep and letting out a satisfied grunt at the memory of the exciting evening experienced; almost disappointed by the fact he had now exhausted his desire, but at the same time happy to have regained his self-control, he squirmed a little, wondering whether, in order to start the day, it was better arousing the partner with a sensual kiss or a pinch on the side; finally, after opting for the first choice, he raised his eyelids and head, and, instantly, he froze on the spot.

Exactly in front of him stood out Bunnymund and Toothiana, the first crouched, the latter loosely lying on the couch, both awake and busy staring at him, and the Boogeyman felt his blood freezing in his veins at that sight: how long have they been there? Minutes, as he hoped, or whole hours, as it seemed to suggest the pitiful state of the pillows on which they were resting? Had they observed him from the beginning, or had they shifted their attention to him only when he had begun to rouse? And what about him? Perhaps had he done something embarrassing in the meanwhile? Had he let out a
moan, arched his back or obscenely opened his legs, trying to follow imaginary thrusts while still basking in the beautiful visions of the intercourse?

«Well, what are you looking at?» he snapped, instinctively pulling close the blanket in which he had wrapped himself.

«A good beginning bodes well, huh, Pitch? You're always the same!» barked back the Pooka.

«To be honest, even if I've been staring at you for a while, I hadn't really realized it» calmly confessed the fairy; «I'm so tired I can barely keep my eyes open, I have not enough strength to understand what I'm doing. Anyway, I was looking at you because you had a genuinely happy expression: were you having a nice dream, or something? I hope I didn't wake you».

Amazed by the ease with which the woman had talked about such a delicate subject, and embarrassed by the confirmation he had been studied for long, the Boogeyman straightened his back, then, hardening his voice, he retorted: «Don't be silly, I never have nice dreams! Speaking of which, rather, where's Sandman?».

«On the sleigh, making sure that children don't wake up while North goes down the chimneys. Do you want to know in the last twenty-four hours, by any chance?» replied the Easter Bunny, showing off a thoughtful expression to better tease him.

Narrowing his eyes, the man commented: «Pleasant as a nail sticking out a stool».

«It's a shame that I and North missed this wonderful opportunity. On the next year we should try to organize everything in time» suddenly intervened Toothiana, thoughtfully scratching her chin.

Dumbfounded, the man looked her up and down from head to toe, trying to understand her observation, but in the end, defeated and too curious to restrain himself, he dared to ask: «What opportunity, if I may ask?».

«We should have given you a chicken coop for Christmas, you would have peck each other so well scratching around in there!» exclaimed the fairy.

Astonished by that joke, in his opinion tasteless and not funny, Pitch stood motionless, glaring at his interlocutor with an expression half annoyed and half disgusted and increasingly frowning as Toothiana let herself go into an uncontrollable fit of laughter, and he murmured: «Indeed, me fool, since I indulged you».

Rolling his eyes in hearing the woman laughing even harder, he tried to ignore her, rubbing his temples with his left hand to dispose of the nervousness and moving the right one to settle the robe with slits he wore, and he decided to leave on the spot that company too giggly to head into the kitchen and make a cup of tea to his lover, but Bunnymund anticipated him, raising a paw to block him and demanding: «Did you hear?».

«Yes, I heard it well, unfortunately, damn my good manners in showing interest!» sharply replied the Boogeyman, carelessly throwing the blanket over the seatback and getting ready to get up.

«No, not that... Toothiana, come on, it's important, shut up! There's someone calling you, Pitch» explained the Pooka, straightening his back up with a jerk.

Amazed by that statement, the man pricked up his ears, pursing his lips as he stood listening, but no call reached him, even when Toothiana finally managed to calm down, so, shrugging, he commented: «You probably had an auditory hallucination, I'm sharp-eared, and yet I haven't heard anyt...».
«It did it again while you were talking» interrupted him the Easter Bunny; «It's very weak, I'm not surprised that you don't manage to hear it, but I assure you it's not a hallucination. I cannot figure out who is, the voice vaguely resembles Jack's one, but it's much more acute and hoarse, I don't know... you'd better go check».

«I'll go immediately» concluded Pitch, alarmed.

Without further ado, he jumped up, dematerializing partially to bypass the couch and then hastily striding towards his goal; with his heart in his throat for the anxiety, he sped up, circumventing the Globe and taking the usual corridor, and he skipped a beat when he heard a muffled moan echoing in it; now running, he covered the last few yards, throwing himself with all his weight against the door and opening it with his shoulder, and when he burst into the room he saw, unfortunately, exactly the scene he expected, and which, for months, had haunted his nightmares: Jack, weak and suffering, his face streaked with tears, lying on the floor and holding his bump as he sobbed.

«Jack!» he cried, rushing toward him; «What happened!? Did you fall? Are you hurt?».

Without even waiting for an answer, he began to give first aid to him, touching him to check if he had got injuries and turning him on his back, but, as soon as he tried to make him stretch out his arms, the boy curled up and stammered: «No! No, do not... ah! Please, no, the baby... it hurts so bad...».

Trying to remain calm, the Boogeyman caressed his forearms and whispered: «Do not worry, Jack, I will check immediately if the child is fine, but, in order to do that, I need you to open your arms: can you do it for me? I know that curling up seems to soothe the pain, but it's all an illusion, and it's prolonging the agony: trust me, overcome your fear, and, believe me, you'll feel better».

«N-no... not that...» weakly protested the boy.

Letting out a gurgling gasp, he arched, spasmodically clutching his belly and shaking his head, and for a moment he seemed about to try an impossible escape, but eventually he gave up and began to loosen the grip, and the man intimately exulted: in the circumstances it was absolutely necessary to act timely, analysing the situation and finding a solution as quickly as possible, but also gently, so that Frost could feel properly tended and at ease, and receiving full cooperation from his part was the best reaction he could possibly desire.

Murmuring encouragements, Pitch slid his fingertips in circular motions along his wrists, aiming to relax him and, at the same time, induce him to speed up the operations, and he rewarded him with the most tender compliments he had ever dedicated to him when Jack finally managed to uncover and show his bump; trembling, he bent over it, slowly lifting his blouse to check every inch and rejoicing in seeing his skin intact and perfectly hyaline, and, after taking a second and more careful look just to be sure, he reassured him: «It seems all right Jack, I don't see bruises, nor cuts or abrasions: you can stop worrying. Now I'll move you on the bed, undress you and observe you better, and, if I don't find anything strange, I'll anyway keep you under observation in the next hours, just to make sure that, in the meantime, no hematomas appears. Don't worry, Jack: you've taken quite a tumble, but got no injuries, and I'll make sure to take care of you as best as possible to make you recover in no time».

The boy, however, didn't seem relieved at all by that statement, and he began to stir again, writhing to the point to make his own belly take a strange, pointed shape and continuing to moan pitifully, and the Boogeyman, alarmed, started to doubt himself: how was it possible that the other suffered so much if he hadn't been able to spot any injury? Perhaps he had performed an inspection too brief? Perhaps he hadn't looked closely enough, or the sought lesion was internal and, therefore, invisible to the naked eye? Or perhaps... no. No, there could be no other perhaps, not so soon, not now, not in the damn morning of the day when everything was forgotten: no, just no.
«What's going on here!?» suddenly exclaimed a female voice.

Without troubling himself to raise his irises and watch the two newcomers, the man answered: «Jack fell. He has no bruises, nor abrasions, but, as you can see, he suffers a lot, and I'm starting to fear that he caused himself an internal injury. Leave me room, I need to move him on the bed».

After sliding the left hand around his shoulders and the right one under his knees, he straightened his back, lifting his partner and getting ready to get up, but right in that moment, without warning, Jack arched violently, escaping his grasp and collapsing on him.

«Be careful, Pitch, the baby is stirring, I don't think it's a good idea trying to lift Jack up now!» warned him Bunnymund.

Although he had felt more than clearly the foetus' strong kicks against his chest, Pitch kept denying the obvious and muttered: «The child has nothing to do with this, I just need to move Jack on the bed, the floor is too hard!».

«Pitch, stop!» intervened Toothiana.

Startled by that unexpected shout, the Boogeyman stumbled and fell again on the floor, fortunately from a height too low for the boy to be negatively affected by the blow, but still high enough for Pitch to get gorggy and sore, and the fairy took the opportunity to say: «Pitch, stop, don't you see you're hurting him? The baby is stirring too much in this moment, you should give Jack time to recover before moving him, and maybe you should also ask for help. Do not force him for now, make him sit on your thighs and hold him by the shoulders, yes, good, Jack, good boy, you've been very brave! Do you feel a bit better now? Could you tell us when you started to feel sick?».

More than happy to see Frost reacting with voluntary movements, the man came to his aid, bending his legs in a comfortable position and hugging him tightly in order not to let him fall; determined to find as quickly as possible a solution to that horrible situation, he began to caress his neck wet with tears, whispering gentle words of encouragement in his ear to make him talk, and in the end the boy succeeded, and he admitted: «Since, nh!, since Pitch went out!».

«Are you crazy!? I left this room almost ten hours ago, why the hell didn't you call for help!?» exclaimed Pitch, shocked.

The woman, unlike him, just winced slightly, casting at him a scared glance and, for the rest, managing to successfully hide her concern behind a concentrated expression, and she replied: «Okay, about ten hours ago. Did it all start with the baby kicking? Did the pain increase gradually, alternating between more and more intense pangs and shorter and shorter moments of respite? Did it? Then I do need to check your belly. Try to keep your back straight, as much as possible».

Accepting the Pooka's outstretched paw, she knelt, allowing herself a few seconds to settle her tails and taking a deep breath, then she bent over the boy's bulging belly and she began to touch it; she studied it for long, caressing it, looking at it, pressing on some areas and auscultating other ones, and finally, raising a smile, perhaps a bit forced, but undoubtedly sincere, she declared: «Well, Jack, the big moment has come: it's time to give birth to the baby. Don't worry, you won't be alone: I, Pitch and Bunnymund will not abandon you, we will help you in every way possible and, if you like to, we will stand at your side and support you during this wonderful experience. The only thing you have to do now is taking deep and regular breaths, okay? If you have a problem, just ask for help, for now try to relax, so Pitch will carry you to the infirmary without danger. You'll be fine, Jack, believe me, try to breathe and relax and everything will be all right».

Without further dwelling on the subject, she stood up, giving a couple of orders in a decisive, but
polite, tone, and immediately getting to work, and so did Bunnymund, who, after grabbing the little pot hanging next to the fireplace, dashed in the hallway; the Boogeyman, instead, didn't move, remaining perfectly still in the midst of that chaos, while a chaos even more overwhelming upset his mind: he couldn't believe it. No, it wasn't true, it wasn't possible, it wasn't really happening, it wasn't true! Why, why after less than three months since the conception? Why in that bloody day when the shadows dissolved in front of the Christmas lights, leaving him weak and with no powers?

«It's not possible, Toothiana, it's too early, it must be something else!» he protested, his voice drenched in despair.

At that call the fairy, who had just grabbed a tall stack of towels and flew up, diverted towards her interlocutor, and, hiding behind the pile of soft cloth, she whispered in his ear: «Pitch, don't think I'm not scared, I expected the pregnancy would have lasted less than a human mother's one, but I was hoping for four months, at least, not only two and a half, and I don't feel ready neither physically, nor psychologically, but you know what? I must be ready, because Jack needs to give birth to the baby now, not when I have finished reading every book about this topic and attended dozens of births to learn, and you have to be ready, too, because your support is the thing he will need most in the next hours, so take a deep breath, clear your mind and regain your self-control. I'll wait for you in the infirmary».

It was with the anguish in his heart that the man watched her casting him an upset glance and going away, lost, confused, terrified that something, in that unnatural and unique event, could go amiss, showing for the umpteenth time that, after all, he was just an incompetent, and permanently damaging his beautiful snowflake whom too often he had failed to take care of as he wished, but in the end the woman's words, which, at first, he had almost struggled to hear, reached him, and, driving out the chaos of doubts which had attacked him, they gave him the courage that he had initially lost.

«Well, Jack, did you hear?» he said, more to give strength to himself than to involve the parter; «We have to go to the infirmary. Are you ready to be carried? Just think about taking long, deep breaths, as Toothiana suggested you, and if contractions become too intense, warn me, so I could hold you better and, if necessary, stop and help you to recover».

«No, the contractions are over, I can walk» answered between the teeth Jack.

Feeling him levering on his legs, Pitch hastened to catch him, picking him up and stumbling for a few steps before he could straighten up, then he blurted out: «You're not walking anywhere! I'm sorry I hauled you in my arms so often in times when there was no need to, and I apologize for having denied you the chance of stretching your legs, but now there's the need to, then you'll be a good labour, let me carry you without protest and you enjoy this comfortable walk».

The boy gruntled at that order, partially annoyed by the prohibition, partially struck down by a well-aimed kick which went so far to lift his blouse an inch, and he couldn't help but obediently letting himself be carried, so, in revenge, he cast his partner a mischievous glance and whispered: «Admit it, when you found out I was pregnant, you started to see me as a girl».

Surprised, the Boogeyman winced, slowing down for a few seconds, then, returning the look, he admitted: «Who knows, maybe a little».

Chuckling, Frost hid his face against his forearm, the blushing timely appeared on his cheeks possible clue both of embarrassment and smugness, and for a moment it seemed he had returned to be the one he was before, with no bump, no pain, no terrible fears lurking, just and simply beautiful and happy; the illusion, however, lasted for little, prematurely broken by a violent contraction, and, cringing, he stammered: «Pitch... I'm scared... I'm scared I won't succeed». 
«I know, Jack» replied the man, displaying the most reassuring smile he managed to put together; «I feel it, and I’m not surprised, because almost all pregnant women are scared, but you have nothing to worry about: you’re an immortal being, even a Guardian, and you’re about to give birth to a creature the world desperately needs, you’re exactly like the protagonist of all the nice fairy tales we read together, and do you remember what happens to these characters? They win, always, sometimes with some difficulty, but without casualties. It’s possible that the birth will not be easy, but you’ll manage to overcome it, and then you’ll be allowed to rest and have fun all the time you want. Be strong, baby, I’m here with you and I’ll help you».

He rewarded him patting his head when she saw him relaxing and nodding, unable to decide whether to feel happy or guilty for having heartened him with a statement as strong and credible as unfounded, and, in order to prevent him from understanding the deception, he raised his head, pretending to be busy orienting himself in the maze of corridors; unhesitatingly, he took first a turn to the left, then two to the right, rejoicing when they saw in the distance the carved door he was looking for and speeding up, but when he broke into the infirmary he stopped: in the room there was no window.

«Toothiana, I had completely forgotten, in this room there are no windows, we must move to a more access...».

«Oh, Pitch, believe me, on such an occasion an open window is the last thing Jack needs» immediately interrupted him Toothiana; «Leaving the door open will be more than enough. Come on, come on, lay him on the table and undress him».

Slightly puzzled, but confident in his interlocutor's abilities, Pitch obeyed, gently placing his lover on the thick layer of blankets which covered the table and beginning to take off his shirt; the fairy, meanwhile, rummaged for herbs and oils, pouring a part in a big mortar, another in a large pot full of water hanging in the hearth, and, after thoroughly washing her hands in it, she reached the couple and said: «Well, here we are: the disinfectant solution is on the fire, all the herbs which could come in handy are almost ready, and Bunnymund will be back any moment with a pile of soft pillows to stack under your back, Jack, so you could feel more comfortable. Do you feel a bit better? It seems to me that now the contractions has attenuated a little, huh? Very well. Let’s take advantage of this time to talk and prepare ourselves as best as possible: did your water already break?».

Inhaling and exhaling with difficulty, the boy gave her a confused look, clearly unaware of this step of the labour which, actually, didn't concern him, and the Boogeyman replied in his place: «No, of course not».

«Okay, no problem» immediately reassured them the woman, taking Jack's hand in her; «It means I myself will intervene to make it break. In order to do this, I will use a tool that I just finished disinfecting, a kind of large needle with a retractable tip, which I'll slid in your body and press against the amniotic sac to puncture it, of course making sure not to hurt neither you, nor the baby. When I manage to and pull the needle out, you'll start feeling a strange sensation, not painful, but very wet, as a kind of subsidence in the lower belly area, and you'll start leaking the amniotic fluid, and all you'll have to do is relaxing and waiting for the liquid to be expelled. If you need something, or you start feeling pain or a particular drive, call us, and, I beg you, even though this experience may seem awkward, do not be ashamed: you're not the first to give birth to a baby, and you won't be the last, what will happen to you will be perfectly normal and none of us will feel discomfort or disgust, indeed, we will be more than happy to give you a hand».

After giving a gentle caress to the boy, Toothiana began to look around, clearly uncertain about what to do, and the man, stunned by her behaviour, didn't manage to respond, but when he saw her bending over his lover and lifting the sheet which covered his private parts, he shook himself, and,
slapping her forearm, he shouted: «No, stop, you can't do it!».

Groaning in pain, the fairy recoiled, then, casting him a pleading glance, she whispered: «Pitch, I beg you, it's not the time to be prudish! I'm not interested in the least in Jack's private parts, and I would gladly spare myself the sight, but he needs help, and in order to give him a hand I need to know if it he's dilated and how much, if the baby has already came down the cervix, if they're turned in the right way, not to talk about when he'll begin to push, there's no other way, I have to look, and both you and him have to get your head around this! If you really want, you can take care by yourself about these things, and I can stay close to Jack's face and try to encourage him, but frankly I'd rather do the opposite, because he will not only need physical help, but also psychological support, and you're definitely more suitable than me to provide him the latter».

«It's not a matter of modesty, I'm not shy about this topic, the point is that you can't do it» insisted Pitch.

«What does it...» started the woman, gesturing; then, however, an intuition struck her, and, trembling, she asked: «Pitch, but... Jack has a complete uterus, right?».

«Of course he doesn't! How could he?» countered the Boogeyman.

«I thought the Man In The Moon had given it to him!» replied Toothiana.

Hiding her face in her hands, she turned, as if she didn't have the strength to deal with the situation, and the man, albeit sad for her, didn't feel like wasting time waiting for her to recover, and he immediately explained: «If he had really given it to him, Jack would have immediately noticed such a macroscopic change, and I would have never doubted about his pregnancy, but unfortunately it's not so, and, before you ask me, no, he didn't even donated it to him recently. I can't be really sure about how the belly looks inside, since I cannot see it, but at a guess I would say that it's simply a sac, with everything necessary to let the child grow, but completely closed».

Throughout the speech, the fairy didn't speak, nor changed her pose, merely sitting heavily on the table and giving the impression she hadn't heard a single word, but in the end she lowered her arms and whispered: «This is a problem, Pitch».

«I do know» commented Pitch.

«We must do a caesarian section» stated the woman.

«Are you crazy, by any chance!? We have neither the knowledge, nor the instruments, nor the ability to do it!» hissed the Boogeyman.

Flying up to give greater emphasis to her reasoning, Toothiana exclaimed: «Are you crazy, by any chance? Have you listened to yourself while you were talking? The sac has no way out, if we don't open one the baby will never be born and eventually they'll die, and Jack with them!».

Straightening his back and hardening his look, the man retorted: «No, of course no, I'm not crazy: I perfectly know what will happen if the child will remain in Jack's belly, and I have not the slightest intention of letting that happen. You remember who caused all this, do you? The Man In The Moon make him conceive, and the Man in the Moon will make him give birth: let's bring Jack in a room where he could see the sky, and you'll see that that maggot will be forced to intervene with his repugnant magic to save his precious child».

He stared at his interlocutor with determination, his teeth bared, pure hatred in his soul for that bitter enemy who, although not exposing himself, had been able to cause so much pain, and he knew from
the beginning he would have won the argument, but when in the fairy's irises he saw terror, and terror only, he wavered, and, despite not going back on his decision, he began to intimately doubt it.

An hour now had passed since Pitch had imposed his decision, and nothing had changed. He himself had chosen for the birth a garret, located almost directly below the circular opening in the roof, he had transferred Jack there and started to take care of him, Bunnymund and Toothiana had worked to set it up properly and bring all the herbs and instruments which could have come in handy, everyone had had time to pull themselves together, ponder and realize the dozens of mistakes done, from the panic showed at the discovery of the labour to the incapability with which they had dealt with him, to the superficiality with which they had carried on the discussions, without actually trouble themselves to speak clearly, and the carelessness with which they had excluded the boy from the conversations, shouting uncontrollably in front of him, but the Man In The Moon had not intervened, the baby hadn't been born, and Frost had continued to suffer. It had been a torture, for the man, standing next to him without being able to do anything but comforting him, massaging him at every contraction and cuddling him at any moment of respite with the only result to see him getting worse minute after minute, hearing him screaming and crying at first more and more, then less and less, helplessly watching his slow withering under the weight of that bump which should have never existed, and which yet persisted in not disappearing, and, now, he could only guard him, compulsively covering him with kisses and encouragements while Frost alternated faints to convulsions, and moved his eyes and head with less and less conviction.

«Pitch» called him the fairy in a faint voice; «The moon has shifted, the...».

«Yes, it's true» interrupted her Pitch, noticing only in that moment that the partner was no longer bathed in the satellite's light; «Give me a hand, let's move the table, so he can continue to see him and take action».

Letting out a sigh, the fairy flew over the table, then, grabbing him by the shoulders, she stared at him and said: «Pitch, stop, it's over. The Man In The Moon had a whole hour to intervene, but he didn't lift a finger; if he did nothing before, he never will. I know it's not nice, I myself would have preferred by far receiving his help and seeing Jack giving birth to the baby with no pain and no complications, but unfortunately it will not happen, and it's time for us to take the lead of this issue: we must do a caesarian section».

It was great, in the Boogeyman, the temptation to say no, to protest, to fight with all his might against that suggestion as smart as dangerous, because none of them had neither the ability, nor the means, to execute it in total safety, but, before he could even think about opening his mouth, a voice intruded, faint and trembling, but determined, and it whispered: «Pitch, please... do a caesarean...».

Wincing, the man turned to his lover, feeling a pang in his heart in seeing that his skin has become now transparent and his eyes bright with fever, and, albeit hesitantly, he countered: «Jack, the caesarean section is a dangerous operation, it can result in a total disaster even when it's done by experts in dedicated rooms and using professional instruments, just imagine what could happen here, in a garret full of germs and with tools good to sculpt rather than to cure. Don't you realize you would seriously risk to die? You may lose too much blood, get an infection, experience an internal injury for a cut poorly made, and the child would risk to die, too, don't you, at least, think about him? You love them now, you can't want to make them risk not to be born».

Raising a smile, Jack replied, between a cough and another: «But, hey, don't you remember? I am the good protagonist, I cannot die, and the same goes for the baby. You cannot appeal to risks which don't scare me, Pitch: the child wasn't born, and they will not be born unless we intervene, so better
trying a dangerous thing rather than waiting for the impossible. I need you to help me, I beg you, I can't hold on any more, I'm exhausted, the baby, too, since they haven't kicked me for at least five minutes, and I'm starting to get seriously scared: please, help me, Pitch. I know I can trust you, I know I'll be fine, help me».

He valiantly struggled to finish his speech, his body shivering and his irises constantly threatening to roll back, but, nevertheless, he resisted till the end, and this, for Pitch, was the signal of his defeat: there was no way to convince the boy to desist from this madness, and, actually, he didn't even have the right to, then the only thing left to do was giving up and roll up his sleeves.

«Let's do a caesarean» he announced, his heart heavy; «This room can't be cleaned more than you've already done, and, anyway, it would be useless trying, since the ceiling is open, then let's get to work. Bunnymund, help me moving the table under the moonlight: I need to see the bump clearly, and I want that bastard who lives there to watch Jack and what he will suffer. Toothiana, prepare an anaesthetic and administer it to Jack, then bring here the tray with the instruments».

The two interlocutors carried out the orders without a murmur, who lifting the bed and shifting it under the cone of light falling from the ceiling, who gathering the tools and starting to mash various herbs in a mortar, then Bunnymund, who had even taken care to move closer the basket of clean towels and the pot of hot water, suggested: «Pitch, let's be honest, I'm not suited to this situation, my fur is dirty with paint, oil and sawdust, and my paws are definitely not comfortable to hand you the tools, how about letting me call North? A this time he should have just finished visiting Europe and Africa, and he'll take a break of a couple of hours before going to America. I'm suggesting this because he's the one who takes care of his reindeer when they give birth, I know that it's not really the same thing, but better than nothing, and then Sandy could help anaesthetize Jack».

«It's a good idea, Bunnymund. No offense, but it's better if you don't hang around here, dirty as you are, then go, and good luck» answered Toothiana.

Bowing his head, the Pooka took leave, then he tapped his foot on the floor and, after evoking a tunnel, he plunged in it and disappeared; the fairy, meanwhile, finished preparing her mixture, then, after grabbing a large brush, she turned and declared: «Jack, I'm sorry to tell you this, but I can't administer you any anaesthetic: there is no substance that has that effect on Spirits like us. Now I'll apply a disinfectant mixture to prevent infections, but when we'll start to cut the belly you will feel pain, and, although it will be difficult, you'll have to hold on and not move, or we'll risk to make a mistake. Scream as much as you want, insult us, we don't care, the only important thing is that you vent standing still, and that you stay awake and keep breathing. Come on, Jack, use this time to relax, and, if you feel the need to, talk to us and ask us whatever you want».

After soaking the bristles in the mashed substance, the fairy began to generously spread it on Frost's belly, making sure to cover its every inch and enroaching, just to be sure, even on the surrounding areas; the boy, for his part, meekly underwent the treatment, focusing on breathing deeply and regularly and opening a bit his arms to allow her to reach every spot she aimed to, and when she felt her moving away he demanded: «Please do not expect North: I can't hold on any more. Bunnymund will take an eternity to find him, and he will not know how to help me anyway, so better starting now, with fewer people and less confusion. We will make them a surprise when they'll come back».

At that suggestion the woman raised her head, questioning the Boogeyman with her eyes to know his opinion, and he hesitated a long time before answering, torn between the desire to receive as much help as possible and not to involve incapable persons who would have only threatened to complicate the operation; in the end, however, the latter prevailed, causing him to nod, and Toothiana announced: «Okay, let's do it now. Who's going to cut?».
«I'll do it» immediately declared the man; «I'll take care of Jack, you'll take care of the child. Let's try to finish quickly and not to do great harm».

«All right» replied the fairy.

Trembling, the man bent over his partner, placing a kiss on his lips and casting him the more reassuring look he managed to put together, then he straightened up and turned to his belly; he studied it for a long time, watching it from various perspectives, touching it, taking time to wash his hands and grab a scalpel and then returning to look at it, and finally he admitted: «I don't know where to cut».

«Usually surgeons open a relatively small cut between the abdomen and the pubic region» revealed him the woman.

Shaking his head, Pitch replied: «Yes, I remember, a cut shaped like a smile wide enough to let the child pass, but I don't think that it would work on this occasion: we can't simply drag out the foetus, we will also have to remove all the support tissues and organs which grew up with them and which are now completely useless to Jack, or when we close his abdomen it'll risk to become gangrenous. I thought about making a vertical incision, more or less in the centre, so as to gain a clear view of the interior, but I fear I'll get stuck on the navel».

Taking her chin between thumb and forefinger, the woman suggested: «Why don't you do it on the side? Not much, it's enough for you to move just an inch from the centre, and at that point I'm sure you'll have no problems».

«It's true, what a fool I am, this idea is so simple, I don't understand why I didn't...» exclaimed the Boogeyman, gesticulating.

«Pitch» interrupted him Toothiana, grabbing him by the wrist; «Stop delaying: just start with the caesarean section. Everything will go well, you just have to keep calm, relax and everything will go well».

Swallowing hard, the man bit his lip, so terrified by the idea that something could go wrong to clearly perceive his Nightmares around the world rising against him, and failing in their attack only because they were now weak, but in the end he managed to gather the courage and conclude: «All right. Jack, Toothiana: I'm starting to cut».

Without further ado, he lowered the scalpel on the belly, placing it carefully on the area he judged most appropriate and beginning to press, then he shifted it down; realizing he had barely scratched the skin, he returned on the starting spot, repeating the process once again and using more force, and at that point he saw the flesh hatching as he passed, revealing a tense and whitish membrane.

«That's the amniotic sac!» he exclaimed, excited as ever; «If I manage to continue the incision in this way we could remove it without breaking it, so we won't spread the fluid, and with it all the other support tissues!».

«Good, Pitch, keep it up, you've got golden hand!» praised him the fairy, caressing Jack's head to calm him.

Heartened by this lucky event and his assistant's encouragement, Pitch rejoiced, and he continued the incision from where he had stopped, but, unfortunately, partly because of anxiety, partly because he covered his view with his own arm, he did a terrible mistake: deceived by the perspective, he diverted the cut, going on not straight, but obliquely, and after about two inches he found himself right next to the navel.
Noticing his anxiety, the woman commented: «Good, Pitch, you've already made a nice cut without even scratching the amniotic sac. Now, I think you would agree it's better to straighten a little the incision, so as to avoid the navel, what do you say? Go on slowly, there's no need to rush, do it in several steps, if you feel it's necessary».

Trying to keep calm, the Boogeyman nodded, thanking his lucky stars for having chosen to stay in that room, where the cold which continuously fell from the opening in the ceiling slowed a lot the blood loss, therefore he prepared himself to remedy his mistake: proceeding slowly, he corrected the incision, deviating from the previous path and managing to reopen it a little further; realizing he had missed a part, he retraced his steps, insisting with the scalpel on that bridge of hard flesh which kept resisting; just when he was sure he had cut it, however, it happened exactly what, until that moment, he had managed to avoid: the knife bent, it penetrated a millimetre too deep, and the amniotic sac broke.

«Damn! Pull out the child» shouted the man to Toothiana.

After striking a blow to end the incision before the skin collapsed, the man dropped the scalpel on the table and dip his hands in his lover's flesh, grabbing as better as he could the foetus and handing it to the fairy, then, as soon as she took them, he tore the umbilical cord and lost any interest in them. Bending again over the partner, he spread the two flaps of flaccid skin obtained, digging frantically in that chaos of fluids, organs and tissues to separate the old from the new and remove what would have no longer be needed, and managing to take out much of the amniotic sac, the remaining umbilical cord and what he supposed it was the placenta, but soon he realized it was to no avail: although he could now glimpse the meanders of the intestine, enclosed in its translucent membrane, and a portion of the pancreas, the amniotic fluid had now leaked and invaded the abdomen, lapping everywhere, seeping in a tissue and the other to soak the meat, and, even if the man had collected it with his hands cupped already a couple of times, it showed no signs of abating.

«Jack, now I have to lie you down on a side to remove all the amniotic fluid, do not worry, everything will be fine, I'll hold you, just make sure to talk to me and tell me how you feel!» he cried, his voice drenched in despair.

Without waiting for an answer, he slid his left hand under his back, pressing on it to turn him on a side and holding back his internal organs with the right one to avoid the risk they could move, but, in contrast to what he hoped, only a small portion of fluid trickled out the wound, while the remaining sunk under the skin, creating a bubble.

Now in panic and run out of ideas, he rolled the partner on his back, forcing himself with all his might not to tremble, and he stammered: «All right, Jack, let's keep calm, this did not work, we have to conceive something else, maybe we could use towels or make you sit up or... Jack? Jack, can you hear me? Jack, no, no, no, please, don't do that, don't let yourself go, Jack, no, Jack, answer me!».

But those crystal clear eyes which for a year had brightened up his days had now become opaque, and the wonderful, joyous light which had always animated them had definitely vanished.

Startling, the Man In The Moon opened his eyes, then, after looking around, he sighed.

Eleven hours had now passed since he had began to guard his sister, eleven hours when he had done nothing but waiting, staring at her, walking up and down, keeping an eye on the measures of the machineries which surrounded her and, occasionally, turning some control knobs to adjust them, but now the wait was over, and the time to act has come.
Advancing in little steps, he reached her side, casting her a pained look, then he bent over her and began to free her: first, he moved away the bundles of tubes which enveloped her legs, wincing in seeing them skeletal and covered in bruises, but mindful of the fact that, unfortunately, when she still had the strength to walk, they were roughed up even more badly; then, he pulled out of her arms the two needle cannula which, now, had there permanent location, making sure to immediately medicate the holes, although only a few drops of blood has spilled out, and remembering the hundreds of times in which these limbs had clutched him in an embrace; finally, after cleaning also her hands and feet, prisoners for years of some electric bands, he removed her mask and stared at her.

The woman was exactly as he remembered, perhaps with features a little more well-formed than once, but her traits always childish, the nose still small, the same heart-shaped mouth, the cheekbones soft and rosy despite the long illness, and the cheeks, unfortunately, now permanently ruined by the wrinkles left by the respirator she had been forced to wear, but, nevertheless, she remained beautiful, overall and especially in his eyes, and he was moved at the thought he finally have the chance to see her again and come in contact with her, after centuries of failures and slow agony.

«Cinnaminson, my love...» he whispered in a gentle tone.

He didn't have to wait long: a second of distraction, a sudden oppressive feeling, and someone else came into the room. The Man In The Moon didn't need to turn to check it was just them, the Spirit of a thousand names and no face, the Dark Guardian with the black cape, the Reaper with the scythe of bones, the Hooded with empty orbits, the One who, neither male, nor female, sweeps away men and women, the One who, neither old, nor young, kidnaps elderlies and infants, the One who, neither poor, nor rich, devours kings and servants, the Death of the body with no flesh and no emotions who, for this, lusts for and destroys those of the others, nor he had to prick up his ears to hear their voiceless call, otherworldy hiss which screamed all the anger the Not-Being felt in seeing one of his own kind, but maybe not so similar to them, coming between themselves and their victim, and, straightening his back, he said: «I'm here to offer you an exchange».

New fanart by ZoeLove Solo Colori!


Chapter End Notes

I guess I shocked you a little with this chapter. What will happen next? Unfortunately you'll have to wait until the 10th of April, because on the next week I'll be busy, but I promise you the news will be worth the wait. Thank you for reading, I wish you a nice evening
«Jack, answer me!». 

Putting aside his task of improvised surgeon, Pitch grabbed his partner by the shoulders, lifting him a little and starting to shake him, and, seeing his jaw moving as to articulate a sentence, he convinced himself that life hadn't left his body yet, and he exclaimed: «Good boy, Jack, stay awake, I'll finish to medicate you!».

Panting, he laid him back on the bed, tilting his head so that his neck was neither tense, nor contracted, in order to ease him the now useless act of breathing and to make his misty pupils be turned exactly toward his own face, like a macabre attempt not to lose contact with him, and he looked down on his ripped open belly; embracing his hips with his hands, he began to work to remedy the mess by moving his palms in circular movements from the bottom up, finally successfully squeezing the mixture of blood and amniotic fluid out of his abdomen and laughing hysterically when he felt it trickling on his fingers, crestfallen by the idea he hadn't thought about such a simple solution earlier; finally, when he realized he couldn't extract any more liquid, he grabbed a needle and a catgut, and, without wasting time cleaning up, he began to close the wound, frowning for better focus.

«There, it's done!» he announced as he put the last stitch; «Now everything is alright, the baby is gone, the belly is closed and you can start to feel good again, Jack, you're fine, right? Talk, please, talk to me, tell me something, don't go, you can't, you can't leave me here alone, please...».

He went on for long, at first murmuring, then stammering, the phrases becoming more and more rambling while his gestures became more and more agitated, his voice growing cracked while his muscles gave in to the point of preventing him from continuing to rock and cuddle his lover, and, in the end, he resigned himself to admit the evidence he had desperately tried to deny: his little, beautiful snowflake was gone. His sweet smile, his infectious laugh, his irises of infinite shades of blue and turquoise, his heart which always magically managed to throb in time with the man's: all gone. The kisses at dawn, the jokes in the morning, the chattering in the afternoon, the walks at sunset, the hugs at night: all over. The trepidatious hopes, the vague promises, the solemn oaths, the touching dreams: all faded. Nothing remained, now, nothing in that frail, broken body, nothing in the Boogeyman's equally broken one, nothing in his mind, nothing in his heart, nothing, nothing, only white, blinding and nonsensical, which like a wall appeared in front of him, preventing him from reacting.

«Shostakovich, easy, easy, it's not time to throw a tantrum!» boomed North.

Pulling on the reins with all his strength, he forced the reindeer to slow down, stopping them just in
time to avoid the sleigh overcoming the edge of the runway and beginning to slide down the roof, then, after having taking off the fur hat and the coat in a single gesture, he got down.

Ever since he had left his Palace, he had felt something in the air, a kind of tense expectation which went far beyond the excitement for Christmas just around the corner and which had alarmed him more than ever, so, worried about Jack and, above all, about his belly now big enough to drag him to the ground even when he sat, he had decided to hurry to complete his task and return as soon as possible. He had travelled fast, riding the faster winds he knew and not hesitating to use his snow-globes to accelerate his movements, exploiting the tooth fairies to properly arrange the presents under the trees and carrying away the cookies offered to him as a reward in order not to waste precious time, and so he had been able to cross the Atlantic Ocean eight hours earlier than usual, forcing Sandman to compel to sleep all the children in this continent so as not to be caught working, but, unfortunately, the rush soon had backfired: having fully and without notice upset his schedule, he had also automatically made himself scarce to the other Guardians, and so he had received the news about the ongoing labour only on the return flight, with a delay which, albeit short, was equally unacceptable.

«Damn, North, hurry up, it's been already twenty five minutes since when I've left Jack, he'll be exhausted now, he needs help!» urged him Bunnymund.

Dropping his reflections, Santa Claus walked toward the access trapdoor, praying that the Yeti had left it open and dragging with himself the Bringer of Dreams, and he asked: «So, where can I find Jack?».

«In the room where you had piled up all the gifts already wrapped, just down here, hold on, I'll take you there» excitedly replied the Pooka.

Without even giving him time to realize what the proposal entailed, he tapped his foot on the ground, opening a large hole and jumping in it, and the master of the house, unable to do otherwise, fell and tumbled on him.

«Sorry, I didn't want to fall on you, are you all right? Sure you could have given me a little advance notice!» he exclaimed, struggling to stand up.

«North, for the last time: hurry up and go help Jack!» muttered the Easter Bunny, pressing a paw on his butt to urge him.

Certain that, given his polemical attitude, the friend was fine, North resolved himself to obey, limping toward the door and opening it with a slap, and he was about to enter and announce himself, but as soon as he looked in he lost a beat and froze, shocked: he wasn't ready in the least to witness such a scene.

In front of him there were Pitch and Jack, both still, both partially bathed by the moonlight, and both in appalling conditions: the first, standing with his head slightly bowed, was staring at his partner, his hands and outstretched forearms dirty with blood and his irises so dull he seemed about to faint; the latter, instead, laid sprawled on the improvised operating table, his limbs limp and his belly, no longer swollen, torn by an irregular cut shoddily closed with a catgut. It didn't take long to Santa to understand what had happened, the gruesome mass of organs and tissues scattered at the couple's feet striking demonstration of how difficult the childbirth had been, and their complete lack of vitality unmistakable sign of the resulting epilogue, and he failed to understand how the situation could have degenerated to that point, and that the rebellious boy who had tormented him so much, but who, actually, he had always loved, and who, regardless of the adversity he faced, had always been able to bring joy and laughter to the others, had passed away forever, but in the end, levering on his own sense of respect, he managed to recover and react, and he began to move backwards.
«North, what are you doing!? The tools are already in there, you don't need to take them from the infirmary, hurry up and go in!» exclaimed Bunnymund.

After silently closing the door, the master of the house turned and, casting his friends a distraught look, he murmured: «Tools are already in there, but they're no longer needed».

Sandman, who had been greatly worn out by the long and laborious night, during which he had used up his powers, didn't seem to grasp the recondite meaning of the answer, and only nodded absently, continuing to shape the magic globe of sand he had evoked in place of the anaesthetic; the Pooka, instead, although initially confused, didn't take long to jump to conclusions, and, at that point, in a broken voice, he shouted: «No, no, it can't be, no! Move away, I want to see him!».

«Stop!» cried North, tackling him and dragging him away; «You cannot get in in this way, screaming or doing scenes would only worsen things: we have to remain lucid, in respect for Jack, and in respect for Pitch, who's keeping vigil. I know it's hard, I know it sounds ungrateful, but, for now, we should forget about Jack, because we can't do anything for him, and think about who is left, so let's be strong and hurry up. Childbirth had taken place, but Toothiana and the child are not here: we have to find them, to make sure they're okay and that she'll come back here to talk to Pitch, because she's the only one who could shake and comfort him. Let's get moving, and don't you dare to enter the room: Pitch still needs to stay alone».

And, with the Easter Bunny in his arms and a heavy heart, he walked down the corridor.

Pitch couldn't say how much time elapsed, if a second, a day or a whole century, but, at some point, the process reversed: the white wall which had wrapped him so tightly to prevent him from breathing began to crack, at first slowly, then faster and faster, returning in a heartbeat back to the nothingness from which it was born and leaving a vacuum behind itself, and, hence, all that it had managed to keep outside poured out into it, taking over.

First, more crashing than a hammer blow, came the pain: pain for the dead present, because Frost's soul hadn't been the only one to slip into a place from which it would have never come back, pain for the blurred past, because the man's brain had never been able to keep for long memories he couldn't revive, nor the positive sensations he couldn't feel, and he was aware that that wonderful adventure would have soon faded in incomprehensible flashes of memory and splinters of darkness, pain for the vanished future, because no tomorrow would have ever arisen without a wonderful sun ready to light it, pain, pain in its purest form, which promised to permeate Pitch's existence for centuries to come, making it even more vacuous and pointless than it already was. Then, heavy as a boulder, came the guilt: it fell from above, without notice, dragging the Boogeyman on the bottom of his conscience and suffocating him with its tentacles, incessantly repeating how incompetent he had been as it tried to drown him, endlessly showing him the scenes of his failure while it ground his skull, maliciously whispering him that, indeed, he should have expected such an epilogue, considering how often he had proven to be good just to destroy, and for a few minutes the man could do nothing but gasping, desperately struggling in the depths of his psyche and almost risking to be overwhelmed. Then, however, burning like the hell flames, came the anger: it germinated slowly in his chest, almost imperceptible, but it took little to flare up, lifting his spirit to the heights of his aggressiveness, wrapping his soul in a perpetual fire while it shouted how unfair this loss had been, stoking his rage with an overwhelming violence while it blinded him with flashes of his partner's last spasms of life, whipping him up against the tyrannical misfortune which, indeed, seemed to haunt him with sadistic punctuality, considering how often it had scourged him, and for a few minutes Pitch could do nothing but wheezing, shivering visibly and threatening to explode at any moment. Finally, more devious than a disease, came the hatred: hatred for the tarnished present, because it all had been no
accident, hatred for the manipulated past, because too many times similar misfortunes had occurred, albeit not so severe, and the Boogeyman was increasingly sure that behind them there had always been a cynical puppet master, hatred for the stolen future, because it was now clear that someone had voluntarily taken it away from him, hate, hate in its purest form, which permeated him instantly, making him even more unstable and deadly than he already was.

After blinking to focus his lover's devastated corpse, the man licked his own lips, baring his teeth in an insane smile, and, raising his face to the sky, he murmured: «So, what do you say? Did you like the play?».

The Moon, which, in the meantime, had kept moving, heedlessly slipped out of his sight, deaf to every call and mute to every request, and this, for the Boogeyman, was the last affront.

«Did you like the play, eh!?» he shouted, kneeling the table to push it back under the satellite light cone; «Did you have fun watching, pulling the strings of this wonderful comedy? Did you have fun? You, brat, vile bastard, I know you've been spying on us, I know you manipulated everything around us to make us suffer! It stuck in your throat, right? You couldn't stand the fact we were happy together, you couldn't stand the fact I was happy, me, the enemy you hate to the point you can't leave them in peace even during a truce! What did I do to deserve this? What? I can't know, I don't remember anything about my past, and I bet you're the only one accountable for this amnesia, but, even if I committed terrible crimes, Jack never did the same! He has always been good and generous, he has always taken care of all the children he met, even if they couldn't see him, he took care of the Guardians when they got weakened and fought me every time I crossed the line, he did everything a good Spirit should do, and you, after centuries spent neatly ignoring him, have repaid him with this! You've tortured him to torture me, and then, when you realized you had failed, because, despite everything, we've managed to support each other, you killed him, beast, you killed him, and only out of disgusting envy! Do you feel satisfied now? Are you happy with your revenge? Hurry up to enjoy it, because I won't wait to take mine! I'm coming, you bastard!».

Giving heed to the last glimmer of lucidity left, he stepped back, making sure to move far enough from the partner's body to avoid the risk of further tear it, then, finally lost control, let out a savage yell and got ready to muster his powers. First, in a sort of warm-up which, actually, was simply the chaotic result of the immense anger he felt, he moved his hands in agitated gestures, evoking all the black sand he could and attempting to shape it; then, realizing he had successfully accomplished the first goal, but miserably failed the second, he snarled and threw himself on the floor, gathering up the sand with his fingers and trying to manually compress it; finally, after giving up in order not to prolong the pathetic show he was offering and having almost gone beyond the verge of despair, he had an idea: there was another way for him to triumph in that day of complete impotence, a way which he had never dared to use in his life, given how many dangers and sacrifices it entailed, but which now could be the time to exploit.

It took little to him to solve the dilemma, the thirst for revenge which animated him too great to be contained by good sense, and the fear of dying in the deed, or, even worse, of getting lost forever, absent, because, indeed, he was already lost, and he saw death as a desirable release, so, without hesitation and without regret, he acted: staring at his lover's belly to better remember the sufferance he had underwent, he concentrated to visualize in the clearest way the details of the bloody revenge he had planned, then, opening his arms, he lowered every defences to let himself be possessed.

It all began with a faint rustle, almost imperceptible, which softly wrapped his consciousness and courted his eardrums, almost compassionate in its comforting hum inviting him to let himself go; then, the noise grew, gurgling in his mind and in the air around him, deafening him and isolating him from the outside world to the point it even absorbed the light around him; finally, slowly turning into silence, it retired into his chest and began to trickle from it in thick and sticky tentacles. It seemed
absurd, and yet it was true, it had been the sound itself to condense and give life to matter, and it still resisted in it, making it vibrate and thrash increasingly strongly as it grew, until the substance didn't begin to take concrete shapes, little detailed, but well distinct: bulbous skulls, anorexic bodies, clawed hands, orbits with no eyes, hungry mouths, the Fear made being, the atavic Terror as old as Behemuth, but less irrational, more sly and conscious, Pitch's darkest soul which permeated his organs and muscles since immemorial times, which had always weaved to prevail on him and which only Frost had been able to drive away from his heart.

Firm in his decision, the Boogeyman relaxed, falling on his knees to better immerse himself in that creature ready to devour him and picking up its heavier parts to help it climbing up along his chest, and, perhaps for determination, perhaps for tragic sentimentalism, he allowed himself a last voluntary gesture, and he looked up at the Moon, silently saying goodbye to the world in which he lived, and which now he no longer recognized, and making sure that it appeared as a clear objective to destroy to the Fearlings old as the universe he had released, but, in that moment, it happened exactly what for weeks he had hoped, and never happened: the Man in the Moon reacted.

Without troubling himself to leave his satellite, the Guardian of the Guardians sent dozens of moonbeams, hurling them with pinpoint accuracy on the horrid newborn beasts and thus making them burst like bubbles of tar, and the man, laughing, shouted: «It's pointless trying to fight them, you fool, these creatures are ancient and powerful, and they won't be stopped by some pathetic rays of light! Prepare yourself, the end of your life has just begun!».

Annoyed by that silly mishap, he withdrew, escaping the attack in the simplest way it could exist and taking refuge in the comforting shadows of the room, and, envisaging that the enemy would have chased him, he looked around to find a well sheltered corner from which he could have defended himself; he sought for long, probing every area while the small Fearlings withered and slid to the ground, and he cursed himself for having chosen a room so bare to do the caesarean section, but eventually he realized that his skin, now almost entirely exposed on chest, face and hands, wasn't burning, and, with a sense of foreboding in his heart, he turned.

No flash blinded him, no flare attempted to blister him, because, as he expected, the offensive had diverted and, condensing into a single beam of light, turned to Jack's corpse, and Pitch, terrified of losing, after his kind soul, even his body, shouted: «No, don't do it, don't you dare to take him away!».

Angry and frightened as ever, he lunged forward, determined to tear his lover's remains from his hideous enemy's clutches, but, in his haste, he stumbled in his own feet, collapsing on the last three deformed creatures survived and getting trapped by them, and, at that point, he could do nothing but helplessly watch the scene: gasping, he noticed the light becoming thicker and denser, being filled up with millions of tiny, brilliant particles and depositing as sand on the partner's corpse; trembling, he saw him slowly rising from the table, ascending nearly a meter and lighting up from the inside, while his head and limbs lifelessly dangled; finally, now so confused and scared he couldn't even breathe, he looked the process reversing, the body slowly returning to lie down on the table and the moonbeams, after gathering for a few seconds on his belly, dissolving.

Unable to give an explanation to that senseless and apparently useless event, the Boogeyman stood motionless, oblivious to the enemy, to the beasts who had attacked him and even to himself, but, to remedy this lack, intervened the boy, who, defying every law of nature, moved. Actually, at least at first, he didn't do much apart from resuming breathing, stretching and blinking, activities anyway surprising for a person who, until just a few seconds before, was clearly dead, but, as if this wasn't enough, he took only half a minute to fully recover and sit up, and, after turning his face, screaming: «Pitch, watch out!». 
Now completely worn out, the man couldn't resist and fainted, and he only managed to hear steps and muffled thuds, moaning and shuddering as he wondered if he was still awake, or already prey of the ancient Fearlings he had evoked, but shortly after two arms definitely real lifted him up, forcing him to his knees, and a firm voice, not echoing at all, asked him: «Pitch, are you okay!? I got so scared when I saw you on the floor, you can't even imagine, and then those ugly creatures! What were they? They almost looked like Behemuth's beasts, what were they doing here?».

With great effort, Pitch finally raised his eyes, and, squinting them, he let out a sob: in front of him stood out two magnificent irises, pure sapphires flecked with cobalt and aquamarine, two irises he had given up for lost and which, instead, against all odds, had returned to comfort him, and made him feel loved as ever.

«Pitch» insisted Frost, visibly worried; «Pitch, please, do you hear me? Can you answer me? I need to know what happened, I'm worried about you, those creatures were eating your back and, although it doesn't seem they wounded you, I saw that your hands are covered in blood, I want to know where it comes from and to medicate you, you have to...».

«My blood is not red» he managed to whisper the Boogeyman, still dazed, keeping staring at him.

Instantly, the boy gasped, taken aback by this revelation and clearly in difficulty in dealing with it; then, probably in search of clues to find an explanation for this absurd situation, he made his eyes wander around the room, pausing on the blankets soaked in amniotic fluid, on the bloody organs abandoned on the ground and finally on his own flat stomach, and, in a trembling voice, he demanded: «Pitch, did... did you do the caesarean to me?».

«Yes» confessed the man, stammering.

Trembling, Pitch parted his lips, tears in his eyes as he struggled with all his might to hold them back and answer, but in the end, overwhelmed, he gave up and just nodded.

«Oh, Pitch!» exclaimed the boy, throwing his arms around his neck; «I'm sorry, I'm so sorry! I didn't want it to happen, I would have given my powers just to spare you the pain, but I couldn't stay awake, I was so tired, so terribly tired... Cry, Pitch, feel free to cry, vent and don't feel embarrassed, now I'm back here with you and will never leave you again».

«The Boogeyman never cries» spluttered in a faint tone the man.

Then, unable to control himself longer, he burst into tears. He didn't feel ashamed of himself, too exhausted to care about something as futile as decorum, he didn't get embarrassed by the other's presence, grateful to be allowed to take refuge against his neck, and he didn't even worry about any stranger' possible interference: simply tired of keeping within himself all the emotions he felt, he let them out, sobbing loudly while his partner reassured him, trembling under his soft hands busy holding him and cuddling him and shedding every tear he felt the need to.

After a few minutes, feeling his own body emptied and his mind now calm, he raised his head, moaning at the throbbing pain which had obviously assailed him, and, still too moved to speak, he just stared at his lover with a hint of smile; Frost, for his part, looked at him in turn, returning the touched gaze and caressing his cheek, and, in a gentle tone, he said: «I love you too, Pitch».

Slightly uncomfortable for that point-blank statement, Pitch countered: «I haven't uttered a word».

Wearily shaking his head, as if amused by the protest, the boy replied: «I heard you anyway». 
Sweet and loving as always, he took his face in his hands and began to kiss him, sparing him the task of responding and gently wiping his cheeks, and, between an endearment and the other, he whispered: «Come on, Pitch, hold me».

«But my hands are covered in blood and amniotic fluid, I would just end up dirtying you» clumsily objected the Boogeyman.

«As if dirt scares me» commented Jack; «I want a decent hug and a kiss, and I want them now».

Without giving him time to counter, he sat in his lap and snuggled against him, pulling his nape hair to make him expose himself and pressing his lips on his, and the man, at that contact, couldn't resist: letting out an almost suffering sigh, he drew his lover towards himself, hugging him until he nearly cut off his breath, lifting him from his own thighs to experience the pleasure of holding him, caressing his flesh with his palms to reclaim him, and, almost melting, he parted his lips, biting his partner's silky ones to force him opening them and sliding his tongue between them, but then just discreetly stroking his palate, without deepening the kiss too much, because what he wanted to convey wasn't passion, but the joy he felt in having found him again, and he had no intention to overwhelm him.

After just ten seconds, aware that the other hadn't fully recovered from the childbirth, he pulled away from him, giving him one last little kiss on the forehead and rubbing his back, and while the boy caught his breath, he stated: «Now there's a nice bath waiting for you».

Snorting, the boy replied: «What a bore, I hoped there was something different and nicer waiting for... the others are waiting for us!».

Taken aback by that statement, Pitch asked: «"The others" who?».

«But what “who?'", the Guardians, of course! We must tell them that, in the end, everything went well and that I'm still alive!» excitedly bursted Frost.

Shaking his head, the Boogeyman explained: «Don't worry, Jack: Bunnymund hasn't returned yet, and North and Sandman are still out, too; the only one here at the Palace is Toothiana, but when she left she was far too busy to notice you were dead. Hush, no one saw you, there's no need to rush».

«I assure you they saw me» insisted the boy, looking around as if in search of something; «Less than ten minutes ago North tried to get in here, but when he realized I was dead he gave up and left. Don't ask me how I managed to see this, because I don't know, maybe I stayed here all the time, whatever the explanation is I bet North told all the others I had died and made them worry, so, please, let's hurry, I don't want them to suffer when it's all right».

Without waiting for an assent, he leaped away, ridiculously swaying his bare butt as he crawled toward a washbasin full of water nearby and shivering when we dived in, then, after stirring a little, he turned and demanded: «Can you help me washing my back?».

Amused by his childish attitude, but glad to see him so active, the man conceded: «Yes, yes, I'm coming».

Without further delay, he got up, limping towards his lover and kneeling again to assist him; then, grabbing a sponge and a bar of soap, he began to wash him, gently massaging his skin in order not to chafe it and taking the opportunity to clean up his own hands and wrists; finally, after thoroughly rinsing it, he helped him getting out of the basin, and handed him a clean towel.

«Where are my clothes?» asked Jack, thoughtfully sweeping the room while he brushed himself.
«The last time I saw them they were on the infirmary cupboard, and I guess they're still there. Don't worry, I'll go and retrieve them soon, but for now I'd like to take you out of here, so I'll wrap you in a clean towel» explained Pitch.

Received the partner's approval, he walked to the towel basket and retrieved the wider cloth he could find, then he helped him to wear it, wrapping it twice around his waist and one a little under his armpits; then, after settling it and draping the exceeding flap on his shoulder, he bent down to pick up the boy, and Frost jokingly commented: «I'm not a girl, Pitch».

Casting him a sweet look, the Boogeyman whispered: «Be my girl one last time».

Blushing and giggling, Frost was about to withdraw, clearly amused by the request and probably also a bit embarrassed, however, perhaps jokingly deciding to play along with him, perhaps understanding the other's concern, he took little to change his mind and nod; the man, for his part, made sure to be as convincing as possible without forcing him, anxious to take care of him not only properly, but also making him feel at ease, and he internally rejoiced when he saw him meekly closing his arms to get caught, not wasting a second to take the opportunity to grab him.

After picking him up, he walked toward the door, thinking about how to open it without slamming it against his sweet bundle, but, just when he was a few steps away from the wood, this parted by itself, and North appeared behind it.

«Oh, Pitch» weakly murmured the newcomer.

With tears in his eyes and trembling lips, he stepped forward, getting ready to discreetly offer him his help, but at that moment the boy raised his head and exclaimed: «Hi, North!».

Jumping back in fright, Santa Claus cried: «Jack! But then you're alive!».

Almost instantly a rustling and hasty thuds were heard, and Bunnymund appeared, running over the master of the house and blurting out: «But then he's alive! North, you're an idiot, how couldn't you notice it!?».

«No, no, Bunnymund» intervened Jack in a gentle voice; «Do not blame North, he wasn't wrong: when he entered the room I was really dead, and there was nothing you could do. Only a few minutes after, I got back».

«Got back?» demanded the Pooka, dumbfounded, making room for Sandman; «What does that mean?».

«It means that, in the end, the Man in the Moon deigned to intervene and save him. Oh, come on, cut it out! Jack is still tired and worn, he needs rest, not to be stifled by your enthusiasm! Get out of the way, I'll bring him in our room!» barked Pitch.

Annoyed by the excessive expansiveness of the Guardians, who had now completely surrounded the boy and started to cover him with compliments and cuddles, he advanced, rudely pushing them away and heading towards his own room; realizing they were following him, he sped up his pace, focusing on the way to hold back himself from blurting out, and, after coming within sight of the sought goal, he announced: «Well, we arrived, and it's time for all of us to go to sleep: good night!».

«Don't be ridiculous, it's barely noon!» protested the Easter Bunny.

Straightening his back to look as much authoritative as possible, the Boogeyman turned and countered: «Less than half an hour ago Jack underwent a caesarean section, died and then raised again, it's definitely time to sleep for him, even if it's barely noon!». 
«Pitch» murmured Frost, pulling him by the sleeve; «I promise that, later, I'll sleep, but first I'd like to see the baby. I don't think I'll ever be able to take care of them, but I'd do them no harm if I just looked at them, and I want to do it so much».

Taken aback, the man hesitated, unprepared for such a request and, actually, not very inclined to satisfy it, but North anticipated him, saying: «Of course, Jack, we would never forbid you to see them, indeed, Toothiana is already bringing them here. In the meantime get in the bed».

Not daring to protest, Pitch resigned himself to nod and please the partner, and, faking nonchalance, he prepared him to the meeting: first, after laying him down on the mattress, he helped him getting rid of the big towel in which he had wrapped him and sliding under the covers; then, handing him one by one the pillows placed in the chest, he suggested him to stack them against the headboard and rest his back on them; finally, after closing the curtains to make the room fall in the dim light of the fire, he moved the desk chair next to the bed and sat down, watching his lover while the Guardians settled in a row on the other side.

Fortunately, they didn't have to wait for long: after just a minute a low hum came from the hallway, growing more and more, and eventually Toothiana peeped out into the room, carrying a bundle and whispering: «Hi, Jack. You can't imagine how happy I am to see you awake: I feared the worst when the amniotic sac got broken, and I left you with the terror not to find you on my return».

Nervously clasping his hands, the boy replied: «That was close, but in the end, fortunately, it didn't happen, and I'm well again. May... may I see the baby?».

«Of course, Jack» readily conceded the fairy; «I brought her here for this. It's a girl, you know? Come on, open your arms, a little more, yes, now hold her, cradle her a bit: she'll surely be so happy to meet you».

Excited as ever, Jack shuddered, at first clearly tempted to refuse, then giving in to curiosity and stretching out his arms, tentatively accepting that sort of little bale of blankets and towels from which only a tiny, frowning face managed to emerge, settling it against his own chest and beginning to clumsily rock it while staring at it.

«Well, Jack, what do you think?» asked the woman, so moved she had tears in her eyes.

«She's...» started the boy, raising a smile while the Big Four leaned toward him, their irises full of expectation.

«... She's really ugly» he finally completed.

Suddenly, the warm and hushed atmosphere of the room froze, falling into a tense and unnatural silence in which no one felt really at ease, neither sure about what to do, so everyone merely reacted in the way it suited them most: Bunnymund, emotional as ever, let his jaw and ears drop in a shocked expression and began to withdraw; Sandy, who, until that moment, had feasted his eyes on the joy of the first meeting and had already shaped a dozen small hearts of sand over his head, let these break in half and brought his hands to his mouth, as if to hold back a scream; Toothiana and North, slightly more demure, simply exchanged embarrassed glances, while their smiles died on their lips; finally, Pitch, the only one who hadn't been stunned by the unexpected statement, laughed and commented: «Oh, Jack, only you could have literally died to give birth to a child, pick them up and comment: “Oh, well, actually they look so ugly!”».

«But no, what did you understand?» hastened to clarify Frost; «I wasn't talking about her appearance, whatever aspect she'll have, she will always look beautiful to me, I'm just worried about her health! Haven't you seen her skin? It's so thin, and it's all patchy, white, red, purple, even yellow,
"Oh, Jack, for all the teeth!" interrupted him the fairy, letting herself go on the mattress; "Why haven't you been clear since the beginning? You made our hearts skip a beat! If the problems are only these, you shouldn't worry: it's all right. Yes, her head is soft, and that's because babies' skull bones are not welded together yet, but in a couple of months you'll notice a significant consolidation, and, within one or two years, everything will be perfectly closed. As for the colour of her skin, instead, well, yellow is simply jaundice, while red and purple are due to the childbirth: the baby has lived for months in your belly, well protected and curled up in the warmth, and she has never known other worlds apart from that, don't you think it was almost a trauma, for her, being torn by force from her nest and brought here, in the open and in the cold?".

"Indeed" murmured the boy, settling the flap which covered the newborn's head; "What's jaundice?".

"It's the yellowish colouring you've noticed" explained the woman; "It's quite common in infants, and it may have many causes, some serious, others less worrisome. I don't know what caused hers, I'm sorry, but I'd like to reassure you: despite the birth occurred just half an hour ago, it's already disappearing. At first it was really intense and I got scared, so much that I immediately rushed to the infirmary to prepare a mild infusion of Himalayan absinthe, but now it seems clear that there's nothing to fear about".

During this cross talk, the Boogeyman kept silent, motionless, intently listening to the conversation in which he felt more and more out of place, and stealing a glance at the guests who were turning out increasingly annoying to him, and in the end, noticing his lover's arms were trembling and his eyelids kept closing up, he took the opportunity and declared: "As you can see, Jack is so tired he can't even keep his eyes open, therefore he needs peace and tranquillity to rest. I'll take care to put away the pillows and make the bed, you can go".

Without waiting to receive their consent, he stood up and began to neatly store in the chest the pillows placed against the headboard, internally rejoicing in seeing North, Sandman and Bunnymund saying goodbye affectionately, but quickly, and getting out, but a woman's voice disturbed him, asking: "Pitch, would you like to put the baby to bed? North has already brought here the cradle".

Embarrassed by the suggestion and noticing only in that moment the presence of the new bed, the man sharply replied: "No, the cradle is on your side of the bed, do it by yourself, I need to finish storing the pillows".

Keeping his eyes focused on the trunk, he continued his work, making sure to take as long as possible in order not to accidentally meet other's fuchsia irises, and he almost exulted when he realized that the interlocutor had not only make no protests, but even hurried to obey and leave, respectfully closing the door behind herself; at last, however, he managed to hold back himself, and, displaying an exasperated expression, he snapped: "Alone at last!".

Chuckling, Jack commented: "You are the usual grumpy man! Sooner or later you'll have to thank Toothiana for all she did for us, you know?".

"Okay, I'll do it later" replied Pitch.

In a single, catlike leap he straightened his back, tore off his robe and slid under the sheets, pressing his body against the partner's one and starting to tickle him to steal him a few laughs, but soon fear and emotion took over again, and, barely holding back the chills, he began to court him, kissing his cheeks, mouth, chin, neck, repeatedly caressing that hyaline and fresh skin which had threatened to
become cold forever, hugging and cuddling on and on that bony chest which had been about to disappear, laying between those long and tapered legs he adored to feel himself being embraced in turn, and going further down to pamper that belly deformed for too long and, finally, flat as it used to be, and as it should have always been.

«Did you miss me?» moaned the boy, arching to meet his lips.

Letting out a heavy sigh, the Boogeyman pressed his forehead against his stomach and answered: «Dreadfully».

Reaching out a hand to caress his hair, Frost kindly demanded: «Are you still scared?».

Embarrassed by the question, the man hesitated and thought about withdrawing and ending the conversation, but in the end, knowing that denying his feelings to the partner was pointless and harmful, he admitted: «Yes, a little. Operating you hasn't been easy at all, and losing you even less, but now that you're back, I'm recovering. Half an hour ago, however, I hit rock bottom: I felt my Nightmares rising up against me and struggling to come and take me, and I know that, if they didn't succeed, it's only because on this day the Guardians magic is too strong and dries their power. I've been weak, and I'm ashamed of this».

«You haven't been weak, Pitch» countered the boy; «You've been only human, and don't try to protest saying you're the Boogeyman, because you've showed countless times you have feelings, and because you'd contradict yourself: your name itself contains the word “man”. Moving on, I think that the Man in the Moon chose this day for the childbirth purposely to ease up on you, you know?».

Growling in hearing his enemy's name, Pitch barked: «To ease on me, you say? And what, for pity's sake, would have been easy today? If he really wanted to do me a favour, that maggot should have troubled himself to make you give birth without pain and complications, not forcing you to go into labour months early and without notice, making me cut you in two and then letting you die in front of me!».

«But in the end he saved me, didn't he?» pointed out Jack; «And that's what matters. I know by myself that seeing him intervening only at the end hadn't been great, I remember well how much I suffered both for the labour and the cut, but this doesn't necessarily mean he has kept aside with ill intent. Maybe he needed to get ready to use his magic, or maybe... what's that?».

Dumbfounded, the Boogeyman followed his lover's gaze up to his navel, and, realizing he was talking about the thin, silvery lines which had appeared around it, he explained: «It's a kind of decoration, or tattoo, shaped of stylized snowflake. The lines which draws it, now, are thin and almost transparent, but as long as we've been in the childbirth room they were thicker and silvery, so I don't know if they're destined to fade away or to last forever and shine only under the moonlight. In my opinion, it's the latter, considering your superior's bad habit of ruining you».

Rolling his eyes, the boy replied: «Oh, come on, do not exaggerate, this pattern is really cute!».

Raising on his elbows to glare at his partner, the man began: «Why should I care about the pattern, the point here is that...».

Suddenly, a faint cry interrupted him, barely emerging from the blankets overflowing from the cradle, and Frost, instantly, raised his head and hissed: «Did you hear? Do you think she needs something?».

Startled by the sound and by his lover prompt reaction, Pitch stiffened, abruptly turning towards the newborn creature he hadn't had neither the opportunity, nor the courage, to face yet, therefore,
recognising that, in order to postpone the encounter, was preferable interrupting the discussion, he declared: «No, they're fine, they're sleeping, probably dreaming, and you know who else should be dreaming? Jack Frost here, who will now behave like a good puerperant and start to sleep».

In order to stifle any protest, he crawled up to his face and stole him a long kiss, during which he managed without hindrance to make him lie down on his side, his back on the child, and wrap him in a warm embrace, then, bending over his ear, he whispered: «Sweet dreams, Jack».

And, scattering a few grains of magic sand on both of them, he fell asleep.

Waking with a start, Nightlight sat up, threatening to tumble on the ground, considering how hastily he had moved, then, blinking, he looked around.

He couldn't say what time it was, since the Man in the Moon's room was perpetually bathed in the moonbeams soft light, nor how he himself, who was able to withstand for years without giving rest, could have dozed off there, on the backless couch on which the master of the house used to lie to ponder, armed to the hilt and still clutching his spear in his hand, but he was sure about one thing: something, in the Palace, was wrong.

Running his right palm over his face to dispel the last shreds of sleep, the warrior jumped up and headed for the exit; striding, he took the hallway, then a broadwalk, following his instinct and going as fast as he could through the maze of bridges and platforms which were the heart of the imposing building; finally, almost running, he flung himself into the tower where Cinnaminson rested and looked onto the entrance, and, instantly, he froze: the Dark Guardian had arrived.

After centuries of angry wait, they had finally managed to break the ban, Reaper no longer Grim, Lady no longer Lone, violating the bright rooms with their own gloomy presence in search of the soul they’ve been courting for a lifetime, and they were already bent over her, their scythe aimed at her heart, their hand reaching out to her head, ready to claim her. Nightlight didn't reflect, nor hesitated, letting out a battle cry and leaning back his left arm to hurl his weapon, but it was too late, and he was aware of this, and so, despite his determination, he failed: suddenly struck by the pain of the ancient touch, he lost his grip on the rod, finding himself weak and helpless in front of the Hooded with no eyes who saw everything, but whose gaze the warrior had once met, and, at that point, he could do nothing but watching them bending over, stealing a kiss with the lips they didn't have from the woman they had so long desired and vanishing in a capful of wind, leaving everything as they had found it, and yet completely changed.

Shivering, the boy slumped against the jamb, his eyes filled with tears and his good hand pressed on his mouth to hold back a scream, and he couldn't understand how the Not-Being had managed to evade the defences erected with the fusion of science and magic; upon closer examination, however, he realized that his beloved Lady was no longer wrapped in the bundles of tubes and pipes, stripped of every medicament and completely taken off the machines, and he began to fear that Death had played dirty, but before he could advance to check, a well-known voice told him: «Come forward, Nightlight: pay homage to your Lady».

Dumbfounded, the warrior turned toward the Man in the Moon, glimpsing him for the first time in the shade of an instrument full of triggers and buttons, and he started: «My lord, your beloved sister has been taken off the machines, I...».

«I know» interrupted him the Guardian of the Guardians; «I myself took her off the machines».

Widening his eyes, Nightlight exclaimed: «You!? And why?».
«Because Death doesn't stop in front of anyone, and doesn't bestow favours for nothing. You should now know it well» replied the master of the house.

Still confused, but not slow-witted, the warrior dared: «His life for Jack Frost's one, am I wrong? The child couldn't have had problems. Why didn't you just helped him during childbirth?».

«Not every change can be reversed to be what it was before» answered the Man In The Moon;

«The mutations I subjected Jack Frost's body to were too deep and too entrenched to be erased. I could have tried to correct them, praying the time would have healed them, but I knew that, for better or worse, he would have remained irreparably damaged, and continued to suffer, and I couldn't allow that. After all, a spirit who aches and yearn cannot be a good Guardian of Fun, and, in these days, we cannot afford to have one unable to fulfil his own duties».

Hearing also the unuttered words, the boy sighed and whispered: «I didn't expect this, my lord: you've been guarding your sister ever since I can remember now».

«And even since before» added the Guardian of Guardians; «But now it was time for the changing of the guard: it's her turn to be free and guard, while we'll remain here, bounded to our duties, under her watchful eye».

Shivering a little under the myriad of memories and emotions which crowded his mind, Nightlight straightened his back, standing proud and composed beside the creature who, together with friends now disappeared, he had always protected, and intently staring at her; after a few minutes, however, he gave in, and asked: «My lord, may I join you?».

«Yes, Nightlight» allowed him the master of the house.

Advancing in discreet, little steps, the warrior walked around the bed and approached his beloved mentor, respectfully stopping at his side, and when he turned to look at him he saw that his face was streaked with tears.

Chapter End Notes

Stunned? Happy? Moved? Let me know how you felt! This chapter was really important for the whole story, especially the last part, so make sure not to miss any detail, because I'll develop all of them later :). Next chapter will be published on Friday 24th

A little note: I almost reached the last Italian chapter I published, so, from now on, I'll keep pace with the original fanfiction and update this translation every two or three weeks. You know, I obviously need to write it before I can translate :). I wish you a nice evening, and I hope you'll share with me your opinion about this chapter!
In those long, yet short, hours of sleep he allowed himself, Pitch didn’t rest much. Sibilant voices hounded him, whispering fears not driven away yet, dark tentacles surrounded him, trying to wrap him and suffocate him in their tar coils, nightmarish creatures visited him, attempting to devour his face and soul, beasts and spirits of all shapes and sizes tormented him, making him flounder in a bedlam of pain from which fatigue prevented him from re-emerging, and then kicks, punches, bites, delicate, in truth, but anyway sufficiently well delivered to steal him suffering cries, and then solid and angular spirals, wet mouths, warm vibrations, which had something oddly reassuring in that pit of hell, but which the Boogeyman, for fear, couldn’t trust enough to let himself go in them: the whole world seemed to have mobilized to torture him.

Terrified and confused, the man resisted for long, fighting tooth and nail against the visible monsters and with his mind against the invisible ones, driven by an indefinite something in his heart which shouted he had suffered too much and he couldn’t give up, and finally, after what seemed almost an eternity, he won: a more violent contraction, a louder growl, and his eyelids lifted, unsticking themselves from those disturbing dreams and bringing him back to reality.

A familiar wooden ceiling welcomed him, comforting him with the soft trick of light and shadows which rose not only between a beam and the other, but even in their own veinings, and giving him all the time to get used to the brightness of the fire strangely still going, and the man, recognizing the room where he had been sleeping for months, calmed down; indulging in a silent yawn, he tried to stretch, eager to recover as soon as possible to take stock of the situation, but something held him back, anchoring him to the mattress, and, fully realizing only at that time the position in which he was, he easily understood what had happened, and struggled to hold back a laugh.

Extricating himself with difficulty from the tangle of sheets and limbs in which he had been wrapped, he finally managed to turn his head, and, so, to have the obvious confirmation of his suspicions: Jack was lying at his side, his legs crossed, his back arched in a cat-like pose and his neck stretched and bent, and he had caught the man’s arm against his chest, hugging him with such passion to nibble it.

Finally understanding the strange and conflicting sensations he had had during the nightmare, the Boogeyman let out a sigh, happy to still enjoy the presence of his lover and his tender demonstrations of affection, and, just for fun, he began tickling his stomach with his fingertips; feeling him digging his teeth into his flesh, he grunted, a little piqued by the rude gesture and almost tempted to retaliate with a pinch; at last, however, he spotted the silver decoration which adorned his belly, and, mindful of the excruciating pain he had suffered and the fatigue he had had to endure, he stopped and started to cuddle him, using all the sweetness he had to assure him a peaceful sleep. It took almost a minute to him to break free, moving an inch at a time and contorting himself until his ligaments creaked just not to bump him, but the beatific smile the boy cast him as he huddled against the pillow was a reward more than enough for the complex feat of acrobatics performed, and the man couldn’t help
but smiling back as he retrieved a new blanket and draped it on his chest: the happiness he felt in having him at his side, again serene and healthy, was too intense to be hold back.

Bending over him, Pitch began to fondle him, rubbing the tip of his nose on his spine and redrawing it vertebra by vertebra from the shoulder blades to the nape, but just when he was about to climb down his neck to take refuge under his ear and inhale the fresh scent of fresh-driven snow, there so intense to stun, he noticed a particular out of place, and he froze: less than five feet far from the bed, just in front of him, stood out the cradle.

On closer inspection, actually, the detail itself was not so shocking, simple piece of furniture placed on the background and even pleasing to the eye, but what it contained was far too much, and, indeed, the Boogeyman felt upset to the core: the presence of that child never wanted was definitely cumbersome, rude meddling in an otherwise perfect scene and unnecessary burden in a life already full of duties, and tolerating them was far from being simple.

Slowly crawling, the man stepped back, climbing down the mattress and hastily evoking the robe with slits to cover himself, and, yielding partly to curiosity, partly habit, he got ready to tiptoe to check the infant.

The first thing which impressed him, of course, was the bed in which they had been placed: carved directly into a single log of fir soaked in red dye, it developed just like a tree, the legs shaped to form winding roots, the support column carved to reproduce the bumps and the recess of a young trunk and the structure of the nest adorned with dozens of branches, thicker at the base, thinner on the cover, each carrying tiny flowers and leaves harbingers of a spring still far. From the top of the visor, natural as the gushing bloom of a newborn stem, branched out a sinuous frond, twisting on itself before boldly lunging into the void, and on it was hanged a small carousel, made of slender reeds and small eggs painted in pastel colours and childish decorations; inside, however, the wood was completely covered with a silky and almost impalpable lining, golden here, orange there, so thin to look woven of real rays captured at sunrise and sunset, and so cheerful in its discreet splendour to seem almost alive.

Immediately recognizing the hand of three of the Big Four, Pitch wasn't surprised by the gifts they had made, but, rather, astonished not to see anything by Toothiana, always the most expansive lover of children of all ages and greater supporter of the unexpected pregnancy; dumbfounded, he wondered if he had missed it and he began to look for it, making his eyes wander around the room, kneeling under the crib to check its bottom and even crawling around it, but he spotted nothing, and, at that point, he was forced to examine the last corner left, which he would have willingly spared to himself: the recess of the cradle.

A strange scent of jasmine was coming from it, similar to the one which had characterized Jack during his pregnancy, but more honeyed, lighter and, at the same time, more intense, as if it were deep, but didn't want to impose itself, and the Boogeyman dived in it hesitantly, almost frightened by the strange novelty; bending down, he began to examine the tangle of blankets, slowly advancing with his head under the visor and making sure not to breathe in order not to be discovered, and eventually he came across a gap between the covers which he had noticed from the beginning, but which, until that moment, he had preferred to ignore.

It was easy for him, since immemorial times accustomed to the darkness, glimpsing the little face which was hidden in it, still a little flushed, but decidedly less inflamed than a few hours before, its small and flattened nose, its soft cheeks, its closed eyes and its forehead frowned in a concentrated expression, and even easier asking himself: why? Why was that child there? Why not on the Moon, where they had been explicitly desired, or in any other part of the Earth? Why did he, who hated infants, had to bear one, moreover descendant of the enemy? No, no, it was pointless, the baby
themselves had no fault, but not even the right to subvert his life with their presence, and he had not
the slightest intention of letting them to: he would have allowed Frost to take care of them and, if
necessary, he would have also helped him, but keeping his distance, and he would have never let
himself go into pathetic displays of an affection he didn't feel. Come on, he, the King of Nightmares
himself, busy making faces and speak in a falsetto voice to please a horrific creature caught by
colics? Was this really what others, whoever they were, expected from him? It was nothing short of
unacceptable! Baby food and baths were tolerable, as long as the boy had asked him, but hugs and
kisses were not. After all, the new Guardian's growing phase would have not lasted long, right? The
pregnancy had finished weeks early, the duties which they would have had to fulfil seemed to grow
more and more urgent, there was no time to waste in twee games and, no doubt, no time would have
been wasted: within a few months, maximum a year, the Spirit would have started working flat-out,
becoming completely autonomous and allowing him and Jack to return to live, alone and in peace,
their ordinary routine. Yes, yes, this was definitely what would have happened, he only had to bite
the bullet for a while, to delegate as much as possible and, in case, help quickly and efficiently, and
everything would have turned out fine, that disturbing parenthesis in their lives would have been
closed and everything would have finally come back to normal, as it should be and should have
always been, he just had to hold on, and, who knows, maybe luck would have even touched him,
and the boy would have felt uncomfortable enough to step aside.

While he indulged in these chaotic reflections, where rejection and availability alternated almost at
alarming speed, the child stirred in her sleep, crumpling the covers and letting out a faint wailing, and
Pitch, who, foolishly, had not expected them to take the initiative, jumped back, startled, stumbling
on a stool and falling head over heels on the armchair; coughing and snorting, he stood up, his head
raised to avoid the flames of the roaring fire he had nearly missed, but his tail between his legs for the
gaffe, and, after making sure he hadn't been seen by anyone, he decided that getting away and
diverting himself for a few minutes was the best choice to recover from the encounter.

A stealthy step at a time, he exited the room, leaving the door open behind himself to make the air
circulate and let the corridor cooler one change the inner one, now musty, and he walked towards the
kitchen to prepare himself a cup of tea; combing his ruffled hair, he went down the hall, carelessly
moving his eyes from a Christmas decoration to another as he reflected about what mixture of herbs
infuse, then he reached the Globe Hall, but he almost didn't have time to enter it that a deep and
cheerful voice boomed: «Oh, Pitch, you're already here! So, what do you think about the ba...».

«The bastions, he wanted to ask you what do you think about the bastions, have you noticed he
changed the decorations?» intervened a female warble.

Stunned by that unexpected and quite noisy welcome, the Boogeyman turned, surprising the Big
Four camped on the floor on some piles of jute bags, and he instinctively asked: «What the hell are
you doing here? Couldn't have you laid on the couches, at least?».

«Oh, well, you see» began Toothiana, ruffling her feathers; «On the sleigh had remained the gift
bags and we thought it was better putting them back, but in the end we were too tired, so we decided
to take a break. They are comfortable, you know? Would you like to sit with us?».

«No, thanks, I have better things to do» sharply answered the man.

«What? Can I give you a hand? I've collected a lot of useful things tonight, if you need something,
just ask!» volunteered North, flashing a dazzling smile.

Annoyed by their intrusiveness and cordiality, which were even more maddening than usual, given
the discomfort he already felt, Pitch countered: «Cutting the broth¹, and no, I don't need your help,
nor all the amazing, useful things you retrieved to do it! May I know why you have to be always so
Haughtily giving his back to the importunate company, he headed away, but the master of the house commented: «Seems that someone here woke up in a bad mood, huh? Did you sleep bad? Maybe the bastions disturbed you, he wanted to say this. You know, they're quite ornate, and you usually don't like Christmas decorations, so, who knows, maybe at night you thought about them and slept bad».

The Boogeyman didn't need to turn and see the woman collapsed on Santa Claus to realize that something was not right in that conversation, nor to think long to understand what topic the latter had tried to introduce twice, however, determined to not face it, he decided to play along and replicate: «Bastions, decorations, stairs and any corner or occupant of this Palace disturb me greatly and continuously, so yes, it's quite likely that my bad mood is due to everything. Are you going to pour salt into the wound by prolonging this pointless and annoying conversation, or will you do me the grace to keep quiet and give a break to my poor ears? I didn't leave my room to indulge in idle talk, I went out to get some fresh air and a tea, and I want to return as soon as possible to... Jack, what the hell are you doing here!?».

Visibly trembling, Jack emerged from the shadows of the hallway, his trousers unbuttoned, his black blouse now saggy and, in his hands, the staff for long forgotten, and he stammered: «Hi everyone!».

«'Hi'?» snapped the man, striding towards him; «Is it really the best thing you manage to say? Don't you expect to move with your enthusiasm, you're going back to bed, and you're doing it immediately»

Hiding behind the stick and putting his foot down, the boy protested: «No, I won't go back to bed! Why should I do that?».

«You perfectly know the reason! Human women rest for days after a caesarean section and take more than a month to recover, then you'll do me the pleasure to sit still at least a week, since you've even dead and revived in the meantime!» scolded him Pitch, effortlessly picking him up in his arms.

«A week!?» exclaimed Frost, clinging to the jamb to avoid being taken away; «But it's too much, I'll die of boredom! I can't do it, and then, don't you see how strong I already am? I managed to get dressed and come here all by myself!?».

«You should have never had» sharply retorted the Boogeyman.

At that criticism, the boy clouded over, slackening off and relaxing his muscles, and, casting the other a repentant look, he murmured: «I'm sorry. I know I should rest, I feel it, and I promise I'll do it as long as necessary, but when I woke up I didn't manage to stay calm and still: I was there all alone, in that room where I've been locked up for weeks, even just thinking about it made me anxious, and then, well, I wanted... I wanted to see the baby».

Slightly surprised by his lover's sudden docility, the man stopped, leaving him time and room to explain himself, and when the boy finished he commented: «Should I believe the first part of the story, or better if I consider it an excuse, as the second? I take seriously your anxieties, but you know you only needed to raise your head to see the child, so I don't understand why you tried to move me to pity with this topic».

He regretted almost immediately the coldness he had used, feeling foolish and cruel for having vented his anxieties and frustrations on the partner guiltless and still recovering, and he mentally
prepared himself to his offended outburst, but, unlike he expected, the other didn't take up the challenge and simply replied: «But the baby was not in the cradle».

Dumbfounded, Pitch chuckled and countered: «Don't be silly, I checked three minutes ago, and they were there. Maybe you didn't spot them among the blankets».

«And I checked just a minute ago, and she wasn't there» repeated the boy; «And it's not possible I didn't spot her, since in the cradle there were no blankets left. Where is she? Where have you brought her?».

The unexpected news shocked not little the Boogeyman, who found himself motionless, his eyes widened and his mouth half open, staring at the other, unable to believe his words and, at the same time, to call him a liar; Jack, for his part, didn't react differently, returning his gaze first with a puzzled look, then an alarmed one, and starting to fidget more and more, but when he was about to talk the man anticipated him, saying: «Stay here with the other Guardians and lie down, Jack, I'll go to check».

Without waiting for an answer, he bent over and left him on the ground, taking care to place him close to the jamb so that he could use it as a support, then he entrusted him to the Guardians, whom he didn't bother himself to turn to, and walked toward his room; fast as a lightning, he darted inside, kicking away the stool blocking his way and throwing himself on the cradle, but, as the partner had told him, he found it completely empty.

Too proud to give up, he began to rummage everywhere, on the armchair, in the closet, above and under the bed in which, up to a few minutes before, he had slept, even among the stacked logs next the fireplace, but, as he should have expected, he found nothing, and at that point he had to admit the obvious: the infant was gone. That awareness, oddly, didn't give him relief, but rather a sense of ineptitude quite embarrassing and frustrating, which the joy for the premature removal of the source of his problems couldn't drive away in the least, and, now, for the second time in that night, he wondered: why? Why, without the slightest warning, had the child been taken away? And why after he had studied them and before Frost woke up? No striking events had occurred in those minutes, he was sure, and not even during the long sleep they had both allowed themselves, so why had the kidnapper waited so long after the birth before acting, and moved in such a risky moment? But, above all, who were they? There were a thousand possible answers to this question, but the first which sprang to his mind, permeating it with hate in its purest form, was just one: the Guardians. Oh, sure, they had all been very sweet and tender during pregnancy, always ready to assist, always available to help and encourage him, but how sincere had been the smiles they had cast him? How much could he, the King of Nightmares, trust his enemies, and how much did his enemies trust him? A year of coaxing couldn't erase centuries of battles, nor resolve the difference of opinions and objectives which had always divided them, therefore it was not unlikely they had decided to stab him in the back: they could have had thousand reasons. Revenge, spite, narrowness of mind, willingness to educate from the beginning the young colleague to the task which they were intended to, desire to make them grow in a healthy and positive environment, fear that the Boogeyman could have a bad influence on them, or that he couldn't be able to take care of them properly, and it was exactly the latter suspicion which made him see red: those pathetic, little spirits should not dare to take decisions in his place, standing between him and his problems, he was the only and unique master of his own life, he had the right to lay claim to a property or refuse his own, and he had every intention of exercising it.

Frothing at the mouth, he headed back and ran out of the room, then, after bursting the Globe Hall, he boomed: «Who did it!?».

Bunnymund, who, in the meantime, had stood up and moved away in order not to be crushed by his
impetus, snapped: «Don't tell me you're really insinuating that...».

«I insinuate whatever I want when the baby is involved!» shouted Pitch, now beside himself; «It's Jack's daughter whom you're talking about, not a pathetic creature whatsoever! Who of you took her? Was it you? Tell me where you brought her!».

Soaring, Toothiana stepped between the two disputants and declared: «No, Pitch, it wasn't Bunnymund who took her away».

Growling, the Boogeyman grabbed her by the arm and drew her closer to himself, then he hissed: «But look at whom we have here, the meddler fairy, always ready to cast a smile as she sticks her nose where she shouldn't! You've drawn your conclusions in these three months of pregnancy, didn't you? You've decided I was too many in the perfect scene you had built, huh? Huh!?».

Unperturbed, the fairy broke free and rebuked him: «I fully understand your anger, Pitch, and I encourage you to vent it, even on me, but you must not let it cloud your judgement: it's not time to get lost in absurd quarrels. The scene you're talking about was built by all of us and has always been far from being perfect, if I had really wanted to exclude you from it I would have certainly not bothered myself to bring you back in it when you run away and then helped you reintegrate, and then, damn, Pitch, there are so many reasons for which I had no interest to kidnap her that I don't even know where to begin to list them! I am a bit nosy, I admit it, but I would never dare to take decisions in your place, nor to take the baby away from you and Jack, because, remember this, as you lost her, he lost her, too, and he's suffering for this».

Taken aback, the man was forced to admit the obvious, well aware that, even if the woman had really wanted to hurt him, she would have never exploited a way which made Jack suffer, too, so he demanded: «And what about the others? I might trust you, but not them».

«But listen to him!» intervened the Pooka; «After everything we did for you, is this how you repay us? If we had wanted to stab you in the back, you would have felt the blade sinking in your flesh months and months ago!».

«Bunnymund!» rebuked him Toothiana, pressing a hand on his shoulder; «Ignore him. He offended me with his insinuations, too, but he's shocked, and we must understand and pander to him. I stand for the others, Pitch. We stayed together all the time, sit here talking, and no one has ever walked away».

«And before you ask» added North; «None of our helpers could have kidnapped her. They're all exhausted from Christmas, they haven't left the dormitories yet, and, even if they did, they could have never get to your room without passing here, because this morning I personally locked up all the doors of the hallway».

«A Yeti or an elf is easy to see, but an Easter Egg can safely go unnoticed» pointed out the man, casting a glance to the Easter Bunny.

«Oh, sure, obviously, especially when it's carrying a child on its top, right?» commented the latter.

«Maybe you simply made one of your practical tunnel available» accusingly insinuated Pitch.

«Or maybe you're just an idiot, since my tunnel cannot be opened remotely, and since I'm the one who suggested to camp here to be at your disposal!» retorted Bunnymund, threateningly pricking up his ears.

«Stop, stop it!» silenced them the fairy, separating them by force; «Pitch, it wasn't any of us, accept it
and look beyond! Arguing is pointless, we must stick together and focus to find a solution, and we have to hurry! If you have any idea tell me, in the meantime, I...».

«Pitch!» called a choked voice.

Recognizing the partner, the Boogeyman turned, and as soon as he met his eyes he had a dizziness: the fear which permeated them was so intense and deep to be palpable, and it had struck him more violently than a hammer. Unable to do otherwise, the man sank into that sea of terror, in that endless ocean of thousand shades of blue and panic, disgusted by his own nature, which forced him to take advantage of the pain of his one, true love, but at the same time grateful for the generous gift which gave him new strength; after a few seconds, making a considerable effort, he shook himself, managing to focus not only the sapphire irises in their entirety, but also Jack himself, lying on the jute bags and supported by Sandman, and to hear him murmuring: «Pitch, Where is she? Where is my baby? She's always been safe inside me, it's not possible something happened to her, she's my baby, I want her back, I've barely seen her, I have to stay with her for a longest time, she can't be already gone, she's so small, she needs us...».

Not surprised at all by that burst of motherhood, Pitch displayed the most reassuring smile he managed to put together, then, after kneeling and stroking his partner's head, he whispered: «Don't worry, Jack: I'll manage to retrieve the child and bring her back to you, and I promise you I will not fail. Make sure to rest as you wait for me. I'll see you soon».

Without further delay, he dissolved into a solid stream of magic sand, rather inconsistent, actually, since the magic of Christmas still interfered with his powers, but shattered enough to allow him to move easily, and, after placing a fleeting kiss on Frost's trembling lips, he lunged forward; panting and stumbling, he jumped from one beam to another, higher and higher, running away from the excited voices which pursued him and which were getting closer, and eventually he managed to escape through the circular opening in the roof.

The effort of the last leap, unfortunately, worn him to the point he re-materialized aloft and crashed with his shoulder against the watchtower, but neither the disorientation, nor the pain, were enough to stop him, because the anger which spurred him was more than sufficient to support him; growling, the Boogeyman stood up and ran to the cave system above the Palace, climbing like a fury along the side of the mountain and then descending in the first crack he came across, and, after a minute of research, he found what he was looking for.

Awakening from a long sleep, the first Pureblood of the new era revealed himself to his eyes, his orbits lit by a blue fire, his left side covered with frost, the right one embedded in the wall of ice, and, snorting, he began to fidget: shuddering and whinnying, he broke free from his prison, his breath condensing in dense clouds of steam, shards of ice and darkness falling from his body and pulverizing under his mighty hooves, and when nothing forced him any more, he advanced.

Inhaling deeply to follow his chills, the man watched the stallion striding majestically, making his way in the midst of his young mates and crushing the weakest ones to absorb their powers, and when the horse reached him, he whispered: «Take me to the moon».

He didn't need to add anything, because the Nightmare, though asleep, had always been vigilant, and knew what had happened, and because the desire for revenge was, anyway, understood and supported by him, therefore Pitch didn't have the slightest difficulty to stop him and mount him, but when he was about to spur him, Toothiana appeared at the mouth of the cave, and cried: «Pitch! Oh, you're here! That's Jack's Nightmare, isn't he? You had a great idea taking him: he could come in handy. Now, you should come with me, we must meet to discuss and conceive a plan».

«I already have a plan» countered the Boogeyman; «And it doesn't include any unnecessary
Without bothering himself to provide more comprehensive explanations, or to close the conversation in a more polite way, he dug his heels into his mount, setting him off at a gallop and sweeping away the poor fairy; once outside, spotted in advance Bunnymund and Sandman, he led the beast between them, so as to cause them to collide and overcome them; finally, after making sure that neither North, nor Jack, were lurking, he pulled the stallion's mane with all his strength and diverted him toward the sky.

He rode fast, in his eyes the image of the brilliant satellite he was about to attack, in his heart the blind hatred for its occupant who had dared too many times, and who now had dared too much, piqued by his intrusiveness, by the liberties he had took and by the cruelty he had had no hesitation to use; he rode tirelessly, heedless of the cold wind which scourged his back and of the Pureblood's sharp tips which sank in his thighs, and he didn't listen to the calls which followed him, begging him to stop and turn back; he rode for long, and, in the end, he heard a hollow sound, and felt the Nightmare slow down.

Extremely annoyed by that initiative, the man straightened up and got ready to hit his disobedient servant, but as soon as he raised his head he found himself facing an unexpected scene: Sandman and Toothiana, the only two Guardians who had managed to chase him, were stuck behind an invisible barrier, which glowed in a milky light when it was touched, and which seemed to stretch for miles in every direction.

Slamming her fists against the magic wall, the fairy shouted: «Pitch, come back! It's a trap!».

But Pitch was too determined to carry out his mission to be frightened by the trap, and, ignoring both the common sense and the repeated warnings, he gave his back to the two Spirits and run away.

Keeping his mind well clear to avoid the risk of taking false steps, he reined in a little his horse, flying over the lunar surface in search of a good access point to the underground, and, discarding a priori the comfortable stairs which were probably the main access, he opted for a narrow crack in the soil. After leaving his beast hidden behind a large boulder, he began to climb down the slit, puffing and groaning as he twisted to slid his long limbs through the tortuous fissure, and when he finally managed to extricate himself and land, more or less softly, against a slope, something came to his rescue: a sweet and intense scent of jasmine.

Although taken by anger and the heat of the moment, the Boogeyman had been subconsciously aware since the beginning he had thrown himself into a reckless adventure, leaving alone and exhausted toward a land he had never explored and against an enemy he didn't know how to defeat, however, the only detail which had worried him was the fact he couldn't discover in advance the location of the infant, and when the solution was handed to him on a silver plate, he didn't waste time to take advantage of it, and got pleased for the luck he had had, following without further ado the trail of perfume and preferring not to suspect that, behind it, there could be hiding an evil hand.

After chasing the honeyed scent beyond the ledge, over a suspension bridge and down a steep staircase, the man slipped through an ajar door and entered into a singular stone room, very bright, despite the apparent absence of windows, and filled almost to the ceiling with strange machinery; frowning, he decided to move along the wall, creeping in the shadows of those quiet metal boxes and bypassing with difficulty bundles of disturbing pipes, and when he reached the other side of the chamber he stopped, astonished.

In front of him, lying on a large bed, laid the little girl, naked, alone, so small in comparison to the impressive equipment which surrounded her, so sad in the midst of those gloomy objects which literally stank of death, and for a moment Pitch seriously feared he had arrived late and found in his
hands, for the second time in less than a day, a cold and lifeless corpse; a few seconds later, however, the newborn moved, beginning to frantically shake her limbs and head, and, reassured, he breathed a sigh of relief and get ready to save her.

Finally made wary by the excessive ease with which he had reached her, he began to look around, checking for the presence of traps or tricks, and soon he realized that the bed had been enclosed by a cage of moonbeams, so thin to be almost invisible, but no doubt sufficiently intense to hurt him; scratching his chin, Pitch began to study the mesh, searching a device to disable it or a weak point to attack, and in the end, noticing a missing bar, he dematerialized and lunged through the leak.

Suddenly, a second row of spars appeared in front of him, hovering less than a yard above the bed and preventing him to rise to his feet, and, regretting not having reflected more, nor observed longer, he was forced to divert and fell heavily on the mattress, his legs drawn up, his back bent in a painful position and his face completely sunk in the sheets.

Growling and snorting, he raised himself on his elbows, cursing his haste, the endless obstacles he always came across in his life, the situation in detail and in general, and the one who had caused it, but soon he had something else to think about: two big, widened irises were staring at him, and, if the multiple speckling of aquamarine and turquoise were no doubt attributable to Jack, the dozens of dark tentacles which were floundering among them were equally unmistakable.

¹ “Cutting the broth” is an Italian common saying, typical of the northern regions. When you say “I'll cut the broth” you mean you’re willing to do even something pointless and endless, rather than what the interlocutor proposed you. It's not gross, but it's quite rude

Here you can find another beautiful fanart made by Fridarush:

http://fridarush.tumblr.com/post/117030796347/cianethedevil-so-in-the-end-i-did-it-i-hope-you

Chapter End Notes

Next chapter will be published on Friday 15th of May. Remember I'm quite busy in this
period, so I might publish the next two chapters late, as this time. The fact I have little free time a day doesn't mean I wouldn't be glad to receive a comment, on the contrary, it would make me happy and let me understand if I'm translating properly and if you're enjoying the story, so feel free to contact me.
Astonished, Pitch stared at her, unable to do otherwise. Astonished, Pitch stared at her, shivering in seeing her doing the same. Astonished, Pitch stared at her, drowning in that abyss of darkness and frost which had no reason to exist, and which yet stood there, in front of him, deep and brilliant, and impossible to deny.

The temptation to indulge in rambling conjectures, mumbling tirades or incoherent gestures, exactly as he had done since his awakening, was strong in him, enough to make him back off and start babbling incomprehensible refusals; as soon as he slipped out of sight of those two discs of obsidian and turquoise, however, a sense of guilt caught him, causing him to repent not only of that flight, but also of all the previous ones, mental or physical, thanks to which he had as slyly as cowardly sneaked off the matter, and so, setting aside his fears and insecurities, the Boogeyman decided to face it clearly once and for all.

Swallowing loudly, he climbed back up to the girl's little face, then, plucking up the courage, he concentrated and tried to think. The first question he took account of, of course, was the one concerning her irises: how was it possible that these, in addition to the obvious colour of the sea, contained also dark tentacles? Maybe the Man In The Moon had stolen some of his shadows and had instilled them in her eyes? Maybe he had copied them, creating them with a similar, but different, material? Maybe the black sand of his clothes had slid on Jack's belly and had slowly impregnated it, then manifesting itself through the mirror of the soul? No, no, it couldn't have happened that way, the magic dust, albeit shifty, couldn't seep through the flesh, those dark swirls were far too similar to his own to be a simple imitation, the Guardian of the Guardians couldn't handle the darkness without destroying it, and, anyway, why should he have done it? Why should he, the Bearer of Light, have allowed what he had always fought to tarnish one of his most precious creations? Maybe the whole thing had happened by mistake, despite the conception had taken place on his satellite? And, in that case, leaving aside the fact that there seemed to be no plausible way in which Pitch, completely unaware of everything and busy getting ready for Halloween, might have interfered with the rape, why had the Man In The Moon not intervened lately, clearing the newborn creature of any trace of negativity? His immense powers were more than enough to guarantee him immediate success, there had been no lack of opportunities, and yet, as was his costume, he hadn't lifted a finger. Maybe before, while the foetus was protected in Frost's belly, he hadn't managed to reach them? Maybe, hindered by the long distance, he had tried and failed, and he had therefore been forced to postpone? It was a possibility, indeed the idea itself would have been a plausible explanation to the second question to be analysed, id est the sudden abduction, but then why had that maggot not taken advantage of the half hour head start to act? Maybe he needed more time? Maybe he hadn't felt the need to proceed quickly, because he intended to keep the child in his Palace forever? But then, why had he abandoned her, moreover in a place so easily accessible, and had he even let her jasmine scent spread in the air, attracting any meddler towards that poorly defended bed? Maybe he needed to have the Boogeyman next to her to purify her? Maybe he had no intention to cleanse her, and he was simply and cruelly using her for who knows what nefarious purpose? Or maybe he was just
improvising and praying that everything could run smoothly?

Without warning, a violent cramp seized the man's shoulder, flooring him on the mattress and almost making him howl with pain, and, although not considering the event a real stroke of luck, he had to admit that it had been nothing short of providential: the sequence of assumptions which he had readily let himself go into had literally overwhelmed him, wrapping him in an endless fog which boded to increasingly clasp on him, and it had nearly suffocated him.

Massaging the contracted muscle, Pitch rose, bending again over the infant who, without moving or speaking, had managed to shock him to that point, and finally he came to a conclusion: as he had promised himself a few minutes before, he had to stop. He had to stop assuming, presuming, conjecturing, guessing, he had to stop getting lost in flights of fancy and mazes of wild fantasies, he had to stop once and for all, because he had no time to do it, nor room, because lingering was foolish and dangerous, and because, in the end, the only thing he could be sure about was the current reality, and this shone all too clear in front of his eyes. Eyes, yes, eyes, precisely them, precisely those were the problem and the solution to everything: eyes cerulean and dark, eyes of aquamarine and basalt, eyes of water and shadows, into which the latter floundered alive and into which they could have leaked only in one way.

At this awareness, a new sense of turmoil caught him, shocking as the initial one, but positively, as a kind of need to participate wedded to the embarrassment of not knowing how to, and the Boogeyman, finding himself floored, preferred to look around and plan the escape, rather than focusing on the warm sensation which had inexplicably wrapped his chest. Making his eyes wander around the room and taking a closer look whenever he bumped into in a foreshortening through the machineries, he soon spotted a small, hidden door, possibly sealed, but certainly easy to break open, judging by the thick layer of rust which covered the keyhole, and he decided to exploit it to get away undisturbed; crawling slowly to the edge of the mattress, he started again to study the bars of moonlight, praying that, from the inside, could be easier deactivating them or finding their weak point, but a wailing interrupted him, and, at that point, he could no longer keep ignoring the creature he had come to save.

Clumsily backing away, he moved exactly above her, just in time to see her chubby little face frowned in a frightened expression and her magnetic eyes full of tears, and, widening his own, he stammered: «No no no, don't cry, no, it's all right, I'm here, don't you see? I came here for you, to pick you up and bring you back, so you'll be back with Jack, I have come here for that purpose, I'm... maybe I'm the cause of your fear...».

A veil of sadness descended upon him when the suspect made its way into his consciousness, causing him to shrink back and stop talking, almost ashamed of his own nature, but the newborn, unlike he expected, seemed more disturbed by the silence than by his voice, so, plucking up his courage, the man continued: «Or maybe it's not so? You're widening your big eyes, but you opened them recently, I don't think you're able to see me, but you recognize my voice, right? You heard it while you were still nestled in Jack's belly? Does it make you feel better? Yes, it seems so, yes, look, you're not crying any more, you look more serene, aren't you? Hush, I'll keep talking, I'll tell you something funny, so you'll eventually relax and feel good again...».

Reassured by his words, the girl fell silent, drawing up her arms and legs and staring into his irises to better focus on that speech which she couldn't understand, but which captivated her so much, but soon after, showing a pleading expression, she arched her back and stretched out her hands towards him; Pitch, for his part, got almost frightened at the sudden movement, jumping and deftly dodging it, anyway he didn't take much to realize that that was a mere attempt to ask a more heartfelt solace, and, albeit not entirely convinced, he decided to give it.
It took him forever to move closer, his eyes shut in order not to be caught by panic and his breath reduced to a hiss, so high the tension he felt was, but in the end, a little trembling and a little hesitating, he succeeded, and, as soon as he reached her, everything changed. It was enough a simple touch to upset him to his very core, causing him warm chills and activating the magic sand which covered his shoulders, and, when this began to run down his neck and cheeks in sinuous tentacles, so easy for him following it and presenting himself to the newborn creature just come into the world, bowing in front of her, letting himself be courted by her little fingers which, albeit with movements clumsy and imprecise, knew to be more delicate than a feather, offering himself to her first exploration, because that was his daughter, and she had every right to know him. His daughter, yes, his daughter, finally he had admitted it, finally, after months of doubts and hours of denial, he had managed to shout it! His first and only, sweet, beautiful little girl, blood of his blood, flesh of his flesh, born from the union of darkness and frost, but even more beautiful than both of them, his descendant, and thus undoubtedly destined for great things, Jack’s descendant, and thus deserving of a life full of joy, at the same time burden and blessing, but certainly, at least in that moment, too beautiful to seem to him nothing but a gift.

Cursing himself for all the time wasted lucubrating, eating out his heart and soul without ever figure out anything, nor managing to take a real decision which was even only a few minutes projected into the future, the Boogeyman pushed his face against the child, rubbing his nose along her soft stomach, and he murmured: «Yes, I’m here, I’m here with you... my baby».

Overwhelmed by stir, he crouched better and allowed his shadows interacting with her, studying her and softly stroking her up to surround her from head to foot, while a shy smile increasingly rose on his lips, and tears of emotion pressed on his eyelids to vent and show more clearly the new feeling which warmed him; moved by her clumsy reactions, he chuckled and cocked his head, in order to let her play with his hair, but at that moment a sharp crack echoed in the air, breaking the idyll.

Startling, the man squatted on his hands and feet and looked around nervously, ready to attack the intruder who had dared to interrupt such an intimate moment, but he spotted nothing strange; after taking a second look, and anyway terribly ashamed of having let himself go to mawkishnesses befitting a pathetic sissy, he concluded that the noise should have been caused by an internal mechanism of one of the many machines therein, and he decided that, unwanted spies or not, it was time to leave.

«Baby, we must go, immediately and hastily, and you must keep silent, okay? No cries and no babbles, stay still against me and you’ll soon be in Jack’s arms» he whispered, looking at her sidelong to better keep his distance.

Then, without further delay, he acted. It took him a few seconds to get ready, managing in a single move to mend the robe now tattered on the shoulders, straighten up, envelop the infant in a soft cocoon of darkness and fasten her, running a support band around his thorax, against his chest, less than a minute to realize that, apart from the chink through which he had laboriously penetrated, and which anyway was not exploitable as an exit, the cage in which they were trapped had no weak points, and a moment to find a solution, risky, but unique alternative to resignation, and thus whispered he whispered: «Hold on».

He was aware that he had spoken more to himself than to the sweet bundle he was about to carry, fearful that the approach far too direct and violent might alarm the master of the house, or that the magic sand could betray him and fail, and indeed he hesitated a long time before summoning it; eventually, though, remembering the desperate look Jack had cast him when he had realized he had lost his daughter never desired, but deeply loved, he took courage in both hands and activated it. He began slowly, only waking it and making it boil in his veins to test its strength; then, praying it could resist, he let it flow in sinuous tentacles down his arms, collecting it on his fingertips and shaping it
into a sharp and slightly convex disk; finally, after thickening as much as possible, he threw it on the bars and rushed behind it.

As he expected, the cupola sizzled and buckled, but it withstand the impact and opened a passage, barely wide as his shoulders, through which he miraculously managed to tumble unscathed up to find himself lying on the cool stone floor; on cloud nine for the success of his plan, Pitch rose on an elbow and exulted, wasting time to congratulate himself, instead of crawling away, and so it happened the unpredictable inevitable: the sand collapsed, the moonbeams pierced it and his left ankle, remained on the border between imprisonment and freedom, was struck directly.

In a blink, a stabbing pain assailed him, paralysing his whole leg and causing him cramps even to the muscles of his torso and lower belly, and the Boogeyman, caught by surprise, couldn't hold back the piercing scream which rose in his chest, nor control the involuntary contractions which seized him; gasping and writhing under the destructive light, he experienced a sufferance not even remotely comparable to the one he had felt during and after Behemuth's attack, sharp, penetrating, indescribable in its cruelty, so intense to make him lose his vision and hearing, but also to give him a herculean force which not even despair would have managed to awaken in him, and so, in a jerk, he bent his the knee and finally rescue the limb from torture.

Moaning and sobbing, he crawled backwards, stumbling in his robe in order to escape, now late, the danger, and only when he bumped against a machine he recovered enough to realize he was now at a safe distance and breathe again; panting, he sat up and decided to check the damage, and as soon as he bent over the articulation he felt sick: the skin, there since he remembered thin, but intact, had been consumed, plowed by deep cuts branching along the foot and the calf as a sort of macabre tattoo, and the flesh visible through them was white, spongy, and throbbed faster than his heart driven mad by panic.

The girl, who, until shortly before, had diligently stayed nestled against his sternum, began to fuss and whine, perhaps sensing his distress, perhaps no longer able to control the fear felt when she had heard the cry of pain, and with a well aimed elbow she managed to pierce the protective pouch in which she was wrapped, so the man got up the nerve and whispered: «No, no, baby, it's okay, it's okay, now we're leaving, stay still and silent, it's all right».

Keeping talking to her and gently patting her back, he managed to calm her enough to immobilize her and patch up the hole in the fabric of darkness, as well as to regain self-control; then, after blaming himself one last time, he focused on his goal and, laboriously standing up, he limped towards the hidden door, the left hand resting on the bundle he had vowed to return to Jack, the right one bent like a claw and ready to hang to any available handhold to prevent him from falling; finally, reaching the exit spotted a few minutes before, he leaned against the wood and pushed, thanking his lucky stars when he saw the whole area surrounding the lock and the knob crumbling and collapsing, leaving him free access to the dark corridor behind.

He couldn't say how long he walked, whether for minutes, hours or days, miserably hobbling along the damp and narrow tunnel which took his breath and hope away at every step and shivering for the cold which mercilessly climbed his bare legs, nor how, although it had almost been unfleshed, his ankle managed to resist and not to bend under the weight of his body increased of the infant; however, when his strength began to falter, and, lost any contact with reality, he started to believe that there was no other world out of that suffocating darkness, and therefore no way to escape, a light appeared in the distance, small and faint at first, then more and more big and bright, beacon of salvation which thoughtfully led him out from the satellite bowels and which, finally, opened in front of his eyes in a large underground cavern.

Astonished by the unexpected change, Pitch took a moment to settle, fumbling on the layer of soft
lunar dust which covered the hollow floor of the cave and dully blinking at the sight of the pretty openings which, as the holes of a lace, adorned the ceiling, thrusting it open to the cosmos; then, after allowing himself a little time to recover and gaze at the Earth which, from that perspective, looked more like a mottled gemstone than a planet, he shook himself and moved to the right, heading towards a wide and short crack which would have let him flee from the place without difficulty; finally, just when he was about to enter it and crawl out, something stopped him.

It all happened suddenly, out of the blue in a dangerous adventure lasted too long for tension and attention to hold on, not only metaphorically, but also physically: it was, in fact, a powerful electric shock which stopped him, cowardly stabbing him in the back when he felt now safe and smashing him into the wall of the chink. Coughing and groaning, the Boogeyman stood up, bracing himself against the surrounding rocks to avoid slipping, and when he managed, at last, to look up he saw exactly what he feared most: a short and stocky figure, light clothes and ruddy face, impossible to confuse as much not to hate.

«You!» exclaimed Pitch, instinctively flattening himself against the rock wall.

Then, without warning and without further ado, he attacked. He evoked first a javelin of dark sand, then another, then another, then, worn out, simple and lighter arrowheads, which he threw in quick sequence, and finally shapeless and sharp tentacles, which, rather than leaping, just crawled towards the target, grunting for the fatigue, inflamed with anger for the mere presence of the enemy, and for the incredible agility with which he managed dodge and parry every attack, and after a minute, exasperated, he shouted: «Running away is pointless, you maggot, I'll make you pay for everything you've done!».

Flashing a cond e scending smile, the Man In The Moon countered: «You don't seem to be in a position to make concrete threats».

«Wanna bet!?» snapped the Boogeyman.

«Let's bet» agreed the master of the house.

After easily deflecting the last handful of sand sent to him, the latter opened his arms and called to himself dozens of moonbeams, absorbing them from stones, dust and air and merging them into a single, fickle sphere bristling with points and sharp thorns, then, as soon as it reached the size of a human skull, he let it go. Immediately guessing its destination, the man got ready to block it with his bare hands and corrupt it with his darkness, actually not sure at all he could be able to success, but too angry to try a less direct and brutal approach; as soon as he lifted his palms, however, he remembered his sweet bundle, too weak and defenceless to withstand such a blast, and thus, neglecting himself, he hugged it and turned to protect it with his body. He barely winced when he was hit, determined to contort as little as possible in order not to expose his daughter, and he didn't let out a moan as the rays of light began to devour his back; he slid on his knees when they reached the bones and didn't stop, always bent to provide a warm, safe shelter to the child, and he murmured rambling encouragements to reassure her and prevent cries and crises; he fell to the ground when, finally, they dried up, and he didn't even breathe a sigh at the thought he had been freed, and however fallen even deeper into the trap.

After a while, faint thuds of little steps reached his ears, gently shaking him, and a pair of funny mustard-coloured shoes emerged from the fog, tearing with their joy the opaque veil which had fallen on his pupils, and Pitch, sensing the end now imminent, held her daughter and stammered: «You'll have to step over my dead body to have her, you bastard».

«Exactly what I wanted to hear» replied the other from an undetermined point of the cave, his voice vibrating with excitement.
In a last, desperate attempt to save himself, the Boogeyman evoked a magical barrier of sand around his chest, but this was so weak and thin that it collapses under its own weight in a second, and, now ready to the worst, turned his mind to his lover, still waiting, still, probably, desperate, again destined to be disappointed, and, closing his eyes, he hoped that, in one way or another, the boy could one day rejoin the girl whom he had given everything of himself. He didn't even flinch when a plump hand rested on his shoulder, resigned to be destroyed by it, nor he tried to escape it when it tightened the grip, and he almost laughed when he felt soft curls branching out from it and laying on his exposed flesh, vaguely amused by the fact that, while being carriers of death, they resulted pleasing to the touch, however, in short, he found himself bewildered to their stoke, and, feeling them withdrawing, groaning and overwhelmed by the feeling of pleasure they left behind.

Alarmed as ever, he widened his eyes and propped himself up on an elbow, squirming to observe himself, and it was only thanks to the high self-control which, more or less often, distinguished him, that he could refrain himself from screaming: his back, which he had now given up for lost, was perfectly intact, naked, yes, the skin thinner and more delicate, no doubt, but no longer torn by cuts, and with muscles, bones and ligaments neatly in place.

Realizing he had regained not only his health, but also part of his strength, he straightened better and looked around, just in time to notice the rival walking away, and just before he could flee through the entrance corridor, the man shouted: «What are you doing!?».

Suddenly stopping, the Man In The Moon turned and answered: «Isn't it evident? I'm leaving».

«Why?» exclaimed Pitch, shocked.

Casting him a mocking smile, the master of the house replied: «Because I got what I wanted, Pitch».

Dumbfounded, the Boogeyman looked at him, trying to understand the message behind his words, but no insight flashed through his mind, nor any clue appeared to his eyes; bringing the left hand to the child, however, he felt a strange texture under his fingertips, and soon he noticed that she was no longer wrappe d in soft coils of darkness, but in shimmering folds of light, and with a terrible suspicion in his heart he yelled: «What have you done to her!? You shouldn't have done, you shouldn't have dared, after all your dirty tricks, you don't know what game you're playing!».

Now beside himself, he ripped his daughter out of the unknown tissue and enveloped her again in his shadows, fastening her against his own chest, then, well aware that verbal threats would have never worked, he jumped up and ran towards the enemy, determined to neutralize him and thus force him to remove any spell he had imposed to the newborn; the Guardian of the Guardians, however, didn't get caught unprepared, dodging him with an almost graceful move and knocking him to his knees simply by tripping him, and, after pinning his arms behind his back, he whispered into his ear: «Believe me, Pitch I know very well what game I'm playing, and I'm perfectly able to control it».

Pitch didn't have the opportunity to fight his gestures, too dazed and worn out even to grasp them, and when he felt a sudden heat warming his neck and spreading along his back and head he couldn't help but giving in, letting his eyelids fall, closing that short hour of thoughts and actions enough to fill a life, and of “yes” and “yet” sufficient to fill a novel, and slipping into oblivio n.

A new, amazing fanart by Fridarush!

http://fridarush.tumblr.com/post/117591316792/cianethedevil-yeah-another-present-for-you-and
Chapter End Notes

Next chapter will be published on Friday 19 or later, depending on my friend's free time. If you could leave me a comment I'd surely have a less hard time while translating - I use a complex style and English doesn't suit it much. And not to talk about the mental incentive you'd give me by sharing your opinion about the story with me.
Light, then darkness. Heat, then cold. Pain, then pleasure. Silence, then a snort, and so it was that Pitch woke up.

It took him less than a second to re-emerge from the forced sleep into which he had fallen and open his eyes, too alarmed by the memory of the last moments of wakefulness to indulge in his weariness, however, the light of the environment in which he found himself was so bright to blind him and cause him to close them immediately; moaning for the muscles pangs and the sense of helplessness, he stirred a little, touching the ground around himself to get physically used to the outside world and trying to hush his restless conscience to mentally prepare himself to face it, and when he felt ready he raised his eyelids.

A diffuse light welcomed him, dazzling him a little before slowly fading into a wide, smooth light-grey surface, and the man, combining this detail to the soft, sandy texture he felt under his fingertips, deduced he was still in the cave in which he had been underhandly attacked, slumped in a supine position; making his eyes wander around, he first spotted the hall entrance through which the Man In The Moon had sneaked, then, unexpectedly, the Nightmare on which he had travelled, standing in all his majesty and busy guarding it, and finally, close to himself, the baby, and, worried, he immediately sprang towards her.

Worn out by the leap, moreover turned out very awkwardly, he soon had to resign himself to crawl, swallowing dust and pride to advance, palm after palm under the indecipherable white eyes of his towering servant, to meet the lady who, albeit young and tiny, in the last hours had moved the world, but every embarrassment disappeared when he reached her, and, fortunately, the same happened to the fears he felt: the newborn, in fact, seemed serene and in perfect health, still while staring at him and still well nestled in the drape of darkness in which he had wrapped her.

Letting out a sigh of relief, the Boogeyman uncovered her, checking with his eyes and hands that her soft skin didn't present lesions or brand s and, albeit confused, rejoicing in seeing her intact, and when he heard her letting out a pleased call he stammered: «You're pretty good, huh? Yes, it certainly seems so, looks like you're calm, you've been really good to remain still and silent until now, as I asked you, you know? Now you have to hold on a litt l e more , a few more minutes, so we can leave and go back to Jack: be a good girl for a while more».

Casting her a weak smile, he wrapped her again in the blanket of magic sand, making sure to block her limbs as best to prevent her from stirring and, therefore, falling during the journey; then, gathering all his strength, he first pull himself up on his knees, then stood up, the bundle of sweetness and darkness pressed against his bare chest and the sight which continuously threatened to fail him; finally, a bit levering on his left arm, a bit climbing on a practical cluster of rocks nearby, he mounted his Pureblood and get ready to flee.

He tried to govern him, grabbing his evanescent mane with the right and pulling it to spur him to
jogtrot, but he immediately saw the horse rebelling and proceeding independently at the pace he liked, and, noticing he was walking towards an exit, he left him free. He lowered his head when the Nightmare turned into the split, twisting his torso to the side and clutching his legs around his sides to avoid slipping, and he almost didn't perceive the rocky outcrop which mercilessly scratched his shoulder. Once outside, he made his pupils wander around, blinking and staring dully at the lunar surface as he detached from it, and he didn't ask himself any question, neither about what he was leaving behind, nor about what he was going to. At last, he spotted the barrier surrounding the satellite, still bright, still throbbing, and, realizing he couldn't do otherwise, he dipped into his powers and wrapped himself and his minute bundle in a cloud of dark sand. He distinctly sensed the impact, the repulsive force, the sizzle, the unequal struggle between good and evil which had now exchanged roles and were tossing him here and there in the attempt to overwhelm each other, and he let the shadows feed on the fear he felt just to have one more chance to save himself, bending on his daughter to protect her till his own death. He felt himself being hurt, bitten, thrown away, then he fell against something, and there he laid, curled up on himself, and praying to be able to win the unfair and senseless battle he had been dragged into.

Suddenly, in that indistinguishable and uncontrollable chaos, something intruded: something small and firm, resolute, but also gentle, which pushed its way deft and light among the spirals of darkness toward him, and which, once arrived, laid softly on his cheek, starting to caress it.

«You're safe, Pitch» whispered an echoing voice.

The Boogeyman, which had immediately recognized it, but which he couldn't trust enough to let himself go, curled up even more, drawing the baby towards himself as much as he could and enclosing her in a further bubble of black tentacles; the other entity, however, didn't get discouraged, and, after thrusting through to reveal themselves, they murmured: «Pitch, my love, you're safe in North's Palace: you can lower your defences now».

Gradually opening his eyelids, which he hadn't even realized he had closed, the man spotted in front of himself the partner, his hair tousled, his eyes red, his smile raised in an expression only partially relieved, and he instinctively outstretched his fingers towards him, caressing his neck to comfort him and thus losing control of the shadows he had wrapped himself with.

«What the heck happened to your back!?» suddenly cried a unknown male.

Ignoring the exclamation, Pitch brushed one last time Jack's cheekbone, then he lowered his arm and, reabsorbing the last protective barrier, he murmured in a cracking voice: «Take her».

Taken aback, the boy hesitated, clearly tempted more to render assistance to him than to satisfy his, apparently, senseless request, however, after a while, he seemed to notice the presence of the bundle, and at that point he no longer had any indecision: in a leap he bent over her, struggling to grasp her, so high was the anxiety which had caught him right away, and probably also gripped him during the long wait; trembling, he picked her up, rummaging almost frantically in the folds of the blanket just to find her; finally, when he managed to discover her head, he let out a sob.

Toothiana, who, evidently, must have kept aside all the time, appeared near the boy holding a clean towel, and, after briefly checking the infant, she commented: «Oh, Jack, look, she has your eyes!».

In return, Jack, who had got excited as ever in seeing the baby and blushed when she had tried to touch his face, cast a moved glance to his lover and added: «And Pitch's eyes».

Although a little embarrassed, the Boogeyman held on and didn't draw back, staring back at the other's watery eyes and remaining quiet, and he nearly risked to shed a tear in turn when Frost brought his fingertips to his lips and blew him a kiss; focusing on his wild hair, wh ich ha d bent into
a sort of funny duck tail, he distracted himself enough to refrain himself and keep watching him, glad to know him finally happy and conscious of his awareness, and so it was that he almost winced when he heard North intervening, booming: «I terribly hate interrupting these moments, but I think floor is not the best place to live them! What about moving?».

Bending her lips into a smile, the fairy encircled the boy's shoulders and agreed: «North is absolutely right: the floor is cold, uncomfortable and dirty, and this area is not protected at all, while you definitely need a warm, welcoming, clean and private place to stay. What about going to your room, huh, Jack? Your face is worn out, it's clear you're tired, and the baby and Pitch are tired, too: retiring for a while will only be good for you. Do you feel like getting going? We'll reach you in a minute, just the time to help Pitch recovering and standing up».

Albeit a bit confused by the request and, at least for a moment, clearly terrified to separate from the partner, Jack sniffed and answered: «Okay, but I don't want to go alone».

«Sure, no problem» immediately conceded him the woman; «Bunnymund, may you go with him? Also, show him the room North has prepared, and take a nappy from the changing-table, they're in the second drawer. Sandy, may you... great, you've already got it, thanks. See you later».

After helping the boy to pick up the blanket and stand up, she pushed him toward Bunnymund and waved, then she started to diligently fold up the cloth she had unfurled before, turning from time to time to observe alternatively the trio and Sandman heading away in opposite directions; she proceeded calmly, taking all the necessary time to gather the fabric and roll it up, and when none could be spotted afar off she brandished it like a club, mercilessly smashing it on the man's nose and blurting out: «You're an idiot!».

Pitch, who, meanwhile, caught by fatigue and emotion, had limited himself to undergo the situation, remaining on the floor and becoming a mere spectator, suddenly awakened, and, not too surprised by the interlocutor's initiative, barked: «Do not think I didn't expect this!».

«And thank goodness that you expected it!» shouted Toothiana, gesticulating; «It means that your brain hasn't gone lost forever! How you could even come up with leaving like that, alone, towards the lair of your most powerful opponent!? You could have lost your life!».

«I'm not a coward like you, fairy good for nothing» hissed back the Boogeyman. ¹

Glancing at him half outraged and half exasperated, she declared: «Being irreverent won't save you, Pitch! You're too predictable to surprise me enough to distract me!».

«All right, all right, that's enough!» intervened Santa, stepping over the wounded and standing between him and his friend; «Now that you've vented, let's lower our tones and talk constructively. What happened on the Moon? We did what you asked us, Tooth, we waited here and tried to distract Jack, but it hasn't been easy, we were increasingly concerned, and rightly, I would say: Pitch's back is rather beat up».

«And his ankle, too, as I see» commented the fairy; «I'll summarize what I witnessed. After retrieving the Nightmare you've seen fleeing away earlier, Pitch rushed to the Moon; Sandy and I, of course, immediately run after him, unfortunately lagging behind, and less than a kilometre from the surface something incredible happened: we've been rejected. We tried again and again to advance, but between us and Pitch now stood a magical barrier, so we were left out, while he landed and penetrated into the soil. We waited for almost half an hour, I hitting the barrier, Sandy flying over
every corner of the satellite to find an access point, but we both failed, and in the end we spotted Pitch. He held a bundle in his arms, and he was worn out, half-naked, exactly as you see him now: he had clearly fought. We tried to help him, but we couldn't reach him, so the only thing we could do was watching him as he wrapped himself in his shadows and broke through the barrier, and finally escorting him here. Tell us the rest, Pitch: tell us what happened while you were alone».

Piqued by the arrogance with which the interlocutor had put him aside to talk, Pitch decided to appeal to the guilt to get rid of that uncomfortable situation, and complained: «What's this, a questioning!? You know I'm tired and wounded, and you don't find anything better to do than leaving me on the floor and subject me to the third degree? And Jack, then, don't we want to talk about him? He's not a child, he has the right to know what happened, and definitely more than you!».

Bringing a hand to her heart and showing a moved expression, the woman replied: «Oh, Pitch, I almost can't believe my own ears, you're really asking us to take care of you! After all this time, and after all the anger and hatred you've accumulated! You made great strides, good! Don't worry, North has just prepared a padded stool just for you, and Sandy went to the infirmary to take the necessity to medicate you. As for Jack, no, it's not what you think: I don't want to keep him wrapped in cotton wool, but to know the whole story now in order to be able to protect you and allow you to tell it to him calmly, face to face and at the moment you'll feel more appropriate. And I also wanted to give you a good lecture, yes, I admit it, but you can't deny you deserved it, and I sincerely hope Jack will give another, too. Come on, let's not waste time, just tell us».

Shocked by the skill with which the talkative interlocutor had managed, with a few sentences, to throw back to him his own ruse, the Boogeyman covered his face with his hands, barely stifling a snarl, and in response he hissed: «Do not expect me to open my mouth about the incident with you, the favourite lackeys of that bastard».

Instantly, a hand as big as a spade fell on his shoulder, mercilessly grinding it as it lifted him up and threw him almost violently on a soft seat at a short distance, and before he could recover, the master of the house appeared in his visual field, his frowning face an inch far from his nose, in his irises an anger never before transpired so impetuous, and said in a serious tone: «Let's make things clear: I'm not anyone's lackey. Man In The Moon may have appointed me Guardian and helped me to become who I am now, but the only thing I'm required to do for him is protecting children. This, and nothing else. I don't have to consider him perfect and always righteous, I don't have to help him fulfil any idea swirling in his head, I don't have to support in everything he does, and I have no intention of doing so. Maybe I don't want him dead as you desire, but be sure that I'm not happy at all neither about conception, nor about pregnancy, nor about kidnapping, and I believe he owes us explanations for everything. Remember this well, because I don't want to repeat it».

Although initially tempted to react aggressively, perhaps shoving him, perhaps even biting him, as soon as he heard his first words, the man froze, and got increasingly surprised as the other proceeded with his speech: never in his life he would have expected him to talk that way. He had always known that, behind the good-natured behaviour he displayed in front of children, North concealed a hard and, at least at times, obscure soul, but that was a bit of a leap seeing him unleashing it against his superior, and actually not just a bit, because that, more than a statement, almost looked like a threat. Maybe the Guardian had finally realized that the Man In The Moon was a despicable person? No, this level of awareness was certainly not attainable in such a faithful Spirit, not without some shocking and undeniable external revelations, and, perhaps, not even if he himself had witnessed a mess made by the Guardian of the Guardians, but certainly doubt had crept into his mind, and this was a great start to a realization which would have been beneficial to everyone. And, just talking about everyone, what did the others think about the question? Sandman remained inscrutable as ever, Bunnymund was undoubtedly still torn between the hatred against him and the brotherly, protective
love he felt towards Jack, Toothiana, instead, had already clearly demonstrated her deep
disappointment, then the situation could have potentially evolved in any way, but it was obvious that
the balance was now swaying to his side, and Pitch had no intention to miss the opportunity to create
divisions and completely isolate his worst enemy.

«It's complicated» he calmly replied; «What happened cannot be told in five minutes, and should be
extensively discussed».

He didn't trouble himself to respond to Santa's admonition, sure it was more a clumsy alliance
declaration than a threat against him, and he didn't care about the fact he had, de facto, postponed the
discussion, certain that the suspense would have only worked in his favour: focusing on the heart of
the matter and buying time was convenient in such a predicament, where a single word could make
the difference between failure and success, and, considering how exhausted and confused he felt,
definitely necessary.

Gently pushing away the master of the house, the fairy came forward, on her face a contrite
expression and in her eyes a mixture of fear and affection, and, placing her right hand on the man's
shoulder, she whispered: «Forgive us, Pitch: we've been too impulsive. In the recent months we've
seen wavering much of what we've always believed into, the kidnapping shocked us and your
wounds have been the coup de grace: we panicked, and we let our concern for Jack, the child and
you get the better of us. We'll talk calmly and extensively about what happened when you've rested,
but we can't let you go without knowing anything: at least, tell us if we should expect another
attack».

Although incredibly tempted to shamelessly lie, the Boogeyman realized that a poorly thought fib
could have easily backfire, so he opted for a simple: «I don't think so, but one never knows, so better
keep an eye out for».

«We'll organize guard squads, monitor the Palace in and out, not moonbeam will pass tonight» ruled
North.

Glad to have, at least for the moment, avoided the thorny question, the man relaxed and concluded:
«Well, since we're done, I'm leaving. I'll need to rest for a long time, and the same goes for Jack, so
do not disturb us until we get out of the room».

Bending his back forward, he got ready to get up, but in less than a second two small and firm palms
pressed on his chest to bring him back in an upright position, and a peremptory voice declared: «Oh
no, Pitch, we might have concluded the discussion, but with you we've barely begun! You're almost
completely covered in wounds, and each of them must be cleaned, disinfected, treated, covered with
lotion, bandaged...».

«Oh, come on, I don't need any of that!» interrupted her the man, recognizing the woman and
panicking at the thought he could have been subjected to her care; «The wounds are already almost
completely healed, they don't require any cure! I'm leaving!».

With a slap he shooed both the interlocutors, then, exploiting the momentum, he got up in a single
movement and walked to his room, but something went wrong: the floor, hitherto stable, suddenly
reared, then dangerously listed, and finally it rolled over and rushed towards his face, chipping him a
tooth. Although stunned, he understood immediately it hadn't be the ground attacking him, but he
himself collapsing on it, but this awareness wasn't of any use to him: confused and weak as he was,
he could little against the dizziness, and indeed the only thing he managed to do was struggling as
pitifully as in vain on and against the parquet which had done nothing, and which yet was causing
him so much trouble.
Pitch, let me tell you» declared the fairy from an indeterminate point in the room; «Taking care of you is exhausting. Come on, let's help him get up».

Two pairs of compassionate hands came to Pitch's rescue, one encircling his chest, the other holding his head, and they gently lifted him up; then, from the veil of darkness which had fallen over his eyes, a pointed face topped by a thousand colours emerged, and asked: «Can you hear me? As you see, you'd need a lot more cures than the ones I listed, but rest is definitely the best medicine in these cases, so I offer you a deal: drink a glass of Himalayan absinthe and promise me you'll do nothing but sleeping in the next hours, and I'll spare you further medication. It's a good one, don't you think so? You could go immediately to spend some time with Jack and relax, he wouldn't get worried, since you wouldn't delay, I could anyway take care of you in an acceptable way and we would all be happier».

After blinking several times to focus on the figure in front of himself, and agreeing that, albeit embarrassing, accepting the others' help was the best and only solution, the Boogeyman surrendered and conceded: «Yes, let's do that».

«Good» said Toothiana, blatantly letting out a sigh of relief; «Sandy is offering it to you, just take it. As soon as you're done, we'll take you to your room and you could end your day as you want; ours, instead, is far from being over».

Glancing over her outstretched finger, the man spotted Sandman, appeared out of nowhere with his cheerful and everlasting smile and busy handing him a tray full of bandages, gauzes and bowls of all shapes and sizes, and he mentally prepared himself to take medicine; narrowing his eyes, he spotted the glass containing the absinthe and reached out to grab him, giving up a polite approach already at the second attempt and ending up bringing the mouth to the liquid, rather than the contrary; finally, a bit trembling, a bit coughing, he managed to swallow all the fluid, and when he made sure he had left not even a drop, he turned and demanded: «So? Is that enough? Am I allowed to leave?».

Bowing her head, as if to congratulate him, the woman answered: «Yes. I'll take you to your room, so I could put the nappy on the child and immediately start to patrol the corridors».

«We'll start already now, instead» intervened North, patting the wounded's back and letting him go; «Good night, Pitch, rests serene while we guard. Come on, Sandy, let's call the Yetis».

Relieved at the idea he was about to join Jack and spend some time alone with him, Pitch lost interest in the two spirits and, absentmindedly, he began to stagger toward his room, but Toothiana wasn't slow to call him, and, in a graceful warble, exclaimed: «Get ready to fly!».

Dumbfounded, the Boogeyman started: «What the hell...?».

Before he could finish the sentence, however, a flutter of wings ruffled his hair, and his feet magically soared from the floor, and he understood: the fairy had grabbed him under his armpits and was carrying him in flight.

Perceiving an uncontrollable rage growing violent in him, the man raised up his head and roared: «How could you dare!? Leave me now, you fool, I'm perfectly able to walk by myself!».

«I saw» teased him the fairy, going on on her way; «In fact, I'm helping to keep up your strength to offer us a new, amazing show of swan dive from the edge of the bed to the mattress, ready to perform?».

Now beside himself, Pitch growled and started kicking and flailing his arms, ignoring the fatigue to furiously try to free himself, and yet, despite all his efforts, he couldn't even slow down the too
zealous nurse; after a while, after entering the corridor and spotting the bedroom door dangerously close, the panic overwhelmed him, and, surrendering, he prayed: «Not beyond the door!».

Softly gliding, the Guardian laid him in front of the jamb, just a few inches far from the door, and she whispered: «Don't worry, it'll be our little secret. Take all the time you need to reach the bed, and call me if you feel you're about to faint».

Relieved at the thought he had avoided by a whisker the terrible humiliation, the Boogeyman clung to a pillar near there and settled down, then, giving up commenting the incident, he followed the other in the bedroom; once inside, it took him less than a blink of an eye to find a safe route, as well as a great excuse to follow it, and, exploiting the dresser edge as a handrails, he asked: «Would you like me to bring you a blanket, Jack?».

The boy, who, in that moment, was bent over the bed, hastily raised his face and replied: «Oh, Pitch, you arrived. No thanks, I don't think I'll need it».

«Then maybe I'll take a little one for me» stated the man; «Last night my feet got cold».

As he walked along the desk to the cabinet, Toothiana reached the boy and exclaimed: «Oh, you already put the nappy on her, very good!».

«Well, more or less» stammered in response Frost; «I tried, but I didn't succeed very well».

«That's not true» promptly countered the fairy, while Pitch, taking advantage of their conversation, crawled beyond the wardrobe clinging to any available handhold; «You put it well, maybe a little too loose, but not enough to bother her, then leave it on and don't worry. We now take leave. If you need help, just open the door and call us. Sweet dreams, try to rest».

Without further delay, she bowed slightly to greet, then she turned to the corridor and entered it, followed closely by Bunnymund who, after stoking the fire one last time, walked away in a mumble and a few leaps; meanwhile the Boogeyman, put now on the spot, ventured a limping run from the window to the mattress, ignoring the twinges of pain and managing not only to remain upright up to his destination, but also to land softly on it before the door was closed, then, certain he had now overcome the hardest part, he got ready to settle more properly.

«Pitch» immediately called him the boy; «Where's your blanket?».

Taken aback as he climbed on the bed, the man froze, cursing himself for not having played whole hog the scene invented to cover his weakness, therefore, trying to sound as convincing as possible, he declared: «Oh, no, in the end I changed my mind and decided not to take it: the room seems much warmer than a few hours ago, I'd risk to sweat if I covered myself too much».

Pretending to be calm, he lifted up on the sheet first his pelvis, then his legs, and he kept his head bent down all the time to hide any possible grimace of pain; holding back a moan, he finally laid down and turned his pupils toward his lover, but, as soon as he spotted him, he skipped a heartbeat: albeit well upright on his feet, the boy was visibly trembling, and his eyes were filled with tears.


«He harmed your back, didn't he?» interrupted him Frost, his gaze hard and his voice cracking.

Realizing the concerns which gripped his partner, the Boogeyman smiled and answered: «Don't worry, it doesn't hurt, and the wounds have already healed».

«That's not the point!» cried the boy, stamping his foot; «He harmed you anyway, and he shouldn't
have dared! What does he want from us!? Pregnancy annoyed me, and not a little, but it hurt mainly me, and at least seemed to have a reason, but this? Why did he kidnap the child? Why did he attack you? I'm sick of his behaviour, sick and angry and terribly tired, I can't stand this any more!».

Sobbing, he took his head in his hands and turned his back to the bed, visibly shuddering as he tormented his hair and threatening to explode at any moment, so Pitch, using the gentlest tone he knew, murmured: «Come here with me, sweety: let's talk».

Albeit still shaken, Jack didn't hesitate to turn and obey, making sure to retrieve his daughter before sitting cross-legged, and, when he had settled, he conceded: «I'm listening».

Reaching out his hand to his cheeks to sweep them, the man said: «Thank you. I know you're still terribly shaken, both by the trauma of childbirth, the anxiety about the kidnapping and the emotional aftermath of pregnancy, but now you can relax: it's all right. I'm the first to be angry with the Man In The Moon for what he did, and I'm willing to tell you what happened since I left to the moment I came back, discuss it with you and decide what kind of action to take, but not now: we all need to rest, and we must do so. Don't you remember what you told me when you opened your eyes after the caesarean section? The important thing is that, in the end, everything went well, and it's so, both the baby and I are safe and here with you: focus on this, and you'll feel better».

It costed him no little refraining himself, the anger he felt towards the enemy not appeased at all, and the desire for revenge still violent in him, but he was well aware he was completely unable both to move and to conceive a sensible plan of attack, and determined to put his lover's welfare before anything, then he didn't repent of the calmness used.

Letting out a heavy sigh, the boy agreed: «You're right about everything. I'm sorry, I still find hard to control my mood swings, and what happened didn't help me at all: knowing that both you and her were far away from me, lost in a dangerous place, and that I couldn't do anything neither to reach you, nor to help you, had been exhausting. I felt angry, scared, frustrated, and utterly useless, I really don't know how I managed to take all that strain, and I didn't manage completely let it off when I saw you coming back, but what you said is true: the important thing is that you're back and well. I trust you about this: if you assure me you're both well, I won't ask you anything, not now».

Proud for the fact he had been able to reassure the partner, Pitch slid his fingers on his leg and assured him: «Yes, we're fine. I'm a bit bruised, but I'm already healing; the child, instead, seems to be perfectly healthy».

«I saw» confirmed Frost, turning his face to the infant; «I checked as well as I could while you were coming here: she has no wounds, nor bruises, and she seems to be very calm, as if she hasn't even realized she had been kidnapped. Do you think she doesn't know that?».

«I don't know» answered the Boogeyman with a brooding expression; «She seems to be a quite smart girl, but she's born just a few hours ago, and so concepts such as distance and time, or even sense of danger, don't belong to her, not yet, at least. Anyway, since I retrieved her, she remained quiet most of the time, and I'm sure seeing you had been enough for her to forget the bad day».

Softening his, the boy commented: «Indeed, she cast me a big smile as soon as I picked her from your arms. She's so beautiful... I like everything about her: her feet, hands, mouth, her soft cheeks, her nose, and then her wonderful eyes, and also everything he does. She's sweet even while she yawns».

Bending his lips in a touched smile, he tucked the blanket of darkness under her chin and began to stroke her cheek with his index, his head tilted towards hers and his eyes gleaming in excitement, and the man got moved at the sight, happy that the other had finally managed to become serene again;
after a while, however, a yawn caught him, suddenly reminding him how tired he felt, and, albeit reluctantly, he decided to whisper: «Jack, it's time to rest, especially for the baby».

«I know» agreed Jack, dejected; «I immediately realized she was tired, and I saw her about to fall asleep a few seconds ago, but I don't have the courage to put her in the cradle: I'm afraid that the Man In The Moon may come to kidnap her again».

At that confession, Pitch winced, perhaps surprised by his partner's fear, perhaps shocked because he had been instantly infected by it, and, realizing he couldn't assure in any way that the hated enemy would have stayed well away from that room, he proposed: «Then keep her here. She'll sleep with us, at least for tonight».

Blushing, the boy stammered: «But... but I move so much when I sleep, what if I crushed her?».

«Place her between us, then, and I'll make sure to hold you still» suggested the Boogeyman.

Not convinced, Frost cringed, biting his lip as he rocked her slowly, and for a moment he seemed about to back away; at last, however, he shook his head, and, rushing forward, he placed the child against his lover's chest and asked him point-blank: «How is?».

Although surprised by the other's initiative, the man didn't take long to understand the true meaning of the question, and even less to be assailed again by all the doubts and fears which, only half an hour before, had literally frozen him, cornered by the situation in general and by its every single detail; just when he felt his mind next to a crisis, however, the newborn moved, gently pressing her arm against his sternum, and at that point, remembering the touching moment when he had recognized her as his daughter and he had intimately imagined a future with her, he sincerely answered: «Strange».

«Strange like unpleasant?» immediately demanded the boy, worried.

«Strange like strange» replied Pitch; «It's a major change, shocking, something which upset me and still upsets me, something about which I haven't been able yet to think clearly, nor to take a real decision. It's like an unmerited gift whose magnitude I can't grasp».

Dumbfounded, Jack asked: «Unmerited? And why?».

Letting out a sigh, the Boogeyman answered: «Because it's so, Jack. A child requires a lot, but gives a lot, too, and only those who can appreciate deserve to receive».

«It seems a very complicated speech» commented the boy.

«Indeed, it is» confirmed the man, looking down.

Frost kept silent for a few seconds, as busy to ponder on what it had just been revealed to him, then he added: «Anyway, Pitch, remember that you're absolutely not required to do anything. I don't expect you to participate immediately, and I won't get angry if you decide to never do it: I know that your work and your nature induce you to hate children, and you never asked to have one, then you have every right not to come forward. I'll take care of her for now, okay? I'll ask for help to the others, if necessary, the important thing is that you feel at ease».

Taken aback, Pitch frowned and, staring at his lover, he demanded: «You'll take care of her in what way?».

«Well» began the boy, clasping his fingers to soothe the tension; «To be honest, I was referring to rather silly things, like changing her, feeding her, helping her to sleep, things like those, in short,
things a baby always needs».

«And things a baby can’t do by themselves» completed the Boogeyman; «Why do you think I wouldn’t want to deal with them? It would be foolish of me to abandon her on such occasions, I know she’s not self-sufficient and I know it’s not her fault, so why should I condemn her? No, every time she’ll need something I’ll be there, and I’d surely not have problems in preparing her the milk or get up a hundred times every night to help her».

He repented not even for a moment of having exposed himself to such a point, too annoyed by the partner's simplistic assumption to feel ashamed, and too eager to gradually come into contact with his daughter to be able to refrain himself, and he almost hastened to press his forearm on her naked side, as if to prove he was ready to protect her at any time and from any danger; Jack, for his part, didn’t seem disturbed at all by the sudden movement, and, casting him a moved glance, he whispered: «I don’t understand how you can say that and then think you don’t deserve her».

«Cut it out!» snapped the man in reply, embarrassed as ever; «You’re making too many speeches, too complicated and at a time far too late, have you the slightest idea how much I had to think today? I’m exhausted now».

«Indeed, thinking is something you’re not used to do» observed the boy in a serious tone.

«But what I’m hearing!» instinctively exclaimed Pitch.

Vaguely piqued by the joke, he decided to take revenge and propped himself up on an elbow to pinch him, but a pang struck him in mid-motion, making him fall back on the mattress and stealing him a groan of pain, and a similar thing happened to Frost who, although he hadn’t been touched, had attempted a preventive escape. Short of breath, they both conceded themselves a little break, staring at each other in amusement, and in the end the boy commented: «We’re two wrecks».

At that joke, actually rather true, the Boogeyman couldn’t stifle the giggle which arose spontaneously in his chest, and he allowed himself to indulge in the first moment of genuine hilarity after hours of anguish; after a while, however, he noticed the baby, who had already closed her eyes, frowning and starting to stir, then he stopped and announced: «End of the games, Jack: we’re disturbing her. Take your clothes off and sleep».

Vigorously nodding, the boy took off first his blouse, then, in a single, twisted movement, his trousers and pants, so, after covering himself and his lover, he laid down and whispered: «Good night, Pitch. And thank you for everything».

Casting him a smile, the man replied: «Good night to you, Jack».

Then, after interlocking his legs to his and embracing him, he closed his eyes and fell asleep.

Moaning weakly, Pitch curled up on himself, trying to cuddle the two sleepers who were keeping him company, but he felt nothing but empty fabric under his palms, and so, wincing, he woke up in a start.

«Who’s there!?» he confusedly mumbled, rising on his elbows; «You bastard, don’t you dare again, you’ll know my wrath, you can’t... ugh!».

Caught by surprise by a dizziness, no doubt caused by fatigue and, perhaps, by the wounds not yet completely healed, the Boogeyman fell back on the bed and found himself with his face buried in the pillow, crushed physically by his own weakness and psychologically by the thousands of fears
which had promptly assailed this mind; grunting, he struggled, trying to emerge from the blankets and, above all, from that state between unconsciousness and drowsiness in which he had been floating for barely two hours of restless sleep he had managed to get, but soon two bony arms came to his rescue, turning him on a side, and a familiar voice exclaimed: «Pitch, Pitch! It's all right, it's just me, Jack».

Finally opening his eyes, it took little to the man to recognize his lover, knelt in front of him and busy caressing his the face, and at that point, still bewildered, he asked: «Jack? What happened? Why did you leave?».

«I didn't really leave» promptly explained; «I woke up because the baby winged, as I sat up I noticed she was stirring and so I decided to move her in order not to disturb you, but now I'm confused, she's moving in a very strange way...».

Dropping the sentence, he backed away and turned to the right, showing an upset expression as he bent over, so Pitch, vaguely alarmed and now lucid, decided to follow him; immediately giving up moving, he just tilted his head and looked sideways at his daughter, amazed to see her pretty face sulky and watching her sliding her tongue on the upper palate almost with curiosity, and so it was that he got floored when he heard her bursting into a desperate cry.

«Oh, no, no no no no no!» exclaimed the boy, widening his eyes; «It's all right, cutie, it's all right, Pitch and I and we are here with you!».

Slightly trembling, he took her in his arms and placed her against his chest, whispering sweet words in her ear and rubbing her back to calm her, but the only result he achieved was making her screaming more, and at that point, casting a worried glance at his lover, he asked: «And now what should I do to calm her? The only thing I'm able to do is cuddling her, and it didn't work!».

Although dismayed as and more than him, the Boogeyman realized that showing himself worried, too, would have not helped the partner at all, then, taking a deep breath, he said: «Let's not panic, babies cry all the time, but always for a reason: let's try to understand what bothers her. Maybe she wants to be changed?».

«I'll check right away!» volunteered Frost.

After gently laying her on the mattress, he fumbled a little with the nappy and, not without difficulty, he tore the elastic side-bands, but when he opened it he announced in a rueful tone: «No, it's not that, the nappy is clean and completely dry! Why? She's born hours ago, she should have already p eed at least once, don't you think so?».

«One problem at a time!» begged him the man, his voice cracking; «Maybe she urinated in that half hour she remained in the Man In The Moon's clutches, or maybe she's like us and she'll never need to, indeed, she never dran... wait a minute».

Caught by a sudden idea, he preferred to verify his hypothesis with a banal test before revealing it, and so he brought the tip of his index to the mouth of the infant in tears; almost instantly, the baby calmed down and tried to suck it, but rejected it a few seconds later with an offended cry, and at that point Pitch declared: «Did you see what she did? I think she's hungry».

«Do you?» asked the boy, clearly in distress.

Showing the most reassuring expression he could put together, the Boogeyman replied: «I cannot be sure, Jack, but her gesture leaves little doubt, and anyway there aren't many possibilities: if she doesn't need to be changed, she's hungry or stressed, so we'll just have to divide up the duties to
make sure she'll calm down. I'll go to the kitchen to prepare the milk, while you'll stay here and lull her. See you later».

Throwing his legs over the edge of the mattress, he got ready to stand up, but Jack objected: «But Pitch, you're still wounded and tired, and...».

«Don't be silly, I'm fine!» snapped the man, clinging to the night-table and pulling up; «I'll be back soon, in the meanwhile try to calm her».

In order to nip in the bud any further protest, he immediately strode towards the door and passed through it without looking back, but the operation costed him the little strength he had, and when he closed the wood behind himself he was forced to flop against it, exhausted: he hadn't recovered yet from the raid in the enemy's Palace, and the short and not restorative sleep had done nothing but accentuate the immense tiredness he felt.

Determined, however, to do his duty as a father and a partner, he allowed himself a few moments to catch his breath, then he shook and, leaving the support, he began to limp toward his destination. He walked for long, a foot at a time, painfully staggering along the corridors while his sight gradually grew dim and his legs constantly threatened to fail; he walked for long, more and more slowly, thanking his lucky stars as Easter eggs and chirping fairies surrounded him, but no Guardians appeared on the horizon; he walked for long, his breath shorter and shorter, fearing to collapse at any moment, but finally he turned a corner and found himself in the kitchen.

Encouraged by the success, Pitch ventured a last run and reached the table, cheering internally when he managed to cling to it and taking the opportunity to not only recover, but also to fasten the shred of dress, now reduced to a simple long skirt, he was wearing since the Man In The Moon had attacked him; after resting, he walked on, flanking the impressive and strange box laying on the floor and casually peeking at its content, but, as soon as he managed to focus it, he stopped, amazed: it was a packaging of infant formula.

A sense of discomfort caught him at the thought he had been, de facto, bypassed in his task, mixed to the relief at having found, in a blink of an eye, the solution to the problem of his daughter in tears, and so, torn between both feelings, he decided to grab one of the cans, not without grumbling. Keeping snorting, he retrieved a small pot and a jug of water and rekindled the embers in one of the multiple burners, however, when he started to read the instructions, he froze: the writing was unintelligible.

Starting to panic, he began to turn over the jar in his hands, studying its bottom, its back, its lid and its front where stood out the photo of a laughing child which had immediately drawn his attention, but he found nothing but cryptic letters of various shapes and sizes, and, after thinking for a while, he snapped: «What the hell, this is Cyrillic!».

Echoing to his exclamation, a chorus of surprised chirps came to his ears, and when he realized that a group of tooth fairies had silently followed him, he turned and barked: «And you, what are you doing here!? Shoo, leave me alone, I can prepare the milk by myself!».

As if to prove his assertion, he tore the lid off the can and poured part of the product in the pot, then the diluted it with some water, put it on the fire, armed himself with a spoon and thought: “Now we'll see who's not able to take care of a baby”.

¹ In Italian this cross talk was more expressive and definitely not so rude. Instead of the simple “lose your life”, we have this common saying which could be literally translated as “lose your feathers”, so the dialogue was:

Toothiana – You could have lost your feathers!

Pitch – I'm not the feathery canary, fairy good for nothing!

Unfortunately, I saw no way to recreate this same effect in English, so I was forced to give up it

Chapter End Notes

Next chapter will be published on the 10th of July, Friday, as always
Chapter 29

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

WE DON'T HAVE TO BE ALONE – CHAPTER 29

Holding his breath, North looked into the last room of the corridor and made his eyes wander over and over again from wall to wall and from floor to ceiling, therefore, sure it was empty, he got in and heavily sat down on a trunk.

More than two hours had passed since Pitch's return and the short, cryptic discussion he had had with him, two hours during which Santa Claus had never taken a break, organizing patrols of Yeti, directing the Guardians, sending crowds of noisy elves everywhere in the Palace and making sure to personally check every single corner, and during which the tiredness had slowly worn him down, however, that wasn't the reason which had caused him to stop: the truth was that the danger, whatever it was, seemed now to be past. Despite his efforts, in fact, he hadn't been able to find anything, neither an intruder, nor a clue, nothing had been spotted, neither inside, nor outside the imposing building and the adjoining caves, and nothing had been seen escaping from the shining satellite which was still standing out in the sky, but already getting ready to slip away over the horizon, so nothing seemed to threaten the new parents and their tiny daughter, and nothing has to be fought or eliminated.

Indeed, thinking a little, this didn't seem so incredible: according to the Boogeyman himself, a second attack was unlikely, and anyway, if the man had managed to escape, alone and weak, from the clutches of the powerful Man In The Moon, the departure could only have been planned by the latter. Reflecting better, however, the fact that that hypothesis was plausible was little consolation and became a source of growing concern for the master of the house, already upset and worried by the incursion of the previous night, and so, albeit still doubtful, he decided to end the break he had conceded to himself and get ready to do another recon.

After, among gasps and grunts, pulling himself up, he settled better his two sabres on his hips and walked towards the Globe Hall, but as soon as he reached the door the worst of his nightmares suddenly materialized in front of him: Baby Tooth, cheeping and gesticulating, flew to him and grabbed him by the sleeve to drag him along.

Alarmed beyond measure by her behaviour, North wasted no time to wonder, nor to try to interpret her incomprehensible language, and he ordered her: «Guide me!».

He followed her almost running, turn after turn, corridor after corridor, the anxiety growing with the shortness of breath and the fear alternating to the anger for the umpteenth violation, and he got confused in seeing that, instead of approaching the worn out couple's bedroom, his guide was heading to the kitchens; concluding that the unwelcome invader should have chosen the longer way, he strode without protest, elbowing among the multitude of creatures patrolling the tunnels and dragging with himself an unsuspecting and sleepy Sandman who clearly didn’t expect the tackle, but, as soon as he broke in the kitchen, he stopped, and he nearly burst out laughing: the scene standing out in front of him was as far from a threat as it's possible to imagine.
Instead of the dozens of moonbeams he had expected to find, in fact, he saw a large flock of tooth fairies, as active as visibly worried, in place of a deadly weapon an ordinary spoon, and in lieu of the Man in the Moon himself, or, more likely, of a fearsome warrior in his service, Pitch, awkwardly slumped on the counter-top next to the stove, and it didn't take long to him to draw his own conclusions: evidently the man had gone into the room to cook something, and, waiting for the food to be ready, he had fallen asleep.

Holding back a laugh, he slowly walked toward him, keeping dragging his friend to share the fun with him and, thus, make up for the brutal move with which he had surprised him a little earlier, but it was enough to him to notice the whitish powder on the table to soothe the hilarity, and the contents of the pot to melt down in a moved exclamation: he had foreseen from the beginning that the man loved the child much more than he was willing to admit, but he would have never expected to see him busy to assist her to satisfy her physical needs so soon.

Touched both by the willpower with which the Boogeyman had waken up, in the middle of the night and still not having recovered neither from the rescue mission, nor from the general weakness caused by the Christmas period, to limp there, and by the sweet awkwardness with which he had capitulated, Santa stepped back, then he called the presents with a gesture and whispered: «Did you see? Dad in action! Who would have ever imagined, huh? But there's many a slip 'twixt cup and lip, and we have the duty to help Pitch overcome it. I'll take care of the milk, you, fairies, resume patrolling the hallways, and you, Sandy, go to Jack: I'm quite sure that the baby is crying, and your powers are perfect to give him a hand to calm her. Come on, let's get moving.»

Waving his hands to better hurry his interlocutors, he hastily pushed them toward the exit, partly fearing that the chaos would have ended up awakening the Boogeyman, partly eager to start working as soon as possible and to contribute to the child's care, and he almost sighed in relief when he saw them moving away, but it was enough to him to turn back towards the stove to frown again: the situation in which he had get himself into was much more thorny than it initially seemed. On one hand, in fact, there was the milk, clearly prepared in a wrong way and, anyway, too thick and scorched to be recovered, and on the other the man, too proud and protective to accept criticism or suggestions: how to extricate himself between the two? The former obviously had the priority, but if, in order to cook it, he had offended the latter, the victory would have been not only bitter-sweet, but also uncertain. Sure, perhaps pointing out that the absence of understandable indications and the lack of experience were as much a hindrance as a good excuse for the failure would have been a sufficient consolation for a normal person, but Pitch was far from being a normal person, and, considering moreover that he was already tired and stressed out, teasing him with constructive criticism could have been as dangerous as insulting him. And what if, instead of waking him and showing him the mistake, he had corrected it in his place? Yes, remedying without revealing himself and then pretending that nothing had happened could have been a solution, good balance between help and encouragement, and it was definitely time to actualize it.

Nodding, smug, the master of the house tiptoed up to the burners and retrieved the pot; then, exploiting the centuries of experience accumulated in sneaking away unnoticed, he swerved toward the sink and threw away the sticky fluid, removing all its traces from the metal with soap and water and taking the opportunity to conceive a more precise course of action; finally, after filling it again with crystal clear water, he silently placed it on the stove and grabbed the can of infant formula which the Boogeyman had opened and then abandoned on the table. It took him a few seconds to read the instructions, already studied during the afternoon, and so to ascertain that the powder shouldn't be cooked at all, but dosed directly into the baby bottle and therein been dissolved in a predetermined amount of boiling water, however, he realized that he couldn't follow these guidelines and successfully deceive the touchy father, so he resolved to add it anyway, as the other had done, in the pot, but only at the end of the preparation. Not completely satisfied with the solution, but aware that he couldn't do otherwise, he decided to console himself by eating some cookies and, so, he went...
into his personal kitchen, where, from the heap retrieved from the children awaiting for his gifts, chose a dozen of the most garnished ones and tasted them with a glass of eggnog; once finished the midnight snack, and now feeling restored, he got back into the main room, took the sterile bottle he had bought along with the child supplies, poured five tablespoons of powder milk in the water now boiling and, heavily slamming his hand on the counter top, he exclaimed: «What a pleasure, Pitch!».

Stunned and scared by the blow, fell less than a foot far from his head, the asked suddenly awoke, jumping up and awkwardly kicking away the stool on which he was sat, and after a few seconds spent panting, confusedly fidgeting and rolling his widened eyes in every direction, he stared at him who had so sharply shaken him and demanded, shocked: «What are you doing here!?».

Extremely amused by his comical reaction, North hid his hilarity behind a jovial smile and quickly answered: «These are my kitchens, remember? I came here to have a snack and bring here the baby bottle, and I see I did well! Milk seems ready, don't you think?».

Narrowing his irises, Pitch hissed: «You came here to spy on me me? I don't need your help, I can perfectly get by by myself!».

Not surprised at all by the reply, Santa Claus countered: «No, as I told you, I came to have a snack. And, come on, don't get upset for the bottle, you are a man with all the angles, but you certainly can't guess where I hide my things, do you?».

«Wanna bet!?» snapped the Boogeyman, his eyes shining in disruptive anger, but his pupils clouded by tiredness.

Masking the hearty laugh which had spontaneously arisen in his chest with some coughs, the master of the house composed himself and suggested: «Pitch: milk. You better take it off the fire, as it's ready. Take the bottle, I'm going to have a snack and leave you here to perfectly get by by yourself».

Perhaps deciding to overlook the slight mockery, perhaps, more likely, not getting it, the man mumbled something unintelligible and resigned himself to obey, so North, sure he had pushed it too far, decided to let him work in peace and walked back into his kitchen to nibble sweets; pricking up his ears as he chewed, he followed the other's operations, from the screech with which he dragged the pot on the stove to the snort during which, probably, he fought first with the bottle sealed bag, then with its screw top, to the metallic clang with which he left the instruments, now useless, in the sink, and he got ready to peek at him to make sure everything had been done properly, but, as soon as he heard a thud, he got worried, and, unable to hold himself back, he ran into the room and exclaimed: «Pitch, what happened?».

In response, an offended grunt came from below, and, when he lowered his irises, he spotted Pitch, lying face down on the floor, the right foot still stuck between the legs of the stool he had clearly tripped over, and the corresponding hand fiercely reaching up to save the bottle so laboriously prepared.

Shaking his head at that sight, Santa reached the other, grabbed him under his armpits and made him stand up, not amazed at all to perceive him momentarily collapsing against his chest, but he didn't have time to lift his free arm and pass it around his neck that the man wriggled away and, growling, snapped: «Let me go! I'm not an invalid, I walk by myself, leave me alone and go back to gorge yourself!».

Menacingly pointing a finger at him, the Boogeyman backed, making sure to interpose between himself and the host the table in order to prevent any unwanted rescue, then, disdainfully turning his back on him, he headed towards the exit, and the master of the house, well aware he could do nothing against his stubbornness, resigned himself to let him go and watch him from afar.
The path from the kitchen to the couple's room was, to say the least, a troubled odyssey. When he had violently rejected the support offered to him, in fact, the man hadn't only ensured himself a complete and tiring autonomy, but also clearly consumed the little energies left, and he had therefore ended up miserably limping towards his destination, constantly stumbling into the droves of helpers who crowded the corridors, dangerously swaying from wall to wall and risking to fall over and over again, not to mention the two occasions when, clouded, he had took a wrong turn and found himself in a dead end: in short, an almost total disaster. Often Santa, concerned about his lot, had been tempted to intervene, sometimes simply by guiding him with his voice, sometimes by picking him up, but in the end he had always managed to refrain himself, in part held back by the neoparent's pride, in part convinced that a tumble, more than hurting him, might have taught him something, but he couldn't help but breathing a sigh of relief when he sighted the door sought for long: heeling the lame Spirit, from fun, was slowly turning into frustrating, and moreover, after all those minutes, the milk was no doubt becoming cold.

Tiptoeing, North followed Pitch inside the bedroom, and, as the high-pitched crying echoing in the hallway had forewarned him, he found the child in tears, her red face pressed against Jack's chest and her bare thorax shaken by sobs, inconsolable in her despair which neither the boy's cuddles, nor Sandman's massages, managed to soothe.

Not surprised at all by the intensity of her sorrow, he didn't dare to intervene, preferring to go next to Toothiana and Bunnymund, standing in a corner, so as not to stress her further, and leaving the field free to the Boogeyman, who promptly barked: «You're nothing but meddlers! Do you want to invite someone else, while you're at it?».

«Pitch, don't be mad» asked him gently Frost, laying the baby on his forearm while the Bringer of Dreams stepped aside; «They heard the baby crying and they came here to help me, they only do me a favour. Have you prepared the milk? You've been very kind, now let's try to feed her, before she wears herself out».

Tamed by his gentle manner, the man seemed to quieten a little, and, ignoring the presents, he laboriously climbed on the bed, holding out the bottle to his lover and bending over him and his daughter to monitor the feeding; he remained in that position for about ten seconds, initially showing off a serious and doubtful expression, then increasingly smoothing his frown, but just when he seemed about to raise a smile, the infant pushed away the teat, turning her head just to shun it, and resumed, offended, screaming.

«And now what's wrong!?» howled the man, clearly on the verge of despair.

Clumsy, the boy left the bottle on the blankets and, cradling the baby, stammered: «I don't understand, it had all started so well, she seemed to like the milk... Do you think she's sick and so complaining about that?».

Letting out a groan, Pitch approached him to check her, visibly not hopeful at all about finding a solution, so North, who had noticed the strange, glittering decorations on the bottle glass, dared to ask: «Have you checked the bottle? It looks strange from here».

«It would certainly be your fault!» immediately accused him Pitch, absent-mindedly rummaging among the sheets; «You and your stupid packed bottle, it would have been, at the very least, a disposable version of very poor quality, how could you even think... it's frozen».

Struck by that statement, Jack bent over the responsible object, then, raising a smile, he chuckled and simply exclaimed: «Woops!».

«Woops» echoed the Boogeyman, staring at him, beaten.
Seeing him in trouble, Santa intervened a second time and suggested: «Milk should still be good, try to put the bottle in the cauldron on the fir...». 

He didn't have the courage to finish the sentence, promptly glared by a venomous look by the man, and so, sealing his lips, he just nodded, watched him trudging toward the fireplace and plunging the bottle into the cauldron of water therein placed, and then sniggering at his capricious attitude with his friends, including Jack; stepping forward, he checked that the neo-father, swaying with tiredness, didn't get too close to the flames, nor leaned on the edge of the pot, and when he saw him levering on his legs to get up again, he withdrew, fearing he would have definitely got mad if he had caught him peeking.

Although a little deafened by the child crying, he turned towards Toothiana and tried to strike up a conversation, talking of this and that to pretend to be busy, and when the silence fell on the room he just lowered the tone in order not to be heard, but went on, as if, by stopping, he could risk to break the idyll and, thus, to embarrass the two parents struggling with their role; after a minute of empty words, however, it was his interlocutor to silence him, pressing a finger on his lips and indicating the bed, and at that point North, surrendering to himself and the other, raised his irises, and immediately melt in front of the tenderness of the scene before him.

The trio, in fact, was in a moving pose, to say the least, the infant nestled softly against Frost's bar e chest, Frost in Pitch's arms, Pitch, collapsed, slumped partly on the mattress, partly on the partner's shoulder. Albeit asleep, the man reached to the other two, embracing them and drawing them towards him, protecting them with his body and, against any natural law, managing to keep his face raised enough to have both of them in his hypothetical field of view, and, at a closer look, Santa realized he was actively participating to the feeding, frantically clutching the bottle and offering his hand as a barrier between the partner's ice and the glass; the boy, for his part, was clearly doing everything not to torture him, his fingers resting on the other's only slightly, in order to limit the flow of cold and frost, and the thorax twisted to better support him, but he didn't fail to care about his daughter, too, stretching his muscles as much as he could in order to offer her a comfortable nest to rest into and repeatedly stroking her thighs and lower belly to help her relaxing; the girl, finally, oblivious to everything and everyone in her unconscious mind, wasn't turned towards anyone, nor seeking any kind of contact, but the serenity with which she sucked from the teat, her fists closed and her eyelids lowered, clearly showed how peaceful she now felt, and grateful to her doting parents.

Sheding a tear, the master of the house watched intently the little group, and especially the looks which, more or less consciously, its members cast themselves, and after a while, feeling the urge to defuse, he whispered: «You have two beautiful children, Jack».

Taken aback by the comment, Jack snorted and hissed at him to silence him, although sniggering, however, in a few seconds, he turned serious and got enraptured again by the sweetness of his baby, and at that point North, understanding that a longer stay would have only become intrusive, waved to his friends to move away, and quietly sneaked through the door, leaving the couple free to enjoy the little miracle it had given birth to.

Nervously scratching his ear, Bunnymund came out of the bathroom, then he slowly walked down the hallway.

A few minutes had passed since the beginning of the newborn's first bath, minutes during which the girl, albeit firmly supported by Jack, Toothiana and North, had managed to empty half the washbowl with vigorous kicks and deafen everyone with her shrieks, and the Pooka, feeling like the fifth wheel, had resolved to leave her alone: he hadn't decided yet how to deal with her, if staying at a
respectful distance until she had ventured to reach him, if gradually approaching her or if immediately participating to her growth, and so, rather than imposing himself, he had preferred to step aside and defer the first contact. To hold him back, in fact, there was not only the simple shyness, but also a deep sense of respect which, two years before, he had begun to harbour towards Frost, and which had only intensified since the boy had decided to accept the pregnancy and stoically endure all the suffering, physical and psychological, deriving from it, and he intimately hoped that Frost would have overcome the barrier and offered him his daughter, rather than having to come forward himself and ask for permission; however, whether it happened one or the other thing, that was not the right time, nor the right place, so it was better to keep calm and wait patiently.

Humming to himself, he turned to the left and absent-mindedly headed toward the Globe hall, but after a few steps curiosity got the better of him, and, unable to refrain himself any longer, the Easter Bunny let himself go to varied questions. When would the big day have come? How would the first encounter have gone? How much responsive would the girl have been? How much aware and developed? And, when she had grown, how would she have been? Sweet and naughty as Jack, or... or like Pitch. Indeed, Pitch, the father, the unaware progenitor, as he said, the most dangerous one, but also the most cryptic one, man of a thousand faces able to show one or the other at will, and to wear countless masks indistinguishable from the skin underneath, but anyway a parent, and therefore entitled to be consulted about what involved his daughter.

Bunnymund took a few seconds to decide what to do: he just had to see the Boogeyman. He didn't care in what state he would have found him, he didn't know if he would have had to wake him up, he wasn't even conscious whether it was appropriate to disturb him, the only thing he could think about was the urgent need to study and question him, in order both to understand his intentions and to clarify some key issues still outstanding, and therefore he wasted no time, rushing to his room and passing through doors and corridors with vigorous leaps.

As soon as he got near the room, something on the floor caught his eye: something alive, grey, stretched, and shaped decidedly like a couple of fingers. He didn't need to take a second look to recognize a hand, his sight too well-developed to be deceived, nor to think long to attribute it to Pitch, and indeed, when he advanced to the threshold, he found him, lying on the ground and busy dragging himself forward.

«What the hell are you doing here?» he instinctively exclaimed.

Growling, the Boogeyman raised his head just enough to talk and blurted: «And you, instead!?».

Rolling his eyes, Bunnymund snorted, then he crouched down and grabbed him by the waist, but the infirm, gasping in surprise, didn't take long to hit him with a weak fist and bark: «I didn't ask for help!».

«And I'm not giving it to you» countered the Pooka.

After tightening the grip, he lifted up the burden on his shoulder, surprised to feel it even lighter than the previous spring, when, moved to pity by his poor conditions, he had resolved to take him in his warren, and he almost felt guilty for having planned, indeed, to attack him; this sense of repentance, anyway, did nothing but reinforce his aim to help him he had matured since he had surprised him crawling on the floor, and so, blatantly ignoring his haphazard protests, he carried him to the bed without major problems and he deposited him there.

«How dare you!» scolded him the man as soon as he was released; «You'll pay for this affront, no doubt! Where are Jack and the baby?».

Not frightened at all by his threats, the Easter Bunny withdrew at a safe distance and answered: «In
North's bathroom, Jack washing the baby, the baby being washed by Jack».

At that revelation, Pitch froze, his golden irises too light not to let leak all the wonder, the sense of uselessness and the pain he felt in being excluded, so Bunnymund, taken aback, tried to tergiversate, muttering: «Don't worry, you're not missing much, the child doesn't seem to like it and...».

«“You're not missing much”?» interrupted him the Boogeyman, glancing at him; «“You're not missing much”!? And you, beast with no family and no partners, what do you think you know about that?».

Hurt by the venomous comment, the Pooka gasped, struggling to tame the myriad of thoughts which always assailed him when he recalled his own now disappeared, but when he succeeded an uncontrollable aggressiveness pervaded him, far greater than the one which had prompted him to go up there, and so, not even for a moment pondering to contain himself, he hissed: «Just out of curiosity, man of the world, why did you spend the last three months pretending to be torn in front of Jack's belly, when you've always known that the creature he was carrying was your daughter? Why such a scene? Do you like dramas, did you want to keep the surprise element, or something else?».

Frowning into an expression of annoyance, the man turned his head away and muttered: «None of the three, since, in these three months, I didn't known, nor imagined, what you just said».

Vaguely pleased to see him embarrassed, the Easter Bunny laid it on thicker, commenting: «But how, someone so intelligent and resourceful as you failed to understand something so simple and obvious? And to think that I, as stupid as I am, guessed it right away!».

«No, you didn't guess that» harshly rebut Pitch; «You supposed it because, regardless, you've blamed me for the pregnancy, which is completely different».

«And yet, even when I found out the Man In The Moon had a hand in it, I didn't changed my mind in the least» insisted Bunnymund; «I kept believing you were the father, I brought forward my idea and, when your Nightmare sniffed Jack's belly, I had the final confirmation I was right: do you really want to convince me that that event hadn't been enough for you to open your eyes?».

Hit where it hurts, the Boogeyman startled, frantically clawing the sheets as to restrain himself from a violent act, then, staring at him with his eyes narrowed, he whispered: «Listen well, rabbit: I'm not here to convince you about anything. I haven't neither the intention, nor the interest, because the issue we're talking about doesn't concern you in the least, because I don't have to justify myself in your eyes, because it's obvious you're too dumb to understand and because of a million other reasons it would take me a whole day to list. The only thing which matters, beyond your blindness, is the truth, and the truth is that I didn't recognize the baby as my daughter until I saw her widened eyes, up there, in that miserable room where your despicable chief abandoned her. That is, whether you like it or not, it won't change because the past is the past and it's not for me a source of shame or discomfort, so save your breath for other nonsenses, because on this you cannot catch me off guard».

Although surprised by that statement, the Pooka had to admit that the way in which the other had articulated it was not only convincing, but also made it realistic, and left little room for criticism; not having well understood all the points of the story yet, however, he didn't get dissuaded, and he immediately demanded: «Then why, if you hadn't recognized her as a daughter yet, you rushed so hurriedly to the Moon to save her? Technically, she had no value for you, and probably not having her in the way any more would have worked out for you».

«But are you really that stupid, or do you enjoy teasing me?» snapped the man.

Struck down with a coughing fit, he was forced to stop and he ended up collapsing on the pillows,
but as soon as he had some breathing space, he went on, hoarsely muttering: «I won't be hypocritical, I won't hide you that one of the reasons was selfish: I hadn't accepted her yet, but not even rejected her, and seeing her being taken away from me without having the opportunity to make this choice had definitely enraged me. The main reason, however, is another, it's due solely and exclusively to Jack, and it's so clear that I really can't understand how you couldn't identify it: haven't you seen him when he received the confirmation that his daughter was missing? Haven't you noticed how he reacted? He felt sick, he trembled, he was almost about to faint, in his mind there was only dismay, and in his eyes fear in its purest state: he was completely shocked, and, frankly, he also gave the impression he would have never been able to recover. It didn't matter, for me, the relationship I had with the child, for him she was what most precious to him, and he had lost her, so for me she was what most precious could exist, and I had the duty to bring her back. I'd do anything for Jack, “even go to the Moon”, I said to myself, and so I did, and so I will always do: he has every right to be happy, both in absolute terms and considering all the sufferance he had already experienced, and I will never fail to do whatever is in my power to protect him and make him feel good».

The Easter Bunny couldn't say he hadn't expected such a response, but not even that he hadn't been surprised by it: Pitch had repeatedly stressed how much he cared for Jack, but the demonstrations he had given had been rather sporadic, open to ambiguous interpretation and involving them both. This, instead, this was different, this was clearly unselfish, and characterized by a considerable spirit of sacrifice, this was special, deep, and undeniably moving, and in fact left an indelible mark on who, finally, recognized it.

«Are you done with your questions?» exclaimed the Boogeyman, annoyed, interrupting the train of his thoughts; «Get out of the way, I'm going to Jack».

«It's for your own good: you still need to rest... mate» murmured Bunnymund.

Then he punched him on the face, and so it was that the man, now unconscious, never managed to fully grasp the meaning of his words, nor to notice the paws which, shortly after, pitifully took care of him.

Gasping, Pitch suddenly opened his arms, ready to spin them around to break his fall, but under his fingertips he didn't feel cold air, nor the sharp spikes which rose from the surrounding soil, but soft cloth, and, understanding he was wandering in a dream, he awoke with a start.

As he expected, the sudden change left him shocked, to say the least, grinding his skull in a painful grip and blurring his view, and while, too dazed to do otherwise, he resigned himself to stay still and wait for the dizziness to pass, he couldn't help but asking himself: why? Why did the fate keep tormenting him with the worst misfortunes and the most cruel hits below the belt? And when, exactly, his life had reduced to a hiccupping alternation between deep coma and dimmed states of consciousness?

As evoked by those questions, the memory of Bunnymund's punch smashing on his temple suddenly flashed through his mind, causing him not only a violent fit of anger, but also an irrepressible desire for revenge; immediately subsequent to this, however, it emerged also the one concerning the first bath of his daughter, and so the Boogeyman, putting off to another moment its payback intentions, prepared himself to get up and look for her and his partner, but he didn't go far.

As soon as he turned, in fact, two pairs of blue eyes staring at him froze him on the spot: the first, permeated by dark tentacles, belonged to the little girl, curled up lying on a side and busy diligently fumbling her mouth and nose, and watched at him more enraptured than ever, while the second, clearer and mottled, was obviously Jack's, who, in the same position of the newborn and half-hidden
behind her, didn't fail to study it with the same wonder.

Partly surprised, partly touched by the sweet vision, the man let out a giggle and murmured: «I don't know why, but I feel like I'm being watched».

Smiling in turn, the boy moved just enough to not have his lips covered by his daughter's head, then he replied: «I don't wanna weird you out, but you've been watched all the time: the baby finds you incredibly fascinating».

Happy to discover he resulted not only not scary at all, but even interesting, to the creature he had gave life to, Pitch countered: «Not at all, actually, it flatters me: it's a pleasure, for me, to be the subject of so much attention».

Quivering with emotion, Frost exclaimed: «Really? Then we could wake you up like this some times, even every day, if you desire so!».

Albeit flattered by the proposal, the Boogeyman couldn't help but feel a total sense of uselessness at the thought of accepting it, and so, giving up to hide the bitterness, he answered back: «Actually, I'd rather prefer to sleep less often».

Immediately sensing his discomfort, the boy turned serious and said: «Pitch, don't blame yourself, you were already tired before starting this endless day, let alone after the birth and the journey to the Moon: you needed to sleep, and you did well. Would you feel better if I told you that I slept for a while, too? I woke up pretty early, actually, and I felt well, I even managed to get to the kitchen without help and holding the baby in my arms, but then Toothiana told me it was time to bathe her, and it's been such a feat! She had a little fun squirting the water out of the tub, but in general she didn't like getting wet, and when we finished sweeping her I was completely exhausted, and I had to come back here to rest for a few hours. Come on, don't look so sad, the girl doesn't like that, she'll end up crying! And we don't want you to cry, huh, cutie? No, no, we want you to laugh and be happy and cheerful and...».

Mellowing his tone and drawling the vocals more and more, Jack delighted the baby girl with childish speeches a little longer, then, after sitting cross-legged, he dragged her with himself and held her tight; albeit worried by that simple gesture, which however, in his opinion, could easily turn out to be dangerous, the man decided to remain silent, but as soon as he saw his partner placing the daughter on his forearm and starting dandling her, he got horrified, and shouted: «Be careful, she could get hurt!».

Scared by that warning, the boy winced and froze on the spot, slightly leaning forward in a defensive posture; after a few seconds spent staring at his lover, however, he seemed to understand right away the cause of his distress, and so, offering him the child, he declared: «Pitch, the baby would also be delicate, but she's not a snowflake: you don't risk to harm her just by taking her in his hands. Moreover, both you and I are very good at handling snowflakes, aren't we? Come on, let her have a little fun, and have fun, too».

Not reassured at all by his words, Pitch couldn't really relax, and he watched with growing anxiety the newborn jumping up and down, between a laugh and a cry, less than a foot far from his face; sensing he couldn't hold on longer, and however, mindful of the dozens of pettish protests he had made in the previous hours, not willing to start a fight with his boyfriend to discuss if the game was safe or not, he opted for a compromise, and he commented: «You know, Jack, you can't continue to call her “the baby”: it's time to give her a name».

Turning his expression of joy in a brooding one, Frost finally stopped, and, casting him a look vaguely pleading, he admitted: «Yes, I know, I've thought about this since her birth, to be honest,
but, no matter how much I strive, I never manage to find a suitable one, and then, you know, I'd like
us to choose it together».

«Then let's choose it together» promptly conceded the Boogeyman; «Come on, come here next to
me».

Levering on his heels and elbows, he backed up to rest his aching back against the plumped pillows,
then, after drawing his partner towards himself, he asked him: «So, do you already have some
suggestion to start with? Maybe, at least, a general idea on which we could work?».

After getting more comfortable against his lover's chest and settling his daughter with the right side
against his own, the boy answered: «Yes and no. I was thinking about something like “Dawn”,
because she's indeed the dawn of a new era, both for the world and for us, but “Dawn” is not a
name».

«Actually, it is» the man told him; «It's not widespread, but it exists. If you prefer a less unusual
variant, however, you can opt for the more common “Aurora”».¹

Losing himself in fiddling with the child's tiny fingers, Jack took nearly a minute to mull over, but in
the end, raising a dissatisfied glance towards his lover, he declared: «I don't like either of them.
However, I still like the idea».

Not bothered at all by his rejection, the man thought for a moment, then he suggested: «How about
“Eos”? It was the name of the Greek goddess of the dawn, “rosy-fingered”, as they often called her,
and I think it suits both your desire and the child».

«Eos» immediately repeated the boy, enraptured; «Eos, yes... this will be your name: our little,
beautiful Eos».

Pleased to have satisfied his partner, Pitch nodded and kissed his head, then, without feeling the
slightest embarassment, he let himself go to some tendernesses with his daughter, massaging her legs
and the back of her hands, stroking her nose and cheeks and absentely combing those two short and
transparent hairs she had on her head, captivated by her beautiful and innocent look, amused by the
sullen expression she often flaunted and intrigued by her every smallest move, promptly imitating
and imitated by Jack.

Enraptured, the two went on fondling her for long, never getting distracted, never getting bored, but,
as soon as they saw her opening her mouth and rubbing her tongue on the upper palate, they sensed
that the idyll was about to end, and, casting to each other a worried glance, they exclaimed: «Let's
prepare the milk!».

¹ Since it would have been not easy at all changing this cross-talk, and since, anyway, I can't know
how widespread the names “Dawn” and “Aurora” are in your country – not to talk about the fact
you surely don't live all in the same village!, I decided to translate it exactly as it was in Italian,
pretending so that “Dawn” was quite unusual, while “Aurora” more known (at least thank to the tale
“Sleeping Beauty”)


Chapter End Notes

Next chapter will be published on Friday 24th of July
WE DON'T HAVE TO BE ALONE – CHAPTER 30

«When I woke up, the Man in the Moon was already gone, and the baby, fortunately, was still with me, in the same position in which I remembered I had left her. I checked her, just to be sure, but she didn't have wounds, nor brands, and she looked serene, so I fastened her to my chest, mounted the Nightmare who meanwhile had joined me and came out. You know the rest».

Pitch had been thinking for hours about how to set up the report of what had happened on the hateful satellite, pondering what events to reveal and what to conceal, evaluating what to change and considering what to make up out of whole cloth, always committed to pretend to be busy with the child in order to buy some time, but when she had finally fallen into a deep sleep, he hadn't been able to delay any more, and, fortunately, he had come to a satisfactory conclusion: telling everything chapter and verse. Heavily modifying the episodes would have been hazardous, since he couldn't exclude that, sooner or later, he would have had to prove them, imperceptibly altering them risky, since his fits of rage and his occasional lapses could have betrayed him and made him bring up, time by time, various contradictory versions, and, anyway, why should he have troubled himself to conceive a new story, when the original was already disturbing? The Man in the Moon had showed himself as the monster he was already by himself, and excellently, and there was no reason not to take advantage of his misstep. Telling every detail to the Guardians all gathered, however, hadn't been easy, both for the anger which remembering caused him and for the difficulties he had in bringing back facts lived in a state of semi-consciousness and therefore, by definition, elusive, and in fact the man had had to stop often and occasionally backtrack to describe particulars accidentally overlooked, but in the end, in one way or another, he had managed to reach the conclusion, and, as soon as he could have left the floor, he hadn't hesitate to do so, cutting the speech and heavily letting himself go against the high back of the chair on which he had sat.

«Actually, I don't know the rest» intervened Jack.

Suddenly shaking himself, the Boogeyman realized that, indeed, his lover hadn't witnessed the brief discussion he had had with North and Toothiana just before going to sleep, then he hastened to remedy, adding: «You're right, I forgot. As soon as I came out of the cave, I took off to get away from the Moon, once reached a few hundred feet I noticed the barrier was still active and that there was no way to deactivate it, nor hope that the Man in the Moon would have lowered it for me, so I wrapped myself in the shadows left, I crashed through it and eventually fell in the Globe hall, right next to you. From what I understand, it seems Toothiana and Sandman have guided me, although not managing to reveal themselves to me, nor to penetrate my defences, as, on the contrary, you did».

In confirmation of his statement, both the mentioned nodded, and Toothiana pointed: «We strove to get in touch with you to let you know you were now out of danger, but we could nothing, the more
we tried, the more you you clammed up, so Sandy created a slope of magic sand and accompanied you here, while I just followed you and checked that everything was going well, assuming that, in this case, we can really use the word “well”».

Bunnymund, who, until then, had remained motionless and silent, his head bowed towards the table and almost more engrossed in its violated decorations, rather than in the story, he asked point-blank, and to no one in particular: «Is that all?».

Assuming he was the only questioned, the man answered: «Yes, that's all, from the most insignificant detail to the most important event».

«It's a very strange story» commented North, stroking his beard with a thoughtful expression.

«What happened is strange» promptly corrected him Pitch, slightly annoyed by the fact no one in the room seemed upset; «Although, frankly, I have in mind a couple of adjectives more suitable, like “absurd”, “shocking” and “senselessly cruel”».

«No, I doubt it» countered the fairy.

Piqued by her intervention, the Boogeyman clenched his hands into fists and demanded in an altered tone: «So, may I know what do you think about that, please?».

Sitting up on the stack of pillows she had piled on the seat to make up for her small stature, the woman explained: «Let's ponder well on the pieces of information we have: the Man in the Moon kidnapped the baby knowing that you, Pitch, would have immediately rushed to save her, both for Jack's sake and to pay him back for the affront, as soon as he saw you coming near his Palace he activated a barrier which didn't harm you, and which allowed you and you only to penetrate in his rooms, he directed the newborn's scent so as to guide you towards her, he let you pick her up without opposing, he even allowed you to get away and come in the same area where you had left your Nightmare, which would have and, no doubt, which gave you part of its powers to help you, he brutally attacked you, but without defeating you, and after exchanging a few words with you he healed you and disappeared without raging further. It seems clear to me that he followed a logic, and that he wanted to meet you».

«And this seems to you an acceptable justification to what we did!?» cried the man, straightening in turn his back.

«Pitch» mollified him Toothiana, casting him a pitiful look; «It's more than obvious that there can be no acceptable justification to what the Man in the Moon did, but that doesn't mean he acted without a purpose. Don't worry, I'm not trying to defend him, and no one else in this room will ever try to, but, now that we all agree on the fact that his acts are to be condemned, we must focus to understand the reasons which prompted him and the goals he pursued, because only in this way we'll be able to guess his plans and know in advance how to behave to prevent similar, unpleasant incidents from happening again».

Although intimately knowing the other had not talked nonsense, Pitch couldn't control the anger which, from the beginning, had pervaded him more and more violently, nor the discomfort he felt at finding himself, once again, closed in a room with all the Guardians and forced to discuss with them about matters he would have preferred to deal with by himself, then he muttered: «The reason which prompted him was the absolute and despicable cruelty which connotes him, as well as the pleasure in seeing others, and particularly Jack and me, suffering, and his future plans consist surely in continuing to torment us in every possible and unpredictable way».

«We'll never get anywhere in this way, you know?» intervened the Pooka, his ears twitching and his
expression annoyed.

«Said the seer who has just suggested a thousand and one plausible theories, right?» immediately retorted the Boogeyman.

«Come on, come on, do not start!» silenced them Santa Claus, raising his palms tone it down; «Let's remain focused. Toothiana is right, it's clear that the Man in the Moon wanted to meet you and confront himself with you, and, please, notice that I'm talking about the verbal exchange, not about the physical conflict!, but that's not the only point: I think he wanted not only to do so face to face, but having you and the baby together. Seriously, notice this: he kidnapped her, but then he let you bring her away, until you picked her up he didn't even come forward, and he declared himself satisfied only when you said something about her. Unusual, isn't it? That's what seemed strange to me before».

«And that's what I would have told you if only you hadn't interrupted me» sharply added the Easter Bunny.

In support of this shared hypothesis, intervened even Sandman, compensating for his mutism, all along cause of the punctual defeats he underwent in any fierce debate, with two generous handfuls of magic sand, evoked in the exact centre of the circle of those present, and deftly shaping them up to form the round shape of the Guardian of the Guardians on a side, and the lanky one of Pitch, burdened with a sweet bundle, on the other, between the two contenders the King of Nightmare's raised hand, and between the latter and the newborn a tiny heart, but the man, sensing what his alter ego had tried to communicate, hastened to wipe out the scene with a slap and declared: «Oh, come on, cut it out! I could concede you that the physical clues resultant from the kidnapping would lead to draw that conclusion, but, in addition to those, we have thousands and thousands of evidences that the Man in the Moon hates me and dedicates his whole existence to crush me, therefore, it makes absolutely no sense saying that he brought me up there just to make sure... and anyway it's not as you think!».

Cutting his reasoning with a shrug, the Boogeyman turned his head, focusing his attention on one of the many orange stained glass windows which lit the room and striving with all his being not to be overwhelmed by the embarrassment which had caught him when his new love for the baby had been openly revealed, but every effort was in vain, because the master of the house didn't hesitate a moment to observe: «He's still in denial. I cannot wait to see when he bursts out and shouts that he loves her with one of his heart-breaking statements».

Extremely offended by the comment, in his opinion derisory and decidedly improper, the man jumped up and got ready to start a fervent harangue of accusations against the other and apologias for his behaviour, not discarding the possibility of resorting to threats and physical attacks and sorely tempted to conclude all with an indignant exit; North, however, was quick to make him sign to calm down, and, even before he could speak, he said: «Before you unnecessarily take offence, know that that was a sincere wish for you to soon accept your feelings and live at peace with yourself, not a mockery, and, if it seemed so to you, that's only because I played on my tone to better drive your attention. What you feel for the child is none of my business, unless you wanted to hurt her, and, if it was up to me, I would let you free to deal with everything without nosing into, but the Man in the Moon has nosed into that, and he did it for a reason, and, in order to find it out, I and everyone else need to talk about that, too, so resign yourself, or, better, just admit that you love the baby and move on. I assure you, both as a Guardian and as a friend, I don't need to know anything more».

Not reassured at all by this explanation, Pitch growled and snapped: «And even if it was so, what would that have to do with what happened on that damn satellite? Why should the Man in the Moon want me, his greatest enemy and incarnation of the evil, to grow fond of his creature? Perhaps to
weaken me with her tenderness and the shock me by killing her in front of my eyes?».

«Pitch, don't even think something like that!» exclaimed the fairy, shocked to the core by the hypothesis.

«But what, you told me you had finally realized the baby is your daughter, why the hell do you come back to claim she's a Man in the Moon's creature!?» cried Bunnymund, equally upset, but for different reasons.

Hiding his face in his clasped hands, the Boogeyman allowed himself a moment to quietly dispose of the frustration which the talking and not being understood had caused him and which the frequency with which this happened did nothing but intensify, then he took a deep breath and explained: «First of all, it was just a hypothesis of mine, which moreover I find unrealistic for the simple fact that the Man in the Moon knows that seeing the baby dying or suffering would send me up the wall, and not put me on the canvas. Secondly, since I now had enough evidences and therefore I understood and admitted that she's my daughter, the fact remains that I never desired her, nor tried to have her, while the Man in the Moon did the impossible to make her come to life, thus it's undeniable that, although she's blood of my blood, the infant is his creature. It's him who wanted her, in clear words, not me, so he was the first to make plans about her and he the first to work so that they could become true, and how can I, the black sheep, have such a role in them? It doesn't make sense».

Spreading her arms, as to add more emphasis to her affirmation and, at the same time, underline how simple that was, the woman observed: «Despite he could, at least theoretically, fecundate Jack right away, the Man in the Moon let you do that, and this seems to me a sufficient evidence that he intended to involve you since the beginning».

«It could be an evidence, but it's not an explanation» countered the man.

Not discouraged at all by that opposition, Toothiana pointed: «Don't you remember? Our conversation about why the Man in the Moon chose Jack to give life to the new Guardian, despite the fact he was objectively the least capable of us to deal with a pregnancy? It's not just you, it's both of you, and you're the protagonists of all of this because you're special. Have the fact you're the King of Nightmares ever had importance in your relationship? You've said that many times, Jack, for you, counts more than your power, and these have no role in your rapport, neither positive, nor negative, they don't even appear, because how could a herd of Nightmares or a blizzard matter before the affection you feel for each other? It's not your shadows, Pitch, nor Jack's ice crystals, but the love you share, which is pure, sometimes a bit possessive, but basically altruistic and generous, and it's something which only you two, among all of us, have, and which only you two can give to the baby. Please, open your eyes and heart, admit that, having you as parents, she'll live a unique and memorable life, full of...».

«Enough!» yelled Pitch, heavily slamming his fist on the table.

Too many words, too much confusion, too much embarrassment, too many expectations, too much pressure: too much, too much overall, and certainly too much for the man, already sorely worn out by the events of the previous months and generally little inclined to bear significant emotional changes, to stand. He didn't regret having lost control, deeming himself more than justified to burst out, nor having frightened those present, certain that it was only right to punish their unspeakable intrusiveness, and, although struggling, he couldn't calm down, nor think lucidly about the topics they had faced, so, giving free rein to his anger, he barked: «Nonsense, nonsense over nonsense piled on other nonsense! Your speech not only has no beginning nor end, but also no basis, how could you suggest such absurdities and then even start to articulate them? I don't indulge in such affectations, the Man in the Moon can't approve our union and therefore not even what you pass of
to ensue from it, and then, damn it, Jack, stop playing, I'm trying to have a serious conversation!».

Wincing in fright, Frost instinctively tried to cover the lace of ice crystals with which, during the
debate, he had conscientiously adorned the table, however, he didn't take long to recover, abruptly
turn and blurt out: «I'm not playing!».

«Ever since we sat here you've done nothing but having fun, you've frozen all the table now!»
insisted Pitch, in part really annoyed by that umpteenth event to deal with, in part seeing in it a
convenient escape route from the much more annoying arguments which he had been forced to face.

Curling his lips into a pained expression, Jack replied: «I thought you'd be happy to see my powers
back».

«It's neither the time, nor the place!» insisted the Boogeyman, his tone harsh, though saddened at the
idea he had hurt his partner.

Hardening his gaze, the boy hissed: «It hasn't been the moment for three whole months, and I have
no intention to wait further!».

«Guys!» suddenly called them a female voice.

After turning to the new interlocutor, the man saw Toothiana raising the most affable and sweet smile
she had ever shown, and he heard her murmuring: «Guys, come on, don't quarrel, there's no need
to».

«He started it!» exclaimed Frost, piqued; «It's not my fault if I can't hold back my powers well, I
wasn't playing, I was just trying to vent them a bit as I listened, because yes, I listened to every word,
and I agree with North! The Man in the Moon wanted to check if you had realized that Eos is your
daughter and if you love her and if you're willing to protect her, of course, only a blind man would
not understand that».

Annoyed by the provocation, Pitch was about to answer back, but the fairy intervened a second time,
demanding: «Eos? Is this the name you chose for the baby?».

Lightly blushing, the boy mellowed out and replied: «Yes, we chose it a few hours ago. Pitch
suggested it to me».

«On the basis of Jack's desires» hastened to add the Boogeyman.

Tilting an ear, Bunnymund asked: «Does it have a meaning or did it simply sound good to you? I've
never heard it before».

«It was the name of the Greek goddess of the dawn» explained Jack, without going into further
details.

Touched, the woman commented: «As I guessed. It's a really appropriate reference».

Nodding with conviction, Santa Claus confirmed: «Very apt, very fitting».

Clearly pleased to have received his friends' approval, the boy smiled and blushed more, starting to
tormenting a lock just above his ear to keep himself busy, so Toothiana, in order to help him
relaxing, changed the subject and said: «Back to us, Pitch, regardless you're willing to accept the
explanation which we gave you and which, objectively, is the most realistic possible, you cannot
deny that the Man in the Moon wanted to discuss with you about the baby, and that, once you
assured him you would have taken care of her, he felt satisfied enough to promptly remedy the
wounds he had caused to your back and to let you go without hindering you».

Wincing at that statement, which, in a blink of an eye, had brought back all the bad mood the brief digression about the baby and the choice of her name had smothered, the man frowned and countered: «I wouldn't say so, since he didn't even troubled himself to lower the barrier of moonbeams».

«At first, I've been dumbfounded by that, too» admitted the fairy; «All his cruel actions had occurred before your declaration, while all the good ones, or, at least, the not bad ones, had occurred later, and this was definitely out of place, but I think I understand now: the Man in the Moon didn't lower the barrier for the same reason he had raised it, so to prevent anyone from reaching him. Destroying it and then rebuilding it immediately would have not been feasible, such a work requires too much concentration and too much energy to be replicated twice within half an hour, and I suppose that opening a breach is not easy, or that it brings too many risks into play, risks he certainly didn't want and couldn't run».

Albeit convinced, at least from a theoretical point of view, by her arguments, Pitch objected: «The reasoning works, but it's unrealistic: I was already running away from the satellite, and I was exhausted and wounded, it was obvious and clear that I wouldn't have come back to attack him, not shortly, then the Man in the Moon would have had plenty of time to rest and erect a second barrier in tranquillity and far before I could recover».

«And what about me?» emphatically asked the fairy; «And Sandy? And all of us? Think that, once we had seen you coming back, we would have calmed down and done nothing? For all the teeth, even now that we've made sure you all feel good we aren't calm! The pregnancy had already started out bad, the progression was even worse, it's better to forget the birth, since it was atrocious, but at least it had a happy ending, but the kidnapping, and then the barrier, oh, no, Pitch, do not believe we would have held ourselves back! If only I had glimpsed a crack in that shield, I would have barrelled inside without hesitation, and I myself would have opened the Man in the Moon in half just to have an explanation for all of this!».

Amazed by her anger and determination, the Boogeyman let out: «Oh, I didn't think».

Smoothing the frown he had kept through all the discussion, North affirmed: «Pitch, we care about you, and also about Jack, and the child, who moreover is going to become a Guardian, it's obvious we would have stepped forward to defend you, that's what we tried to do all the time».

Slightly embarrassed by that statement, the man decided to ignore it and pointed out: «Whether he "simply" wanted, as you claim, to question me about the baby or not, the fact remains that we can't consider her out of danger, given the sentence after with which he took his leave».

«Definitely» confirmed the woman; «But, unfortunately, that sentence was as threatening as vague, then I fear the only thing we can do about it is keeping our eyes open, both to protect the child and to glean clues which could help us understanding in advance the Man in the Moon's plans and, possibly, thwarting them. This, of course, unless any of you have a better idea, or, even better, has already guessed something».

Feeling themselves indirectly questioned, all those present confusedly gave their opinion, someone muttering that the available evidences were too poor, someone murmuring that the Man in the Moon was too unpredictable, someone timidly advancing the hypothesis that, whatever would have happened, would have unlikely hurt the child, considering the background and the role she was destined to fulfil, and someone simply shaking his head, so Toothiana concluded: «If you have nothing to add, we can conclude the discussion here. We have no clues, we have no ideas, we cannot reach the Man in the Moon because he's still protected by the barrier: it's pointless continuing
to talk about that. Let's be on guard, but let's focus on other things, and try to assure the baby, or, rather, Eos, a peaceful life. What are you going to do now, you and Jack? Soon it'll be time to bath her, you could try together this time, without any of us interfering».

It took a moment to Pitch, slightly puzzled by the sudden change of subject, to gather his thoughts and formulate a response, but at last he remembered a detail, seemingly tiny, but actually fundamental, it hadn't been touched in the least, so he asked: «And the stench of death? It was not the simple reek of putrefaction, I'm sure about that: it was the smell the Dark Guardian leaves behind themselves».

Shivering, the fairy brought her hand to her mouth, as if to hold back a scream or a cry, and made no attempt to disguise the turmoil which had caught her; she remained in that position for a whole minute, a little trembling, a little nervously moving her eyes from the ceiling to the table and back, but finally she declared: «I didn't like this detail, I didn't like it at all: the Dark Guardian is not to be trifled with. I don't know what happened in that room, I don't know if Death came there out of necessity, or because they had been called, I don't know if they simply attended to their duty or have been used, but, whatever the answer is, Eos couldn't be involved, or she wouldn't be here with us, moreover so serene and healthy. The stench you heard must have been the remnant of a previous event».

«That's a cold comfort to me» commented the Boogeyman, troubled.

«It's a cold comfort to me, too» agreed the woman; «But sufficient, because, in the end, that's what counts. What's certain is that it's strange that you perceived that smell, or rather, that Eos was placed exactly in the same room in which someone had died shortly before: I could believe that the Man in the Moon has servants, and that one of them casually died right before the kidnapping, but his Palace has hundreds of rooms, and he wouldn't have had to struggle to find a more suitable one».

«He did it on purpose» intervened Jack, suddenly raising his face; «He wanted Pitch to smell that stench, he wanted him to know that Death had been there, because he certainly did something terrible!».

«It could be related to your childbirth, Jack» suggested North; «Maybe he simply called the Dark Guardian in that room to save you, and then he put Eos there to let you know».

«That's all we need is for him to start boasting about his actions!» snapped the man; «Not to mention the fact that Death cannot be stopped, when they come they always bring something away! Just as Toothiana said, whatever happened, it cannot have involved Eos herself, so let's end it here. I and Jack are leaving».

Without saying anything more, nor taking leave in a more appropriate manner, he stood up and turned his back on those present, then he strode to the exit, twisting his torso to pass it without moving the door and quickly entering the corridor. It wasn't long before a thud echoed behind him, soon followed by hurried footsteps, and then a voice called out: «Pitch! Don't you even wait for me?».

Recognizing his lover, Pitch slowed down a little, but he didn't give up on his aim to get away as fast as possible from the place where twice he had found himself discussing and fighting with the Guardians about personal questions, then he declared: «I'm in a hurry to get away».

Not discouraged at all by that aloof attitude, the boy sped up his pace, overtaking him and then stopping in front of him with his arms open, and he exclaimed: «What's wrong!? Why are you mad at me? First you scold me because I can't hold back my powers, then you ignore me, and then you leave ditching me to the others! Why? Was the frost I spread on the table really so terrible? You think
"I'm too stupid to deal with certain things?».

Repenting of having been so harsh with him, the Boogeyman stopped, too, looked away and answered: «The frost you spread on the table was rather nice and well done, and it fitted the carvings I had impressed in the wood about two months and a half ago».

Clearly puzzled by that statement, Frost gasped and demanded: «But... but didn't it bother you?».

«I cannot say it didn't annoy me at the time, given how tense and chaotic was already the situation, but that doesn't mean I'm not happy to see your powers manifesting again. I rather exploited it as a good excuse to embarrass the others and change the subject» nonchalantly confessed the man.

Instantly, a bitter cold invaded the corridor, while a thin layer of frost expanded on the floor and walls and tiny snowflakes began to swirl in the air, but Pitch barely had time to notice these strange changes, since a black and white whirl lunged at him, throwing his arms around his neck and his legs around his waist, and a muffled voice murmured: «You're the usual softy, grumpy man! I knew you still cared for me!».

The Boogeyman struggled not to fall, both because caught completely by surprise by the leap, and because he was more busy checking that none was watching that intimate moment, rather than clinging to some handhold, and initially he didn't respond to the embrace, but when he was certain no meddler was nearby, he let himself go, and, giving a caress to his lover, he whispered: «Of course, Jack. Rather, what is all this snow?».

Quivering with happiness, the boy hugged him even tighter, and replied: «I got excited! Come on, let's go back to the room, rather, give me a piggyback up to there!».

Without waiting for a consent, he let himself to slide downward, and the man instinctively tried to grab him, but it wasn't necessary: a few seconds later, Jack began to rise by himself, laboriously climbing on his thorax, pulling his robe and digging his heels in his thighs and hips over and over again before he proudly managed to settle on his back.

«Are you done? Can we go?» asked Pitch, angry for having failed to reject the other.

«Yes!» confirmed the boy, beaming with.

Giving up protesting, the Boogeyman contented himself with revenge, crossing his arms and so not helping his lover to hold on, and he walked through the maze of corridors, choosing the shortest and less frequented route; after less than a minute, he came in sight of their room and got ready to speed up and take refuge in it, but Jack was quicker than him, and, after jumping to the ground, he exclaimed: «I wonder if Eos is already awake!».

It was a matter of a blink of an eye: a moment before Frost was happily running in the room, and a moment later a foot long spikes of ice sprang out of it, climbing on the door jambs and lintel and obstructing the access.

«Jack!» shouted the man.

Terrified, he flung himself against the concretions, managing to break them and burst into the room, but welcoming him, instead of a glacial cave and general devastation, he found a flurry of snowflakes, and two distinct giggles.

«Jack, what happened!?!» he cried, flailing his arms to clear his vision.

After making the snow deposit with a simple gesture, the boy cast him an embarrassed look and
explained: «I must have got a bit too excited! But Eos had fun! And then, I did nothing wrong, it's the ice is all on the door, here I evoked just a few snowflakes... damn, the staff!».

Chasing a swirl of rebel frost, Jack reached his staff, which for months had rested against the side of the cabinet and which, at that time, was illuminated by a feeble pulsing light, but, as soon as he touched it, this, instead of diminishing, intensified and spurted icy sparks around.

«Everything is under control!» loudly assured the boy.

A little disoriented, he first tried to deactivate the rod by firmly squeezing it, then by shaking it, but every attempt was in vain, so he finally resolved to throw open the window and lean out to vent his powers without causing damage, and he insisted: «See? Everything's under control!».

Pitch, which initially had been nothing short of shocked by the sudden explosion and terrified that this might have harmed his partner or daughter, didn't take long to calm down, nor to smile at the clumsy moves of his lover, and when he saw hanging from the ledge, his butt well exposed, he couldn't help but laughing, and commented: «Yes, I see well!».

«Do not tease me, I'm not doing it on purpose!» rebuked him Frost.

Not offended at all by the reproach, the Boogeyman replied: «Come on, don't be touchy, I was just kidding! Rather, don't you think it would be better for you to go out and vent a bit? This time you've been lucky, but the next one you could risk to hit someone».

Raising on his elbows, the boy countered: «No, not that, I would never hurt anyone!».

«Jack» called him the man, softening his tone; «If you can't control your powers, you cannot even direct them, regardless your will of hurting no one. Think about the baby: a frost wouldn't be good for her».

«No, not at all» agreed Jack, mortified; «And now we should even bathe her, I'd risk to freeze the water... but I'm sorry to get away and leave her here alone, I wouldn't be a good parent if I did so».

Albeit with a bit of hesitation, Pitch declared: «You're not the only parent, I am, too, and taking turns is normal: go out to vent your powers and take control of them, in the meanwhile I'll look after her».

Glancing at him, stunned, the boy asked: «Really? Do you feel like doing so?».

Angry and still insecure, the Boogeyman barked: «I suggested so, it's obvious!».

Showing off a broad smile, Frost exclaimed: «Well, then let's do so! I won't leave for long, anyway, just let me say... ouch!».

Shaking his head in seeing the partner tumbling to the ground after trying to step back without manoeuvring the staff through the window, the man muttered: «Do not move, I'll bring her here for you».

Walking carefully in order not to slip, he tiptoed on the frozen layer which covered the floor, retrieved the baby, awake and well active, and placed her against his chest; Frost, for his part, didn't miss a move, following with his eyes and even with his body their every movement, and when he saw the other offering him their daughter, he whispered: «Hi, cutie, how are you? Now I'm leaving for a while, but I'll be back early, be a good girl with daddy!».

Softer than a feather, he placed a kiss on her nose, without daring to caress her or pick her up, then, after doing the same to the man, he darted through the wide open glass and shouted: «See you in half
an hour, an hour tops!».

Pitch would have wanted to say goodbye in turn, both wishing him good luck and giving him advice about how to behave, but he couldn't: a few seconds after leaving, the boy closed the window with a gust of wind, and maybe deliberately, maybe, more likely, by mistake, he sealed with a layer of ice almost an inch thick. Frightened by the sudden blow, the Boogeyman winced, a little tempted to rail against his lover's rude manners, but an astonished cry drew his attention, and at that point he, finally embracing his role as a parent, lifted the child in front of his face and said: «It seems it's just you and me now, baby».

In response, the daughter looked at him surprised, squinting her eyes and curling her feet, but as soon as she opened her mouth, a voice different from hers and far more mature intervened, exclaiming: «What happened here!?».

Immediately recognizing Toothiana, the man turned and answered: «Nothing weird, Jack was excited and didn't manage to hold back his powers. He went out a little while ago, I suggested him to vent a bit, in order to get used to evoke them and keep them under control again».

Reassured by the explanation, the fairy replied: «Oh, well, you did well, training will help him, and also do well to him: he needed a trip a bit daredevil, after two months of sedentary life. The baby, however, still need to bathe, so get ready! North is heating the water, we'll wait for you in a few minutes».

Then, without further ado, she left, leaving father and daughter alone again.

«It also seems you'll have to take a bath, which, as far as I know, you don't like at all» continued Pitch, again talking to the unaware girl.

More than a shiver caught him at that thought, of emotion, because he was about to share with her, finally and consciously, a moment so intimate, of fear, because failing or ruining everything with a clumsy move was too easy, of nervousness, because the inexperience certainly would have not worked in his favour, and of anger, because he would have had to do that in front of the Guardians, but he was aware he had no time to waste in idle and endless reflections, then he shook himself and got ready to act. After finding a corner of the bed not touched by snow, he placed there the little girl and began to tinker with the white romper she was wearing to take it off, struggling against the tiny buttons which closed it, encountering many difficulties in pulling the sleeves and legs off that limbs always stirring, getting a little touched in hearing her incomprehensible protests, and it didn't take long to him to get lost in his task and the expressions, some times curious, some times perplexed, some times disgruntled, the creature he had given life to showed him, but, after a while, someone broke the idyll, announcing: «Water is ready, come to the bathroom!».

«I'm coming» absent-mindedly replied the Boogeyman, without even troubling himself to check who had called him.

Still not convinced, he temporized, waiting a minute, then another, then another, stroking with a finger the newborn's soft stomach and keeping staring at her, but in the end, for the second time, someone interfered, announcing: «Pitch, you should...».

«Stop bothering me, I understood it's time to bathe her, I'm not stupid!» snapped the man, suddenly raising up.

Instantly, Bunnymund, which had clearly showed up to the door with the best intentions, given his ears lowered back and his calm expression, flared up, and, after hitting the other in the face with the bundle he had held in his paws, yelled: «Then suit yourself, for sure you know how to remedy the
cold water!».

Albeit outraged by the irreverent gesture, Pitch made no attempt to answer, knowing that his words would have never reached the Pooka now running, so, instead of letting off steam in little constructive insults, he bent over his daughter, stared at her intently and said: «You know what? We're going to the thermal bath, just me and you».

Chapter End Notes

I set the next chapter publication day on the 14th of August, because I'm rather busy this week, but, if I manage to, I'll publish it on the 7th
Chapter 31

WE DON'T HAVE TO BE ALONE – CHAPTER 31

Reaching the thermal baths, for Pitch, was child's play. He didn't have the slightest difficulty in silently crawling out of his room, sliding at the Globe hall edges not to be noticed, no problem in nonchalantly taking the wide staircase which went down to the deepest heart of North's Palace, blending in the crowd of beefy Yeti working to avoid questions and embarrassment, no impediment in worming in the narrow tunnel which, as he had discovered a few months ago, led to the thermal springs, advancing in complete darkness and safe from the frost outside to emerge directly into the sultry basin, and, indeed, why should he have had? Sneaking and being elusive was his work, his passion and his talent, there was neither reason, nor premises, to fail, but controlling his own fear, on the contrary, was not at all in his abilities, and in fact he felt it a lot during the whole walk. Lurking Guardians, nosy fairies, spying eggs, meddlesome elves, sighing gusts of magic sand, everything seemed to conspire against him, everything seemed to shadow him and plot to torment him, but, above all, everything seemed a great excuse not to think about the real source of his turmoil: the daughter he was carrying. Calls, giggles, cries of joy, wailings of astonishment, incomprehensible mutterings of disapproval, and then delicate kicks, stronger elbows, wet kisses and gentle caresses bestowed with tiny fingers always conscientiously moistened with saliva: the exact opposite of what had happened on the Moon, where the newborn had remained still and quiet, like a simple and docile doll, and the exact opposite of what the Boogeyman was able to handle. A few weeks before, when he was on Sandman's ship and he had just reconciled with Jack, he had found a little strange the sentence with which the boy had declared himself floored at the thought of the coming little girl, because “a person who will move, cry, talk, who will need help, and continuous company”, even almost a statement by a ninny who couldn't comprehend the wonders which nature could, but never, ever as in that moment he felt so much on the wrong: the only idea that creature, blood of his blood, was able not only to breathe, but also to actively interact with the world around him and, above all, with him, literally sent him into a panic.

As sensing his anxiety, in that moment Eos turned and looked at him, worried, while trying to touch his face, and the man shortly startled at that unexpected contact; after a while, however, he managed to pull himself together, and, preferring to postpone the interaction, he whispered: «Look, Eos: we've arrived».

Actually, he needed to speed up his pace and advance for more than a few meters to leave the dark passage and climb up a pile of huge boulders which blocked the way, but finally, after passing through a narrow gap between two of them, he came into the sought depression, and managed so to turn his daughter and show her the view.

The thermal bath, as he expected, hadn't changed in the least since his last visit, which had happened a few weeks ago: pleasant as always, they peeped here and there through the steam, somewhere showing off their sparkling waterfalls, elsewhere flaunting their crystalline and pinky waters, and elsewhere delighting the spectator's sight with abstruse concretions and puffy moss pads, while they
enveloped them with its warmth. The baby girl, however, in contrast to what he expected, reacted with extreme distrust: she didn't let herself be enchanted by the soft clouds of fog, nor by the splendid reflections, and, after watching them sideways for a few seconds, she cried out a moan, turning to her father and seeking refuge against his collarbone.

Amazed by her fear, apparently unjustified, Pitch shrunk up his shoulders to offer her a more protective nest, and laid his left hand on her head in a consolatory gesture; torn between the temptation to take to his heels, in order to promptly leave the place and avoid further problems, and the determination to find out the reason of that concern, both out of curiosity and to spare himself the bath in the company of the Guardians, he hesitated, some times advancing, some times backing, but at last an intuition flashed through his mind: evidently, the basin reminded her the Palace of the Man In The Moon. No creature with a minimum of awareness and instinct could have ever be deceived, the structures of the two sites too unique and opposite, their smells completely different, their temperatures minimally comparable, but Eos didn't have neither the first, nor the second, her beautiful eyes still too underdeveloped to properly focus large and distant landscapes, her little nose not suitable at all to distinguish mixtures of scents, her skin perhaps not even able, given the eternity which it was destined to, to feel heat changes, and, above all, her brain just awakened not yet organized enough to manage to precisely store memories, nor to recall them, and so, in part convinced of the hypothesis, in part certain that testing it would have not hurt anyone, the Boogeyman murmured: «Eos? Baby? Are you afraid of this place because it reminds you the Moon, and that bad man who took you away from Jack? You shouldn't fear, this is not his Palace: these are the baths of North, simple, beautiful pools filled with hot water and falls, where we can splash around and wash ourselves safely. Do you trust me? Let's try to get in, huh?».

He felt a bit silly in talking to a creature who, by definition, couldn't understand him, thanking his lucky stars for the absence of further, inopportune listeners and struggling to simplify his language and soften the tone, but the answer he got in return repaid all the effort: his daughter, albeit hesitantly, seemed to calm down a little, and twisted her torso, remaining well flattened against the father's chest, but opening herself up to a cautious exploration of her surroundings.

Happy for the fact he had been able to reassure her, the man wasted no time and, gently grabbing her wrist between thumb and forefinger, he made her stretch out, bringing her first to play with the puffs of steam, then to touch the smooth rocky wall which framed that paradise, and when he heard her laughing at the spongy texture of a hanging lichen, he couldn't help but exclaiming: «Ah, but then you like this place, huh? Let's move ahead, let's explore it a little bit more!».

Pandering her delighted looks, he carried her everywhere, leading her first to skirt the borders of that small Eden, where frost and heat met in murmuring rivulets, then more and more inward, sliding from a concretion to the other and, from time to time, making her follow the folds of the funniest ones, and losing himself in showing the hidden shapes concealed in the most peculiar ones. Without even realizing it, he ended up beating the whole north area, too focused in his task to notice the time passing and, actually, too involved to worry about it, but when he risked to tumble down the short flight of steps leading to the south zone, richer in pools, he decided his daughter had explored more than enough the place, and he got ready to climb down.

«Now we're going to bathe, Eos. Try not to throw too many tantrums, huh? Try to simplify my work a bit» he begged, his tone slightly cracked.

Without wasting time to check if the infant had heard him or not, he placed her against his sternum, then he rapidly descended the rough steps, and, after climbing on a small spike, he looked around to find a good place to change her.

He had to give up almost immediately that examination, hampered not only by the precarious balance
on which he was, but also, and especially, by the clouds of steam which blocked his view, and it was with more than a few mutterings that he started walking, reaching the numerous falls of pure water where he had rinsed himself with his lover; although he zigzagged hence to the large pool which North had showed him and even a ten meters further, however, he didn't manage to find any corner clean and dry enough to satisfy him, and so, growling, he had to resign himself and head to the cave entrance, where the towels were kept.

The little girl, who, in the meanwhile, seemed to have well acclimatized, didn't like the father's sudden change of mood, nor the deviation, and, raising two irises filled with confusion towards him, he expressed her disappointment with a whimpering and almost cracked cry; Pitch, for his part, felt distinctly his blood freezing in his veins at that sound, and he hastened to cuddle her, while exclaiming: «All right! No schedule changes, we're just going to change ourselves! Indeed, you don’t want to go into the water wearing your nappy, huh, Eos?».

Comforted by those words, the newborn seemed to calm down, perhaps not enough to feel completely at ease, but enough to stop complaining, and for the man, at least for the moment, that was enough. After reaching the low stone bench he was looking for, he covered half of it with two large, soft towels, thus creating a makeshift changing table, and he began to fiddle with the side elastic bands of the diaper to remove it, but as soon as his eyes fell on his daughter's ones, busy staring at him charmed and full of expectation, he couldn't help but commenting: «I wonder why you enjoy so much listening to me. You don't understand me, I know you can't, I could be saying terrible things about you and you wouldn't even realize it, but no, you laugh anyway».

As if to confirm his statement, Eos, instantly, smiled, proudly showing her toothless gums and reaching out as best as she could toward the parent, and the man, moved by her reaction, murmured: «Yeah, why am I even asking? You just want to hear my voice, and, anyway, I think you know that I couldn't be mean to you».

He couldn't help but feel a bit of bitterness at that the assumption, anyway still Boogeyman in the soul, and therefore piqued at the idea he had developed a weakness, moreover so evident, which prevented him from carrying out his work; however, pondering a little, he agreed that coming to terms with that wasn't a prospect so terrible: a single failure counted nothing in front of an ocean of past and future victories, while the chance to make a new experience was worth more than a sea of precious.

«Ha!» suddenly babbled the girl, delivering a kick in the inner part of his elbow.

Chuckling, Pitch followed the blow, letting himself be pushed away, but returning right away to the fray with a gentle bite to that tiny foot which tried to hold him off, and, after sliding his daughter's diaper from under her butt, he exclaimed: «Be careful, Eos, do not take advantage of this, do not test me too much!».

Not scared at all, Eos shrieked with joy, bending her leg to escape her father's teeth, while arching her back to draw him towards herself, and, shaking his head, the man resolved to satisfy her. After unfastened his robe, now reduced to a simple long, tattered skirt, and letting it fall to the ground, he tickled a little the girl with his nose, then he lifted her, leaning her almost against his neck so as not to deprive her of his company; opting for the longer, but safer, route, he walked along the southern ledge, proceeding bowed under his festoons of lichens and struggling to distinguish their touch from the even lighter one of the burden he was carrying, evidently busy exploring his skull; finally, having now reached the main pool, he approached it from the side where the bottom slowly declined, and, just as much slowly, he entered.

He didn't encounter substantial difficulties in accessing, only occasionally hampered by a smoother
stone here and a deeper depression there, and he fully enjoyed the warm embrace in which the water enveloped him, happy to be courted by it and eager to completely plunge in it, however, as soon as the liquid wet his shoulders and, therefore, his daughter's feet, too, the baby fell into a panic and started crying and fussing, to the point she pulled his hair and forced him to withdraw.

«Eos, what the hell!» he instinctively snapped.

In an effort to extricate himself from her grip, he awkwardly limped backwards, a little tiptoeing on the bottom, a little swimming, and he ended up colliding into an outcropping rock; once he leaned against it, he managed to move better and, finally, to tear the girl off, lifting her an inch above his head, and he got ready to scold her, but, as soon as he saw her, he didn't have the heart to: Eos was literally terrified. Her forehead frowned, her eyes wide and full of tears, her lips pursed, her whole body shaken by tremors, everything in her smelt like fear, everything shouted how uncomfortable she felt, to the point that, for Pitch, it was impossible not to wonder: why? Why such an overreaction? Jack had told him their daughter didn't like to bathe, but he hadn't expected it this far. Maybe she had had a traumatic experience with water? Maybe the Man In The Moon had tortured her, trying to forcibly submerge her in a tub filled with some kind of liquid? Having confirmation of this would have not surprised him, since it would have been in keeping with the cruelty of the Guardian of the Guardians soul, but the theory, in itself, was quite unrealistic, both for the fact the first ablution had been difficult, but certainly not a drama, and because, at the time of her discovery in that creepy room full of machineries, Eos had, indeed, seemed scared, but by the absence of company, not by bad memories. What if that was simply unjustified childish funk? Indeed, on closer inspection, the girl seemed mostly confused, and, perhaps, even annoyed by the fact she wasn't in full control of the situation, nor able to understand what was happening. Maybe he should have tried to reassure her, and let her approach the new environment more calmly? A complex and embarrassing solution, but the only one conceivable, and so the Boogeyman, resigning himself to take Toothiana as a model, prepared himself to put it into practice.

«Eos, darling» he whispered in the softest tone of voice he knew; «Don't be afraid: this is only water. Can't you see that I am immersed in it, and yet nothing happens to me? I'm fine, indeed, I'm even relaxed and I'm having fun, look at how much I enjoy splashing around! And you could enjoy it, too, if only you trusted me. Do you trust me? Do you trust me when I say the water will not make you anything? Do you trust me when I say that I'll hold you tight and never let you slip down? I'm not the best swimmer in the world, but I'm not even the worst, and this pool is shallow: I'll manage to handle the situation. Look, look what I can even do, always having fun and not harming myself».

After taking a deep breath, the man plunged, descending only an inch below the surface and making sure to keep the baby well raised up, and he got really surprised when he realized he could hear her complaints; determined to carry out his persuading, however, he held out for ten seconds, then he slowly re-emerged, opening his eyes as soon as he felt the light outside breeze blowing on them and immediately looking for his daughter's.

When he met them, he couldn't hold back a surge of joy, seeing in them, in addition to the turmoil, a beginning of doubt, so he exclaimed: «Come on, come with me! We'll have much fun together, come to play with me».

While regretting the company of his lover, who, no doubt, would have succeeded a thousand times better in such a situation, Pitch did his best to show the happiness he felt and look funny, making up for his inabilities with the charm he seemed to exercise over the child, and when he thought she could be ready, he started to lower her; proceeding slowly, and making sure to keep her at a distance from which she could see both his face and the water around herself, he helped her approaching the troubling novelty, giving her plenty of time to gradually acclimate, soothing every shiver with a cuddle and keeping reassuring her, and when he dipped her down to his shoulders, he heaved a sigh
of relief: he had done it.

As a reward for her courage, he pulled her to himself, willing to allow her to rest a little against his collarbone while, in turn, he conceded himself a few moments of relax leaning his head against the soft cushion of moss behind; Eos, however, who had evidently been stimulated far too much, didn't take the opportunity to recover, but rather started to squirm restlessly, occasionally letting out some short laments and trying in every way to break free and look around. Rolling his irises, the Boogeyman satisfied her, firmly grabbing her waist with both hands and turning her to offer her a better view of the pool, and he got surprised when he felt her moving her legs and arms as if to keep herself afloat; partly forced by her, partly yielding to curiosity, he broke away from the rock and advanced, and was stunned before what happened next.

As he lazily walked on the bottom, in fact, his daughter began to swim, resulting indeed a little clumsy and rough in her movements, but still managing to push herself in the desired direction, failing in keep her head raised, but finding a perfect balance which allowed her to breathe through nose and look around sideways, putting her all in that activity, so unique and, to be sincere, superfluous, since others were supporting and manipulating her, and not giving up that exploration even for a moment: it seemed she was born to live in that element. Almost plodding behind her, Pitch shifted her towards springs, upwelling currents, waterfalls, concretions, bunches of algae and festoons of lichens, and then bubbles, sponges of minerals and mucilage, ripples and anything, strange or trivial, within reach and sight, because nothing could escape her attention, and therefore nothing could escape her touch, and indeed, the more she went on, the more her interest in the outside world and the ability to extricate herself in it grew.

After about ten minutes spent wallowing, Eos slowed down, showing herself still eager to browse, but less and less vivacious, so the Boogeyman, guessing she was tired, carried her to the area where the water depth reduced just to an inch, and, after lying down and making her sit, he studied her. While she let him watch her, the girl, who didn't seem to have been negatively affected by that effort, furrowed her forehead in a frown half dumbfounded and half melancholy, as if she felt sad for that stop, but she didn't protest, and the man took the opportunity to tell her: «You're quite a character, and a weird one, you know?».

Hearing her parent talk, the infant looked up at him and cast him a beaming smile, so excited she even pressed her fists on her cheeks, and Pitch couldn't help but feeling flattered by such an ecstatic reaction, however, as soon as he saw her sliding a finger in her mouth, he didn't hesitate to intervene and push away her hand, and he whispered: «No, do not put your hands in your mouth: it's not hygienic».

Confused, the girl stared at him, shaping her lips in an almost perfect “o” as she struggled to understand the situation, and she remained motionless for nearly half a minute, but in the end, smoothening her frown, she cheered, and, after uttering an acute cry, she shoved the whole palm in her mouth, stopping before the wrist just because hampered by the thumb, stretched out.

Although floored by her gesture, the Boogeyman tried to stay calm, and, taking her phalanges out her mouth, he repeated: «No, Eos, do not put your fingers in your mouth». Bewildered, Eos stared at him again, clearly unable to explain herself the reason for that ban, which probably looked senseless to her, and perhaps tempted to oppose; a few moments later, however, she seemed not only to give up, but also to get over it, and, while letting her father hold down her arms, she began to move her legs, spraying minute drops here and there and getting lost in observing the ripples they produced.

Facilitated by her docility, the man preferred to keep the grip for a while, just to make sure her
attention was now fully focused elsewhere, and he encouraged her to play, immersing the lower half of his face in the water and blowing to budge it; noticing the fun the child had was greater as larger were the bubbles, he put effort to expel the air all at once, ending up quickly exhausting his entire reserve of oxygen, and when he felt his lungs burning he emerged, taking a deep breath and loosening his grip. He didn't worry when she saw his daughter lifting her arms again, sure he had distracted her enough, and he let her splash as much as she wanted; relaxing under the involuntary light massage she gave him, he allowed himself even to briefly close the irises, congratulating himself for the ease and speed with which he had made the other obey and dreaming of future scenes where his authority would have, always and obviously, guaranteed him a complete success, but as soon as he opened them, he distinctly felt his blood running cold: the infant had just grabbed a big chunk of floating lichen, and she was about to bring it to her mouth.

«No!» cried Pitch.

Scared, he lunged forward, stretching out his fingers to block her and his neck to better admonish her, but the baby, both because unbalanced by his intervention and because seeing the trinket be taken away, leaned over and ended up crumpling on his face; moaning in pain for his knee which, in his haste, he had slammed on the bottom, the Boogeyman tried to get up, but a weight located exactly on the bridge of his nose stopped him, and it didn't take long to him to figure out what it was: his daughter, in the attempt to eat the plant, had ended up biting him. Too shocked to do anything, the man just widened his eyes and stood still, barely hearing the giggles the child let out and hardly perceiving her soft gums diligently chewing the bone; as soon as he felt her tiny phalanges creep into a nostril, however, he recovered, and, lowering his eyelids in an exhausted expression, he commented: «Eos, stop putting things in your mouth: you must not».

The baby girl, of course, didn't listen to him, and continued to nibble him and conscientiously torment his face with her hands, so gentle in her manners, and yet so terrible in her rebellious autonomy of thought, and yet still so innocent as she devoted herself to one and the other activities, and the man had to admit he couldn't really get upset with her; between not getting angry and not asserting himself, however, there was a far cry, and, while the first prospect was more than acceptable, especially considering the infant's age, the second was absolutely not conceivable, so Pitch didn't hesitate a moment to escape from the other's lips, point against her the index and sentencing: «No more things in the mouth, Eos, not now, not ever. Now we'll go washing ourselves, so then we'll be able to dress up and go back, and I could prepare you some milk, because, judging by how you tried to eat me, you look hungry».

And finally, albeit clearly tempted to bite that admonitory finger, Eos calmed down, and, opening and closing her lips like a little fish, she turned around to find a new source of entertainment.

Narrowing her eyes, Toothiana bent down towards the roof of North's Palace, then, after dashing with pinpoint accuracy through the round opening, he circled the Globe and glided toward the floor.

Two days had passed since the birth of the new Guardian, two days during which she had done nothing but mounting guard, helping the master of the house to prepare anything the newborn could need, running here and there in a vain attempt to remedy the misfortunes which, one after another, had come, and worrying, and she had had little time left to work on the gift for the baby, so, when she had seen Pitch furtively disappearing in the corridor leading to the thermal baths, the fairy hadn't hesitated an instant to let him and get away: the fact the man wanted to spend some intimate moments with his daughter was a good thing, and a right she would have never denied him, and there couldn't be better occasion for her to proceed with the work in progress. She had travelled fast, taking advantage of the stronger currents to reach her kingdom, and once she had arrived in her room, she
had immediately get to work, allowing herself not even a second to recover; feeling a little tired, and realizing that, by herself, she would have taken a whole day to finish, she had involved twenty of her helpers, choosing them among the most sensitive and capable, and, after explaining them her project and assigning to each a task, she had continued, rejoicing at seeing the enormous progresses which, minute by minute, she made with the others; finally, finished the motif and now satisfied, she had wrapped the gift in a cloth, delegate to Baby Tooth the room cleaning and headed again to Santa Claus' home.

After deftly dodging a couple of Yeti carrying a load of wood and tools, Toothiana zigzagged among those present, lavishing compliments and suggestions about the designs of new toys, then she took the corridor to Pitch and Jack's room, but at last a doubt occurred to her, so, instead of directly entering in it, she preferred to make a stop, sitting on a large trunk and rechecking what she had so painstakingly produced and transported.

The present, as simple as heartfelt, was the result of a long and reasoned reflection, and, as soon as it was extracted from the bundle, it unraveled, revealing itself to be a wide, white band of fine cotton. A tape of dark blue silk fringed it, combining business with pleasure in the soft, shiny line with which it framed and reinforced it, pairs of thin laces tied in a bow, dark blue, too, peeked at regular intervals from the top, as pretty as functional to hang the canvas, and three embroideries, made with a particular feather-shaped stitch, adored a side of it: the first, colourful, represented the woman herself, busy offering the tender bundle containing the newborn to Frost, eagerly supported by the partner; the second, much darker, showed the Boogeyman riding a Nightmare fleeing from the Moon, his bare back ploughed with slender, white doodles, his arms weighed down by the baby huddled body, completely surrounded by a cloud of shadows; the third, finally, in softer tones, depicted the whole little family, the boy leaning against the man, the man half-lying on the boy, both intent to rock and feed their daughter with a tiny bottle. Each of these drawings was flat and linear, stylized in its forms, which just reproduced the outlines and filled them with colour, omitting every other detail, but no less meaningful, and, actually, incredibly striking to the viewer who'd have lingered to study it, and it was, in sequence next to the others, only in the left part of the cloth strip, leaving wide space for similar, future decorations which, from time to time at the most important steps of Eos' growth, would have been added, thus forming a kind of picture book of memories which, by the Guardian of Memory, couldn't be a more appropriate gift.

Hoping both the thought and the effort would have been appreciated, Toothiana took one last look, checking that the fabric hadn't got crumpled, wet or stained, and that no thread, in the hurry, had been torn or pulled, then, after briefly rolling it up, she headed towards the room, bringing it with herself; after easily passing through the door, left wide open, she flew over the bed and prepared to land beside the cradle, but suddenly a voice barked: «Who's there!?».

Overwhelmed, to say the least, by this verbal assault, the fairy jumped back, avoiding by a feather's breadth head-butting the ceiling, and she instinctively replied: «Who are you?».

Snorting, a dark figure emerged from behind the armchair, peering out the back, and countered: «And who do you think I could be, considering whose the room where you are?».

At that point, she had no difficulty at all in recognizing her interlocutor, facilitated in her reflection by his appearance, but, on the contrary, she struggled a lot to control herself: Pitch, in fact, looked nothing short of ridiculous, his face deformed by an angry grin far too exaggerated, his eyes wild, his cheek smeared with flour and, most of all, his hair dishevelled as ever, on a side raised as the spines of a huddled hedgehog, on the other stuck to the skull in a sort of bon-ton coiffure.

Displaying the most serious expression she could put together, Toothiana answered: «Oh, right: Pitch».
«Oh, right: a nosy fairy breaking into other people’s rooms without knocking» mocked her the Boogeyman; «What are you laughing at, huh!?».

Caught red-handed and not sure at all to be able to pretend for long, the fairy couldn't bear to lie shamelessly, so she declared: «I wasn't really laughing, I was only quite surprised by your... new hairdo».

Dumbfounded, the man looked up, naively trying to look at himself, and he blurted: «What's wrong? What happened to my hair?».

Gesturing, in order to look more convincing, the woman wheedled him, stammering: «No, no, it's just a little...».

«Cut it out» promptly silenced her Pitch; «You shortly chocked when you saw me: tell me what's on my head».

Albeit defeated, Toothiana preferred anyway not to be too irreverent, so she simply explained: «No foreign things. Your hair, on the other hand, just seem to have come out of a storm: on the left they're all raised, as if you've been struck by a lightning, on the right, instead, they're all knotted and squashed on the skull. What happened to you?».

Leaving his head dangling in exhaustion, the Boogeyman replied: «Nothing, actually. Simply, at some point the lady here decided she was hungry and she had to eat, and right away, so I had to run to the kitchen to prepare her the bottle, without lingering in foolish pursuits like weaving myself new clothes or combing my hair

«Oh, I'm sorry, Pitch!» exclaimed the fairy, understanding the feeding was still underway; «I didn't mean to disturb you, I'll come back later».

«What have you come to do?» asked the man point-blank, suspicious.

Showing him the bundle, the woman answered: «I came to give you the gift for Eos. I wanted to put it in the cradle and make you a surprise».

Taken aback, Pitch hesitated, clearly embarrassed by the generous gesture, but it didn't take long to him to shake himself, and, after resuming his usual, displeased frown, he bitterly stated: «You'd disturb even later, then you might as well put it in the cradle now».

Well aware that, under her interlocutor's unfriendly attitude, laid anyway a big heart, and seeing something else, besides the offences, in his words, Toothiana nodded without protesting, and she flew up to her destination, unrolling, in the meanwhile, the strip; after draping it in the cradle, attaching it to the thinner branches of this with the special ties and well smoothed it, she turned to leave, but at last curiosity had the upper hand on her, and so, moving as silently as she could, she sat on the stool beside the fire and pretended to warm herself to its flames, taking the opportunity to look sideways at the father in action.

As she expected, the man got embarrassed as he realized he was observed, and he slightly twisted the torso, as if to conceal the newborn and, especially, the care he was giving her, but he didn't try to chase away the importunate company, so the fairy, plucking up her courage, asked: «What are you thinking about, Pitch?».

Wincing, the Boogeyman straightened his back, perhaps in a vain attempt to show himself aloof, but finally he sighed and replied: «About the bastions».

Understanding the reference, the woman smiled and demanded: «And how do they look?».
Bending his lips in a doubtful grimace, he confessed: «Not as terrible as they seemed at first, indeed. However, they're called “buttress”».

At that remark, Toothiana snorted and commented: «You're the usual schoolteacher! I'd have liked to see you in my place, tired, worried and struggling with a hulk who couldn't understand the baby was not to be mentioned yet! I said the first credible word beginning with “ba” which came to my mind».

«So credible I realized you were talking about the baby in less than a second!» sniggered Pitch.

Folding her arms, the fairy declared: «If you were a bit less touchy, we would have had no problems in speaking you about the girl, and you would have not been forced to hear neither about bastions, nor about buttress. Oh, she already finished! Make her burp».

After putting the bottle, now completely empty, on the seat arm, the Boogeyman looked up and asked: «Make her what?».

«Burp!» promptly explained the woman; «Lay the baby on your shoulder, gently pat her back and keep on until she relieve».

«What an uncivilized practice!» indignantly snapped the man.

«But Pitch!» protested Toothiana, shocked; «Don't be ridiculous, everyone needs to burp after eating, and she's too young to do it politely, then help her, or she won't manage to digest properly».

Disgusted, Pitch looked her up and down from head to toe, conveying her such a disapproval she almost felt guilty for having explained the child's needs, but finally he conceded: «All right, I'll make her burp. What do I have to do?».

Pleased that the interlocutor had decided to show understanding, the fairy stood up and flew beside him, then she began to guide him, suggesting him: «You must lay her against your shoulder, like this, her chest against yours, a little more straight, okay, now massage her the back, slowly, and when you hear her stomach grumbling, start gently patting her...».

Although never smoothing his frown, the Boogeyman obeyed every command, some times behaving resolutely, others hesitantly, but never making a mistake, demonstrating so how much effort he could put in his new work, and when she saw him wincing at his daughter's little burp, albeit amused, she couldn't laugh, because too much moved.

A gust of wind. A lace of frost. A flurry of snowflakes here, a bezel of ice there. Sheets on sheets of transparent freeze, layers on layers of white blankets, necklaces of stalactites, toothings of stalagmites, whole packs of howling gusts, armies of grey, looming clouds, and again frost, snow, ice, one after the other and all together, in a storm worthy of the oldest annals, in a storm boding to never end, in a storm which had something scary in itself, and which, yet, Jack loved from the depths of his heart: the perfect storm, the storm burst from venting, the venting necessary, and the need finally become reality. He had been dreaming this moment for weeks, months, even, living it as he slept, imagining it while he was awake, trying, from time to time, to activate the staff, and praying with all his might that his powers could return when the wood just faintly glowed, and in the last period he had begun to seriously fear this would have never happened, and that he would have remained useless and impotent forever, but in the end, thankfully, that terrible scenario had not occurred, and the flame of the freezing cold had blazed again in him, giving him new hope and such an energy to prevent him from sitting still for more than a moment, and he had managed to do nothing but surrender to it, pretending to be forced, but actually eager as ever to spend a few
moments of pure and full freedom after a quarter of agony. Oh, how much he had longed to fly once again on his own strengths, how much he had desired to twirl in the sky, bringing snow and fun in the world, and not caring about anything, nor anyone, not his enemies, not his friends, not himself, not to eat, not to sleep, not to behave, not to do anything which might benefit the creature whose he had become keeper and casket! Make no mistake, he loved her, he had loved her from the first moment he had seen her, and even before, and if, for whatever arcane magic, he could have travelled back and had a chance to choose whether to grow or reject her, he would have not hesitated for a second to accept her, retracing step by step the whole ordeal experienced, but this, this autonomy, this independence of the algid aspect and the fresh scent was his life, and he couldn't, nor wanted to, abandon it altogether, and he would have not failed to, carving out every available moment to enjoy it and giving up even rest, if necessary.

While promises and fantasies jumbled up in his mind, trying to prevail one over the other to assert themselves and hold their own, a memory made his way through that chaos, evoked both by the thought of sleeping and the one about the newborn, and tickled his consciousness with images of the sweet pampering the baby had given him during the nap, sometimes stroking his chin, sometimes sucking his finger, sometimes, even, laying delicate, wet kisses on his chest, and soon the emotion had the better hand: where was, at this time, his little Eos? In the bathroom, being washed and splashing around? In the kitchens, waiting for the bottle? Already in the room, sleeping? Indeed, now that he thought about it well, it had been some time since he had left the Palace, maybe two, maybe even three hours, judging by the thickness of the blanket which covered the ground and, above all, by the distance he had travelled, hours during which everything could have happened, and hours during which, he had to admit it, he had enjoyed himself and vented more than enough, and then, feeling a touch of nostalgia in his chest, and the desire to fulfil his duty as a parent, Frost decided to end the scamper on the spot, and immediately head back.

Evoking the faster winds he knew, he retraced the way back, passing like a lightning over the visited areas and thanking his foresight for choosing the uninhabited tundra, instead of a populous country, to give vent to his, at least at that time, devastating powers, and in a heartbeat he found himself in front of North's home, already perfectly directed towards the circular opening on the roof; dashing through it and then directly into the corridor leading to his room, he prepared himself for a theatrical entrance, holding the staff ready to evoke a practical ice strip on which to slide, but at last he remembered that sudden clamours and temperature changes, for the newborn, were not ideal at all, and therefore, restraining himself for her sake, he landed and walked sedately.

Just when he was a few steps from the door, confused calls came to his ears, and a well-known male voice exclaimed: «You tried to put off in every way, Eos, first eating, then taking a nap, but now it's time to dress up! Come on, don't worry, once you'll have this onesie on, you won't even feel it, and you'll be able to move much better than staying wrapped in a blanket!».

Excited to hear his partner so involved to talk with the child while taking care of her, and, at the same time, curious to see him at work, the boy stopped, remaining well hidden behind the jamb and peeping over it just enough to spy the other with his left eye, and when he managed to focus the scene, he nearly melt into a delighted comment: Pitch was sitting on the bed, kneeling in front of her daughter, lying, and busy fight against her restless legs to dress her, and, albeit a little tired, he didn't seem bothered at all, but, rather, amused by the funny game in which he had been involved.

Making sure not to get noticed, Jack continued to watch without interfering, not losing a move of the two spirits and not amazed to see his lover neither, first, letting himself be overcome, nor, later, quickly regain control of the situation and succeed to dress the infant, and he pondered if it was now better to manifest itself, but before he could take a decision, something happened, that left him stunned: as soon as, maybe in order to get up, maybe just to change position, the Boogeyman withdrew, the newborn began to fidget, turning her head around and started to whine.
Evidently equally surprised by that reaction, Pitch winced and immediately leaned over the child, heaving a sigh of relief in hearing her quieting, but starting to study her, doubtful; after a while, he tried to back away again, but again his daughter, worried by his disappearance, cried, and he found himself forced to turn around; now clearly believing to have solved the mystery, the man made a final test, simply crouching down for a few seconds, and crawling right away to the infant when she began to whimper, and, after bending down to brush his nose on her stomach, he whispered: «Oh, Eos, foolish, foolish Eos: how could you look for the company of someone like me?».

Upset by the sentence, which, in its brevity and simplicity, had been able to bare every deepest fear and insecurity so long rooted in the man's mind, the boy didn't resist, and, determined to change the other's self-consideration, he stepped forward and stated: «Because you love her, Pitch, and you'd do anything for her, and she knows this».

Wincing suddenly, Pitch jumped away from the bed, tripping over his own feet and almost risking to ruin on the bedside table, and yet being more than ready to protest, given the index finger he had already raised and the rumble about to become a growl, but Frost didn't give up, and, taking advantage of his momentary confusion, added: «No, Pitch: no. Do not, do not deny what you feel about her, I beg you. If you feel embarrassed, do it with the others, do it even with me, I don't care, but not with yourself. Have more consideration of yourself, you're good, and capable, and incredibly loving, and you know to perfectly show these qualities to the people you love, especially to Eos. I assure you, Pitch, I swear this on my powers: you deserve her as much as she deserves you».

Taken aback by that speech, the Boogeyman couldn't fight back, and, after a few, failed attempts to speak, he bit his lip, dodging his gaze as he stood slumped against the drawers of the night table, so the boy, seeing a chance to get him, picked up his daughter, offered it to him and urged him, murmuring: «Come on, care her».¹

Suddenly raising his head, the man commented: «You don't say “care her”!».

Delighted to have found way into his wall of reticence, Jack insisted, exclaiming: «But she doesn't know that! Don't you hear her? “Care me, care me, Daddy!”».

Dandling the baby on his forearm, he handed her back to his lover, encouraging her to giggle and reach out to him, and eventually the man, albeit mumbling, hugged them both, and whispered: «All right, all right, I admit it, I love her, but stop massacring the grammar!».

Narrowing his eyes, Nightlight leaned over the magic mirror one last time and studied the scene before himself, then, now satisfied, he blew on its surface, freeing the moonbeams infused in the arcane liquid and, indirectly, also those connected to them and sent watching, and walked away.

He travelled fast the Palace meanderings, striding through vast halls with a light step, slipping light along wide and sloping stairways, crossing bridges and walkways as a gust of wind, and finally, after passing a long tunnel and a sharp turn, he resurfaced in the satellite lung: the immense, sighing field of flowers suspended in time, died by a magic attack, and by the magic reborn to enlighten the world and, above all, a special pair of eyes.

Slowing down a little, so as not to risk wreaking havoc into that splendour, the warrior came forward, entering without fear in that fragment of past eras, letting himself be caressed by the blossoms delicate petals and the tails, just as delicate, of the moonbeams kept in there, the most beautiful, the kindest, the spirits so pure to be able to think, and not only to obey, the jewels of a soul generous enough to know how to console, and not only to defend, and yet, the creatures so good not to be able to survive the cruelties of the outside world, and, a little following them, a little guiding
them, he went up along a soft hill, not the highest, not the most imposing, simply the one which, many times in the past, he had climbed in sweet company, and when he reached the top he found whom he was looking for: the Man In The Moon.

A surge of profound sadness overtook him when he saw a large stone peeping out behind his round figure, thin, but wide, so terrible in the way it stood upright, showing off in a fine and elegant writing a name which belonged to others, and the boy didn't have the heart to come forward and violate that moment as intimate as tragic, but the Guardian of the Guardians wasn't of the same opinion, and, while not turning, he immediately ordered: «Report, Nightlight».

Raising his face to hold back his tears, Nightlight obediently told: «Jack Frost has finally regained his power, my lord. I watched him for a long time, for three whole hours, and even more, I studied his every move and checked the result of his passage, and I think we could have never hoped for a better recovery: although he travelled quickly, he hasn't struggled to cover the whole northern part of Asia with a layer of snow several inches thick, and if, in the end, he stopped, it was only out of nostalgia for his daughter, and not of tiredness».

«Excellent» commented the master of the house; «And what about his task? Has he already come back in contact with children? Has he already put effort into entertaining them and reinvigorate his legend?».

Shaking his head, the warrior explained: «To be honest, no, my lord, he's kept well away from them, and he never showed himself eager and impatient to meet them. If I can speak, however, I think he behaved in this way not because he was disinterested, but worried: his glacial powers returned suddenly, bursting and wild, he initially had a hard time controlling them, and therefore I guess he decided to stay away from towns just to avoid the risk of causing damage».

«You can always speak, Nightlight: you're a smart guy, and capable, and I have a high regard for you and your opinion about any matter» stressed the Man In The Moon, keeping his voice calm and soft-spoken.

Taken aback by the compliment, the boy blushed, feeling proud as ever of his own abilities, and infinitely grateful to his lord for having not only noticed them, but also helped them to grow and flourish, and awarded him with a love perhaps seemingly a bit cold, but unquestionably unconditional, and at that moment he didn't know how to respond, nor if it was actually appropriate to do so; after a few seconds, however, the presence of Cinnaminson's grave returned to loom over his heart and mind, hundreds and hundreds times heavier than the granite which constituted it, thousands and thousands times more debilitating than the despair from the broken hope, and, plucking up courage, he asked: «My lord? What do we do now?».

«What do we do, you say?» replied the Guardian of the Guardians, finally turning to open to his interlocutor; «We observe, Nightlight: we observe».

¹ The Italian original sentence was "Vogliile bene", an exhortation, intentionally incorrect, to push Pitch to openly show his feelings for the baby, and not only to deeply, but just secretly, love her. I chose to use the verb "to care for somebody" (obviously duly modified into the incorrect form "to care somebody", in order to sound as rushed, cute and childish as the Italian one) to translate this sentence, because it's quite clear that Pitch loves the baby, and so writing "love her" would have been only redundant
Chapter End Notes

Next chapter will be published on Friday 21st of August
Sighing, Pitch fell back against the pillows, then he began to lazily pamper his lover and his daughter.

Just five minutes before, he had spent hectic moments with them two, caught between the strong hands and the soft gums of the second, who had seen fit to pour all her overwrought love on his already mistreated hair, and the arms of the first, who, a bit tied, a bit amused, hadn't really managed to help him, and he had had to sacrifice no little time and hair to break free, so he hadn't hesitated a moment to follow the advice of his partner and take a break: he had limply laid on the bed, the fatigue accumulated in the past days suddenly become heavy as a boulder, and he hadn't objected to the affectionate couple's second attack, rather opening his arms to better welcome them; resigning to give his robe collar to the exuberant child, he had begun to narrate the trip to the thermal baths, dwelling in particular on the child's dramatic reactions and on the singular strength of will with which she had started to swim here and there; finally, after discussing it for a while with Jack, he had turned quiet, losing himself in the eyes of one and the other, waiting for everything and nothing.

«Next time I wanna come, too» concluded the boy, settling better against his partner's chest; «I'm not going to miss this thing, I'm too curious about it».

Nodding, the Boogeyman conceded: «Sure, no problem. Next time we'll go all together: you and I will enter first, so that you could get used to heat, then we'll take Eos, and you'll see how she moves».

«No» immediately contradicted him Frost; «I don't wanna cause you any trouble, there's already the baby who needs constant help, the last thing you need is me doing the same. I'll stay at the bank, don't worry».

Displeased, the man countered: «Jack, you don't cause me troubles, it costs nothing to me to dedicate you ten minutes and only then to involve the child, rather, I'd be glad to».

At that statement, the boy stiffened a little, slowly curling up on himself and stopping only when their daughter, hampered by his proximity, pressed a hand on his forehead, and Pitch, curious, couldn't help but ask: «What's the matter, Jack? Something wrong?».

After repeatedly biting his lip, Jack confessed: «Nothing, just... past memories. About the thermal baths. Something that shouldn't happen, in short».

Taking the hint right away, the Boogeyman whispered in his ear: «Why shouldn't it happen?».

«Pitch!» exclaimed the boy, outraged; «I have no intention of doing lewd things in front of Eos!».
«No!» cried the man, quivering: «But why in front of... argh, for all the Nightmares, the very idea makes my stomach turn! How could you think I was suggesting such a behaviour!? I was just trying to say that what happens to you, in itself, is not a bad thing».

«How can it not be?» suspiciously asked Frost.

Still troubled by the other's suggestion, as well as annoyed by his sudden and unjustified lack of insightfulness, Pitch covered his eyes with his right hand and murmured: «But why do you think it is? What's the matter? Eos? It's not something you have control on, you don't become more sensitive because of the heat on purpose, so don't blame yourself. You don't want that to happen in front of her? I understand, and I agree, and indeed, if we were all together at the thermal baths, I'd help you relax, not excite you further, but I was speaking in general, not about that specific time, and, in general, what would the problem be? In general, couldn't we be alone? In general, couldn't you be alone? There's a good reason why I urged you to go out a few hours ago: you don't need to abase yourself to become a good parent, and, rather, if you did, you couldn't properly take care of Eos. A child entails sacrifices, but should never lead to renunciations, otherwise, why having them? I know that, despite all the sufferances pregnancy caused you, you love Eos from the bottom of your heart, and that for you having her beside you is a pleasure, so make sure that taking care of her continues to be a pleasure for you, and a pleasure added to all the others which were already part of your life, and please notice I said “all”».

He couldn't deny himself he had felt terribly embarrassed during his forceful discourse, the unaware baby busy crumpling his robe too close to him not to seem unduly exposed to ill suited arguments, and the arguments themselves source of considerable discomfort, not because unpleasant in themselves, but because faced at a delicate time, and with a reluctance bordering on ridiculousness which had never belonged to him; as soon as he finished, however, it took little to him to recover, glad he had held out till the end, since he believed he had established an important concept, and it was with his heart pounding that he saw his lover parting his lips, and heard him whispering: «Are you serious? Do you really think so?».

Sensing an immense weight suddenly been lifted from his chest, the Boogeyman asserted: «I don’t think so, I know it's so».

Perhaps moved, perhaps amused by that vigorous and high-sounding encouragement, the boy smiled, and murmured: «Then can we talk about that in the next days?».

«Sure» promptly replied the man; «When, where and how you want. Maybe, while Eos sleeps, so you'll feel more comfortable».

Raising a look, finally serene, to his partner, Jack huddled up against him, and began to gently caress his collarbone with the tip of his nose, making sure, in the meanwhile, also to give some massages to their daughter, who still fought with the collar of sand and shadows; amused by this unequal struggle, Pitch allowed himself to participate, tickling the infant's wrists with his index to divert her and prevent her from tearing the fabric, but he didn't forget his lover, whose kindness he rewarded with some relaxing cuddles to his hair and neck.

«Pitch?» suddenly asked the latter; «I don't wanna do racy things in front of Eos, but... a kiss? Don't you think we could do that?».

Giggling in front of his stuffiness, which he knew was just a game to get satisfaction, the Boogeyman shook his head, and concluded: «It wouldn't be sensible hiding to her we're partners, don't you agree? Come here».

He had not hesitation in drawing him to himself, although making sure to be gentle in his possessive
grip, and no difficulties in making him tilt his head back to better expose him, no problem in lifting him a little by the hips to compensate for the height difference, despite the uncomfortable position, and no impediment in reaching him, and when he succeeded, he almost melt with emotion, his partner's breath so strangely hot on his skin, his velvet lips so soft under his, and the light chills which shook him so sweet. He took a little to pull himself together, too overwhelmed by old feelings now renewed to do anything but staying there, motionless, enjoying them again, but when he felt his lover parting his mouth he couldn't help but accepting the invitation and gradually slid his tongue in it, without vehemence, without excess, just enough to play a little with the other's and communicate that nothing had changed between them, neither the desires, nor the feelings, nor the hopes and certainties, just enough to get in contact with him, but not to overpower him, because he didn't feel the slightest need to in that moment.

He couldn't say how long he went on, if only for a few seconds or for whole minutes, far too lost in the kiss never really desired, but which he had realized he had been missing as soon as it had arrived, but it was with perfect precision that he perceived how it ended: in an instant, and in one motion, so light to be almost imperceptible, and yet so well aimed at his cheek to have an immediate effect.

«Oh, but look a bit here!» exclaimed Jack.

Making room for their daughter, who, perplexed, had intruded into the kiss with her hands stretched out to separate the two lovers, he commented: «You jealous cutie! You wanted Daddy all for yourself? Or maybe you just wanted a kiss? Huh? Huh?».

Amused by her confusion, Pitch let out a laugh, which was soon followed by the delighted one of the little girl who, tickled by the other parent, began to squirm in the tight embrace in which she had forcibly intruded; a bit worried that she could slip, a bit eager to participate in the game, he grabbed her by the waist, lifting her to let her defend herself with some weak kicks, but immediately offering her to the boy as soon as he changed strategy and began to cover her with kisses, and he relaxed at the soft sound of those sweet effusions, closing his eyes for a moment.

«Pitch, Pitch! Do not sleep! Give me a hand!» jokingly scolded him Frost.

Grinning, the Boogeyman replied: «I think you'd better not ask me for help, Eos can let out earsplitting cries when she becomes overexcited, you know?».

«For real? Let's try!» enthusiastically suggested the boy.

«No!» shouted the man, his voice cracked.

After quickly retrieving their daughter and lying her against his shoulder, he glared at his partner with his eyes narrowed, and he snapped: «Hadn't you come out to vent? Why all this desire to make a mess?».

«But what?» asked Jack, showing himself blatantly amazed; «You told me I make a mess wherever I go! Have you already forgotten that?».

A shiver caught Pitch at that statement, of satisfaction, because he couldn't deny that fooling Frost had been a great pleasure and, even now, one of the successes he was most proud of, of pain, because actually, considering everything the other had, meanwhile, done for him, he felt a sense of guilt, and of surprise, because that fact dated back to less than two years before, but it seemed so far to belong to another life; anyway, he preferred not to let those feelings out, so, after shaking his head, he muttered: «No, I remember it well».

Irreverently sticking out his tongue, the boy sat astride on his partner's thighs and took the baby back,
pulling her gently from his grasp and settling her against his own forearm, then he said: «Speaking of venting, don't you think that's the case, for you, too, to go out? It's been a while since you did it. I know that, unlike me, you can work without, how can I say?, directly go on the ground, but I also know that doing so allows you to strengthen up more easily, and that taking a break from North's Palace always makes you feel better. You don't have to worry about Eos, I've already taken care of her for a few hours without messing up, and, if I don't have to bathe her, I'm sure I'll have no problems».

«Indeed...» began the Boogeyman.

«So, when you come back, we could present Eos to all the other» nonchalantly added the boy.

«What!?» cried the man. Even before he had finished the exclamation, he realized that he had, at least in the other's eyes, overreacted, and yet he didn't regret it: what had just been suggested to him had, to say the least, upset him whole hog. Presenting Eos? But why? And to whom? The Guardians seemed to be the only plausible hypothesis, but they had already had the opportunity to see her, and far too many times for his liking, and, anyway, why should they enter in contact with her? The infant was not their daughter, nor their relative, but only a future, and still hypothetical, colleague, a person who, perhaps, would have had to share with them duties and responsibilities, not certain experiences and feelings, and thus for what purpose exposing her forcibly and so early to their company?

«Pitch, I know what's swirling around in your head right now, and I have something to tell you about it: cut it out!» rebuked him Jack.

Vexed by the reproach and the hard look he had received, Pitch stuck his chest out and countered: «I don't have the slightest intention to! Who are these “others” whom you'd like to present her to?».

Not frightened at all by the other's stern voice, the boy quietly answered: «Exactly the Spirits you're thinking about: Toothiana, North, Sandman, and yes, Bunnymund, too, because, whether you like him or not, he's a Guardian».

«I see no need to stage this scene» bitterly replied the Boogeyman.

Struggling a little to hold their daughter, who, upset by the quarrel, had started to fidget, Frost rebutted: «It's not a scene, Pitch, it's an important meeting, for her and for everyone. I know, we could put it off, she's still young and, assuming she'll accept to become a Guardian, she'll start working with us only after quite a while, but I'd like her to see the others mainly as dear and reliable friends, and not as simple colleagues. Don't you think that it would be good, for her, having someone to count on, other than us parents? You never know, maybe one day we couldn't be with her, for any unpredictable reason, and, frankly, I'd feel more comfortable knowing that someone reliable and whom she knows will take care of her. Moreover, it seems obvious that, for a while, we'll live here, and we can't certainly spend the next few years keeping our friends away from her».

At that conclusion, the man, who had been struck by the perfectly reasonable motivations of his partner and rather inclined to agree with him on that involving the appointment of a guardian ready to intervene in case of extreme danger or need, clouded over, annoyed by the fact that presenting their daughter was, in practical terms, a fate which he had to resign himself to, and he stated: «Regardless the reasons you can put forward and the hesitations I can have, the fact remains that others have had many opportunities and much time to know her, and then, again, I see no reason to stage this scene».

«Oh, no, what did you get?» exclaimed Frost, almost giggling; «I don't want our friends to know her, I want her to know our friends!».
Dumbfounded, Pitch frowned and demanded: "Her to... know your friends?".

"Oh, come on, for once make up your mind and admit now they're your friends, too!" scolded him the boy, casting him a look of disapproval; "Anyway, yes, you understood well. I noticed that, although she's already opened well her eyes, Eos has difficulties in seeing, especially distant objects, and none of the Guardians, apart from Toothia na, and just for a few minutes, has ever stayed in front of and close to her, so I think she hasn't really realized who and how many they are. Whether it's so or not, anyway, I'd like her to meet them better, looking at them well and one by one, listening to their voices, trying to interact a bit with them and, come on, do not make that face!, I'm not suggesting to throw her down a cliff! You'll be allowed to hold her all the time, okay? I said, I'd also like her to interact a bit with them, touching their faces, maybe playing a little, more or less as it does with us. Nothing strange, nothing dangerous, nothing that you should worry about, so».

"So so" instinctively retorted the Boogeyman, partly to parrot him, partly because he was really upset.

Not giving in to that provocation, the boy lingered to kiss a few times the fingers with which the child was touching his chin, then he asked: "So? What do you think about it? If you really don't feel like doing it, I won't arrange anything, I have no intention to fight with you, nor I want to make Eos do something to you don't agree about, but I hope you'll say yes, for the reasons I've already explained you».

The man didn't answer immediately, torn between the surprise for having, in the end, received the opportunity to choose, the fear, obviously unjustified, but all too real in his eyes, of losing his daughter, the mistrust in the Guardians not yet dispelled and the awareness he couldn't keep them at bay forever; before thoughts and worries could overwhelm him and drag him into a downward spiral reflection, destined only to increase his anguish without letting him reach any solution, he managed to come to a decision, focusing on the many favours and aids the others had given him and, above all, on Toothiana, who he considered now officially a friend, and so, in one breath, he declared: "All right, yes, let's do it, since you want it so badly».

Showing a radiant expression, Jack exclaimed: "Oh, thank you, Pitch, thank you! I knew you'd have understood!».

Foreseeing that, given his enthusiasm and his increasingly energetic hops, the partner would have soon tried to jump on him, Pitch hastened to tackle him, and muttered: "Don't waste your time thanking me, rather, make sure not to do damage, neither now, nor during your long-awaited meeting!».

"Don't worry" reassured him the boy, slowly calming down; "Everything will be fine! So now you're going out? You'll stay away for a few hours, as I did?».

Not convinced at all by his lover's statements, but unable to do anything but resign himself, the Boogeyman helped him to lay the child on his forearm, freed himself from his legs and stood up, then he replied in a weak voice: "Yes, I'll stay away for a few hours, too».

"Come on, aren't you happy to come back to scare children and rule your Nightmares? Try to smile, think about how much fun you'll have!" urged him Frost.

Wrinkling his nose, the man hissed: "Are we sure that, while I'm away, you won't go around to present the child to half the world?».

"You never change! I'll pretend I didn't hear that, but make sure to go out, and fast! Shoo, shoo!». 
And so, with a pinch and a shove, he kicked him out of the bed, and Pitch, defeated, had to run away, muttering.

«Well, but look if it's ever possible: I, the King of Nightmares, driven away by my own room, and in that way!».

An hour had now passed since the lively discussion with Jack, and yet Pitch still couldn't come to terms with the irreverence with which the partner had vigorously thrown him out the door. How could he have, how had he even thought of daring? Maybe he believed that, now that the baby was born, every act was allowed? That the fact that he, the Emperor of Shadows, had imperceptibly softened to take proper care of Eos, had automatically given him the permission to treat him like any pathetic, slow-witted human father? Oh, he was wrong, if so, how much he was wrong! The infant granted him the immunity only as long as she laid awake and next to him, but, as soon as she had closed her eyes and been in condition to be moved to a safe distance, nothing and no one could have never stifle the wrath of the Boogeyman, nor stop his righteous vengeance!

While conflicting ideas alternated in his mind, suggesting him punishments of any kind, from the most cruel, and therefore impracticable, ones, to the lighter and sweeter, through rather interesting sensual variants, a ribbon of golden sand unrolled in front of his eyes, and he, who never refused luck gifts, hastened to grasp it and make it his own, thoughtfully kneading it to spoil it in its depths and starting to model it to create a small Nightmare; well aware that, in the village where he was, none of the houses not visited by his Purebloods hosted souls suitable to develop it, he pondered the best course of action to choose, rejecting an idea for every detail he added to the dark creature he was about to release; finally, opting for a drastic change, he dissolved into a stream of sand and terror and flung himself into a tunnel nearby.

After just a few seconds of turbulent journey, the Boogeyman took a sharp turn and exited from the depths of his lair, leaping out and materializing in front of the searched destination: a foster home. Inhabited by various bullies on the threshold of adulthood and a handful of fragile children too frightened to be able to rebel against the abuses, it was the ideal hunting ground for the inexperienced creature just born, a reliable guarantee of its rapid growth and perhaps, even, of the transition to the higher level of Pureblood, and the man didn't hesitate to penetrate through a window left ajar; as soon as he entered, however, a cacophony of voices reached him, deafening, albeit coming from upstairs, and, guessing that bedtime hadn't arrived yet, he decided to wait.

«Well, now we'll have to... hey, stop!».

Taken aback by a sudden buck of that horse in miniature, the man temporarily lost his grip on its back, and he was forced to chase it to avoid that, attacking blindly, it could risk to unwarily commit suicide; after a rocambolesque hunt, ended, fortunately, on the flight of stairs leading to the dormitory, Pitch blocked it against his chest, and barked: «You fool! What were you thinking about? You cannot attack senselessly, you must think before acting, and, above all, you must obey my orders! This is not the right time to go upstairs: the lights are still on, and the children awake and excited, while you're born to move in the shadows and attack your prey in their sleep. Thank your lucky stars that I intervened, or, at this time, you would have already dissolved, and don't believe I'll do you the same favour a second time: if you take the initiative without listening to me again, I'll let you do, and be sure I'll enjoy seeing you falling apart amid those despicable, pathetic children. Now let's go back downstairs, and wait».

After lazily shifting it away, as if to prove that, indeed, he wasn't interested in the least in its survival, the Boogeyman descended the steps and walked towards the educators' room, pleased to sense his
servant meekly following him, but making sure not to show the satisfaction he felt; flaunting a bored expression, he watched one by one the photos on the walls, smoke and mirrors for the social workers who deluded themselves to entrust their protégées to angels in heaven, but actually left them in a limbo too many times looking like hell; finally, after crawling into a private lounge, he sat on the couch, next to the only night guardian remained.

As soon as he settled down, the other, in a kind of ridiculous ballet, took over and jumped to her feet, hurrying down the hall to turn off all the lights and put the kids to bed, and the man was forced to wait her, getting bored as he analysed one by one the tacky knick-knacks which crowded the shelves; when, after about twenty minutes, he saw her coming back and grabbing a remote control, he shook himself suddenly, always fascinated by this magic tool called “television” and able, apparently, to arouse any emotion in humans, and so eager to look closely at it again, but his excitement soon disappeared: the program aired was a romantic film.

Moaning loudly, Pitch sank down on the pillows, too annoyed by the mawkish scene which stood out in front of him to notice their roughness, or the stale smell they emanated, and he decided on the spot he would have not tolerated a second longer that nauseating show, so, after leaping forward, he began to randomly press the buttons next to the screen.

«Hey, what the fuck...!?» snapped the woman.

Clearly bothered, she stood up and followed the Boogeyman, engaging in an unaware battle with him with his punches on the TV and increasingly nervous taps on the remote control, and deafening him with expletives growing in volume and vulgarity, but at last she seemed to desist, and she exclaimed: «Oh! Ulysses».

Taken aback, the man stopped in turn, mindful of the just mentioned hero’s story and believing that the educator had, precisely, found a cinematic representation of that, so, breathing a sigh of relief, he returned to his seat place, and he got ready to a short viewing to kill time before going back to work; relaxed, he watched with his eyes half closed the opening of the programme, much more absorbed in the development of a good course of action for the baby Nightmare than in the images this showed, but when it ended, he roused, and focused entirely on the TV.

Emerging from a faint dim-light, a singular landscape appeared, indeed characterized by columns, pediments and decorations clearly evoking the ancient Greece, but rather poor, unrealistic and, above all, closed; a few seconds later, a man stepped on the stage, a weathered and, at the same time, attractive look, a face with marked features, a slightly unkempt beard and framed by a thick head of wavy hair, actually perfect to interpret Ulysses, but dressed in an elegant suit little fitting the character; finally, an inscription which had nothing to do with his legend slowly uncoiled in the background: «The secrets of children: from zero to two years».

Even if Pitch would have wanted to grab at straws to defend his guesswork, claiming that, instead of a film, that was a contemporary play, in which the myth had been completely revisited, the last clue nipped in the bud even that hypothesis, but the Boogeyman, actually, didn't feel the slightest need to hope that what now appeared openly as a documentary was something else, nor to complain: a lesson about young children was exactly what he needed in that moment. Too many times he had felt embarrassed in front of Eos, too many times he had felt clumsy while handling her, too many times he had felt himself literally suffocated by the weight of his ignorance about that, and sinking through the floor when he made a mistake or found himself forced to guess what to do, and that man, young-looking, and yet with ancient features, almost a Michelangelo's subject cunningly escaped from one of his works, seemed just for him.

«The younger children are already asleep, my beauty, and the older boys are ready to play a joke to
scare them: take the opportunity to nourish yourself, and, when you see them stopping, don't give up, but wait in the shadows, since their torments never last for less than three hours» absent-mindedly suggested to the small Nightmare.

Then, without even checking if the animal had listened to him, he leaned back on the couch, and let himself be absorbed by the detailed explanations that that mysterious character with a charming voice had so generously decided to bestow. ¹

Sliding without difficulty into the narrow gap between the wall and the cabinet, Pitch jumped out of his tunnel in the room he shared with Jack and, now, their daughter, in North's Palace, and there, a short distance from the desk, he materialized.

Immediately, he spotted Eos, lying on the twisted sheets, and, at the foot of the bed, his lover, the first busy looking around with a confused expression, the latter hiding, and, guessing the two were playing, he didn't announce himself, and he make sure to stay still so as not to be noticed; a few seconds later, as he imagined, he saw the partner suddenly jumping up from the edge of the bed, exclaiming “Peekaboo!” and stealing delighted giggles from the infant, and he couldn't help but laughing in turn, and at that point, now discovered, he heard a call.

«Pitch? Are you here? Yes, you're here! Look, Eos, Daddy's back! Let's go greeting him!».

Reaching the overwrought couple, the Boogeyman relished that exuberant welcome, dividing himself between the delicate and a little clumsy caresses of the girl and the kind kisses of the boy, stuck between one and the other and, at the same time, hugging them, and he was surprised to hear Frost calming down in a few seconds and eagerly asking: «So, how was it? Did you have fun? Did you create new Nightmares?».

«Yes, I had fun» he answered, touching his neck with the back of his fingers; «I'd say that, overall, it was a very interesting exit».

He preferred to say nothing about the documentary he had watched, both because reluctant to show how far he was willing to work to become a good father and because more inclined to make those notions appear as part of his ancient culture and, therefore, accumulated in years of experience, rather than learned since and in a short time, and thanks to others' teaching, then he changed the subject, and demanded: «What about you and Eos? Did you have fun?».

Lingering to settle Eos' romper, which, in the heat of the moment, had come unbuttoned, Jack replied: «Oh yes, a lot! We stayed here all the time, and...».

«You stayed here!?» cried the man, astonished; «All the time?».

«Yes?» answered back the boy, showing a dumbfounded expression; «Is that a problem? I thought... ah, now I understand what the problem is! Amazed that I didn't go around to “present the child to half the world”, huh? A promise is a promise, Pitch: I had sworn I would have waited for you, and so I did».

Overlooking the mimi c king, furthermore all too well done, of the scene he had done a few hours before, Pitch clarified: «No, I'm just amazed by how you kept your word: it wasn't necessary for you to close yourselves in here».

Softening his look, Frost explained: «In truth, we didn't closed ourselves in here all the time. A few minutes after you left, Eos got hungry, so we went out to prepare the milk, and what a chaos we
found! I don't know if North had planned that or not, the fact is that no corridor was free. It took ten minutes to us to reach the kitchen, and another ten to come back, we couldn't take a step without having to immediately stop and let anyone pass, and we heard a lot of noise coming from the Globe hall, as if someone had suddenly decided to turn it over from the ground up to the ceiling: in short, a disaster. I don't think I could have walked out there without constantly meet the Guardians, and, even if they weren't around, I could have never avoided their helpers, and the works in progress, and all this mess, and I thought it wasn't safe...

Experiencing the discomfort the partner had felt, the Boogeyman praised him, whispering: «You did very well, Jack. Although she's growing quickly, Eos is still young, and should not receive too many stimuli at once, and, especially, she should stay away from loud noises, because she has very sensitive ears, which may got damaged easily».

Reassured by his words, the boy smiled and definitively handed him their daughter, helping him to lay her against his chest, then he murmured: «So, can I go and call the others?».

It took a moment, to the man, to understand his questions, but less than a second to let himself be assailed again by the mixture of anxiety, fear and anger the subject had aroused in him, and without even thinking he began: «I don't know, Jack, as I said, too many stimuli are not ideal, and then Eos looks tired, it would be better to...».

«Eos is not tired» interrupted him Jack, his eyes narrowed and his lips pursed; «And four people who present themselves one at a time are a stimulus she can easily bear, unlike you».

Hit where it hurts, Pitch raised his head and started to reply, but the other anticipated him, pressing his index on his mouth and whispering: «Come on, Pitch, trust me, we'll be fine, there's nothing to worry about: it's just a little meeting with some friends. I'll go looking for them, and I won't rush: try to use this time to relax. See you soon, I love you».

After placing a little kiss on the tip of his lover's nose, Frost leaped away and bolted through the half-open door, and the Boogeyman almost didn't have time to notice his movements before he realized he had been left alone; as she looked around, a bit confused, Eos followed him, but performing almost immediately a wide yawn, and at that point, unable to help himself, the man snapped: «Couldn't you have yawned five seconds ago!? We would have been spared this unnecessary ceremony!».

Puzzled by his rebuke, the girl stared at him, unable to understand that surge of anger when, for her, it was just time to laugh at that moment, and the Boogeyman, obviously, didn't dare to convince her otherwise, and, rather, put any effort to keep her happy, tickling her stomach and casting her a smile, albeit raised; muttering to himself, he made the bed, shifting his daughter from a forearm to the other to use, time by time, the more convenient hand, and overlooking some of folds which would have needed much more vigorous treatments to disappear, then, after sitting on the armchair, he waited.

Five minutes passes, then ten, then fifteen, for him of tension and complete immobility, for her of entertainment and rocambolesque explorations, up his arm, down his collar, inside and outside the robe of the father who, instead of blocking her, let her do, intervening only when she risked to slip, and when, finally, the door opened, they both jumped, one in fright, the other in expectation.

Scrutinizing one by one the new and oddly silent visitors, Pitch let Jack sit on his lap and helped him to support the infant, then he barked: «One at a time, first Toothiana, then Sandman, then North and finally Bunnymund, face eight inches far from Eos', because it's at that distance that she can focus objects better, low tone of voice, because she has delicate ears, affectation allowed, but only until they don't overexcite her, and not more than a couple of minutes for each of you! She's born just few days ago, we must treat her with care, or we risk to do more harm than good to her». 
At that order, the only one who seemed to get irritated was the Pooka, who, while managing to refrain himself from commenting, didn't spare even a touch of the theatrical vehemence with which he rolled his eyes; Jack, on the contrary, didn't give the slightest weight to his aggressiveness, nor to his rather overt protectiveness, and he commented: «Oh, Pitch, you know so many things about children, I and Eos are really lucky to have you here with us».

Flattered by his partner's compliments, the Boogeyman cooled down a little, not to the point to become calm, but enough to stop frantically clawing the armrest, and he got moved when he felt the other rewarding him with a delicate caress on the wrist; well aware that letting the Guardians advance was the most effective way to get rid of their cumbersome presence, he decided to start the meeting, therefore he grumbled: «Come on, Toothiana, do not stand there staring at me, come here and present yourself».

Gracefully soaring in the air, the fairy reached them, approaching the child from the right and stopping exactly eight inches from her face, then he whispered: «Hi, little Eos, how are you? Do you remember me? I'm the Tooth Fairy, the Guardian of Memory, the... oh, yes, yes, you remember me, huh? After all, how could have you forgotten my little petulant voice, not to mention your first bath! Yes, cutie, we can play together whenever you want, I'll bring some knick-knacks next time, some coloured feather to tickle you!».

With these and similar sentences, she had no difficulty to ingratiate herself with the baby, ruffling her feathers and blinking to charm her with the colours of her plumage; despite the allure she clearly hold on her, however, she didn't take any advantage, neither to touch her, nor to entertain her more than she should, and, indeed, after just a minute, she didn't hesitate to voluntarily leave, blowing one last kiss to the newborn and respectfully standing aside.

Seeing the field free and his turn come, the Bringer of Dreams didn't need to be asked twice and went near the trio, silently hovering in front of them and stopping to allow the child to focus himself; not embarrassed at all by his mutism, he communicated with spontaneity the desire to get in touch with her through facial expressions, smoothing his forehead, wrinkling his nose to look a little more likeable and, above all, showing a wide smile, and he perfectly succeeded: Eos, with a jerk, tried to reach out to him. Going towards her, Sandy allowed her to do to him anything and everything, bearing tugs to his hair, kicks to his chest and deafening cries, but also gentle caresses, wet kisses and light giggles, never complaining, never try to escape, encouraging rather her to play with the grains of sand which inevitably covered him, losing himself to compare his hands with hers, more minute, but of the same proportions, and so ending up exceeding the deadline imposed to him, which Pitch promptly reminded him, hissing: «Cut it out, your time is up».

The Boogeyman, who had felt his anxiety rising to unbearable levels during that interaction, followed with his eyes narrowed his nemesis quietly sliding away, and, soon after, the master of the house taking his place, and he was about to warn the latter with a sharp sentence not to be equally exuberant, but soon he realized it wasn't necessary: his daughter, in fact, seemed intimidated by his considerable bulk. Perhaps realizing she had fell silent, perhaps having already reckoned he could look threatening to her, Santa Claus make any effort to put her at ease, showing her the more friendly expression he managed to raise, murmuring her sweet words in an even sweeter tone, and holding out the tip of his beard to let her touch it and, thus, realize it was not something to fear, and in the end, albeit with difficulty, he succeeded in his intents, because the infant resolved herself to give in to his invitation. She never let herself go too much, she never went beyond the simple, hesitant caress at that white tuft which had been waved in front of her, nor ever let out a breath, and when she judged that she had explored enough, she had no qualms about withdrawing and turn her eyes, but North seemed nonetheless content with what he had received, and, without complaining about her distrust, he said: «For now it's enough, she'll slowly know me better». 
Without even troubling himself to nod, the man waited for him to step back, then he blurted out: «Come on, rabbit, move on: let's end this farce once and for all».

Albeit visibly annoyed by the rude command, the Easter Bunny, for the second time, didn't answer and limited himself to obey, meekly tiptoeing to the armchair and leaning over the baby, but he soon proved he didn't feel ready at all for that important meeting: instead of advancing near the baby, as he had been suggested to, he stopped almost a yard away, putting her in serious trouble in focusing his image; obviously embarrassed in seeing her stirring and rolling her irises, he attempted to help her moving, but he ended up standing between her and the fire, and, therefore, being in full shade; eventually, in a last, clumsy attempt to appear cuter to her, he pricked up an ear, and raised a hesitant smile, and yet he achieved the opposite effect he desired: Eos, unexpectedly and with a shocking energy, burst into a desperate cry.

Immediately, Jack, who, from his strategic position, had probably sensed that reaction, intervened in his daughter's aid, cuddling her, kissing her and trying to convince her that there was nothing to fear, that the mysterious character who stood out in the distance was only a shy friend and that all of them would have had fun, if only they had managed to know themselves more; the girl, however, didn't listen to his reasoning, starting to scream even louder and squirming to escape that looming and disturbing figure she probably saw, so Pitch, pleased as ever, hugged her, and commented: «Oh, look at her: she's just like her father! She can recognize people not to trust from afar».

And so, partly because busy swelling with pompous pride, partly because finding himself compelled to reply to the others' accusations, he never saw the pain in its pure state which gleamed in Bunnymund's widened eyes to that refusal, nor the sad resignation with which he respected it, backing away slowly and sliding, not seen, through the door still ajar.

«Pssst! Pitch, are you awake?».

And Pitch, keeping his eyelids closed, continued to pretend to be asleep.

Only twenty minutes before, he had concluded one of the longest and heaviest days ever experienced with Eos, waking up in the night to console her for who knows what terrible tragedy, preparing her the milk, then the bath, then the milk again, then the bath again, then the milk once more, hoping that the third time was the right one and that the child would have finished the bottle sated and without spilling the liquid down herself, and indeed that had happened, but then baby colics had arrived, and, with them, the beginning of the end. Screams, cries, shouts, kicks, for hours and hours, without breaks, without rest, neither for the infant, who was surely feeling a stabbing pain, nor for the parents, who, beyond being deafened by her cries, had underwent a sufferance maybe not as palpable, but equally deep, that was the sense of complete helplessness before the creature they loved most in the world and were supposed to know how to protect and take care of, but, while the Boogeyman had been completely drained out by this experience, Jack had re charged himself more and more: instead of losing his energies as the whimpering went on, he had gradually awakened, coming from lying to sitting up to starting hopping around; instead of letting himself be gripped by despair at seeing his attempts to reassure his daughter failing, he had acquired greater conviction, and he had never dared to give up, nor to indulge himself more than a minute to elaborate a new strategy; instead of being disappointed by his inability and, therefore, withdraw, he had reacted positively and tried anyway to give his best, and when he had finally succeeded he had rejoiced, and got ready to begin the grandest day of his life, the man's and the infant's. “Now we can be together and enjoy ourselves!” he had exclaimed, on cloud nine; “Now we can go to bed and sleep, given the late hour and the fact that Eos has already drifted off” had countered Pitch. And there the second apocalypse had begun. Pinches, wailing, jostles, whines, scratches, growls, kicks, grunts, everything had become
a good mean to torment him, and nothing had been spared by him to his lover in the effort to get what he wanted, which really didn't seem clear even to him, but which, however, had to be done, and immediately, and the Boogeyman had taken almost an hour to calm his partner down just enough to get him to make him get under the covers and close his eyes, but, evidently, the trick had worked only for a while, and it was to be feared that the order so painstakingly achieved would have soon been subverted.

«Pitch? It's pointless for you to fake, I know you're still awake. You'll move and answer me, by hook or by crook» stated Frost.

Without further ado, he reached for his interlocutor, touching first chest, then his neck, and finally his face, and Pitch managed to show a considerable resistance to his tortures, lying motionless even when the other tried to tickle him under the chin; however, as soon as a curious finger unceremoniously slid into his nose, he couldn't withstand any more, and, after tearing it off, he snapped in a muffled voice: «But will you cut this out!?».

«No!» immediately countered Jack; «I told you, I'm not sleepy, I'm not even tired, I want to move».

«Then go out! Grab your staff and bring some chaos in the world, because here we already have enough of it!» hissed the Boogeyman.

«No, I don't feel like doing that» retorted the boy again; «But I want to vent a bit. Let's do something together?».

Covering his eyes with a hand, the man commented: «Jack, I don't know what you want, and I think even you don't, too, but I don't care about this, the only thing I want is for you to get it over with! Do you feel like venting, but without using your powers? All right, then go out for a walk, or for a run, or to play, or to steal new building blocks, or to annoy the Yetis, or to do anything else, just as long as you get out of here! Do you want Eos to wake up again, by chance? Don't you think at least she deserves to get some sleep?».

«Of course» readily agreed Frost; «I don't want to wake her up, and I'd rather leave this room, but if I did, you wouldn't you follow me!».

«And with good reason!» added Pitch, furious; «Today's been rough for me, too, and I deserve to rest as much as her!».

«I know what your problem: laziness! But don't worry, now I'll cure you of that».

Without warning, the boy jumped on the partner, pinching his hips, nibbling him and smashing him under his knees, clearly not caring about not harming him, just to rouse him, and going to the point of elbowing his jaw in his ardour, and this, for the Boogeyman, was the last straw.

Piqued, outraged and bruised, he broke free from the other, shouldering him so violently to throw him almost to other side of the bed, but not for this he conceded him a pause, and, on the contrary, he immediately leaped on him, grabbing him, pressing his hand on his mouth and pinning him down; well aware that continuing the discussion there would have inevitably bothered the little girl, he stood up and dragged him with himself, using his powers to slid, unseen and undisturbed, outside the bedroom in the corridor to an adjoining room, used as a storage closet, and after extricating himself among the dozens pieces of furniture and ornaments and sitting on a carved chest, he blurted out: «So, may I know what the hell you want!?».

Two confused, but no less resolute, eyes, met his gaze, rolling back just to see him, casting him a look a bit offended, but also satisfied and full of expectation, as if that brutal kidnapping hadn't be
really unwelcome, and of hope for a pleasant continuation of the night, and the man, irritated by that umpteenth failure, decided to allow himself a little revenge, and strongly pinch his lover’s inner thigh, at that time well exposed, since he had his legs almost spread; when, however, he lowered his irises on them, and saw them there, so smooth, so white, so beautiful, so perfect to be breathtaking, so at his fingertips, he thought that, actually, there were better ways to torment them, and so, caressing the right with his palm, he whispered into his partner’s ear: «You know, there’s a funnier way, for you, to vent, rather than tormenting me... colt».

And, without waiting for his consent, he bit his neck, and firmly grabbed his cock, and when he perceived this already half-hard, and the other groaning, he knew he hadn't been wrong.

¹ The documentary I talked about really exists in Italy. It's called “Ulisse” (“Ulysses” in English), and it's presented by Alberto Angela, who I shortly described in this chapter. It's one of the most famous and influential ones, so, in case you're curious about it, you can easily find any information on the internet, or, obviously, ask me. The episode I mentioned had been aired about five months ago
Tightening his grip both on his cock and on his mouth, Pitch broke away from his lover's neck, detaching just enough to catch his breath and decide where, on that throbbing carotid whose simple heat could excite him more than ever, to leave the first of the endless lovebites with which he intended to brand him; in the meantime, however, he spotted his gaze, and the apprehension at the bottom of it, and, standing still, he perceived him groping to break free, albeit weakly, and he didn't take long to realize his concerns.

«The child is safe, Jack» he quickly whispered, sliding his right hand on his stomach to better calm him; «Voluptas is watching her, as she does every night, and your Nightmare is outside the Palace, guarding: no one will bother her, and, if she needs us, we'll know that even before she begins to cry».

A flash almost shining in its own light passed through Jack's irises, of relief, because no sentence could reassure him more, of gratitude, because nothing was more appreciated by him than a help in that field, and of tenderness, because seeing the partner taking care of him like that was something which always moved him, and the Boogeyman couldn't deny to himself to feel proud at the idea he now perfectly knew his lover, and that he was perfect to his eyes; not at all inclined to boast about this, however, he didn't struggle to hold himself back, preferring to enjoy the pleasant result, rather than the high-sounding fact, and so, almost without thinking about it, he closed his eyelids and rested his cheek against Frost's temple, lazily starting to cuddle him.

Rousing suddenly, the man raised his head, instinctively hugging that thorax he, until then, had gently caressed and turning toward the boy to understand what was happening, and when he focused him, he froze on the spot: Frost, suddenly letting all the libido he had shown only a few minutes earlier emerge, had parted his lips, and, staring at him with a lascivious expression, he had begun to sensually suck his ring finger.

Feeling an idiot for having gotten distracted to the point of losing touch with reality, and not a little embarrassed by the awareness he had done that to indulge in mawkish endearments, Pitch counterbalanced readjusting the partner against his chest with a swat, then he blew in his ear: «The ardent colt is already back? Too amorous to be able to hold himself back? Too eager of the caresses he was receiving not to pretend others?».

In response, Jack groaned and arched, taking deeper the finger he had seized and moving his pelvis to meet with that hand which had first stimulated him, and then soothed him with trivial pampering, and the Boogeyman, chuckling, continued: «I feel you bucking, but I don't understand: what do you want, exactly? Some stomach massage, maybe? From how you're sat, it seems it's aching...».
Determined to definitely distract the other both from his concerns, both from his own gaffe, he continued the sadistic game and began to gently massage his stomach and abdomen; amused by his vain moans and stirring, he went as far as to kiss his temple and rock him, just to be sure to nerve-wrack him, and, as expected, the plan worked to perfection.

After just a minute, abandoning any reticence, the boy, frustrated, snorted, and reacted with such a speed and a conviction to leave stunned: giving a violent thrust, he forced the other to open his legs and pressed his buttocks against his groin; twisting his own right arm, he grabbed his and dragged it without ceremony on his own member; finally, almost growling, he opened his mouth, and snapped it on every finger he managed to capture.

«Ouch!» instinctively exclaimed the man.

Although he hadn't felt a great pain, he couldn't refrain himself from jumping and huddling up, ending up further drawing his lover to himself; realizing he had unwittingly rubbed his palm over his cock, and so, actually, played in his hands, he straightened, and hissed: «You want to play? All right: let's play».

Leveraging his own pride, which he felt hurt as ever by that efficacious coup, Pitch allowed himself a moment to breathe deeply and be pervaded by the desire to lead and have the other at his mercy, then he acted: focusing, he evoked dozens of dark tentacles and twisted them around his partner's limbs, forcing his thighs on his, knees outside, and his forearms behind his back; without prior notice, nor grace, he bent his phalanges and dug them into his mouth, deeply, as much as he could; finally, with a sharp turn of the wrist, he grabbed his erection and started to vigorously massage it.

He was tempted to speak to him, to provoke him, seduce him and enjoy his gurgling answers, but, thanks to the heat and the excitement, from his lips escaped only a faint grunt, and he preferred to give up, focusing on other, on biting the boy's jugular to take his breath away, on modulating the grip and the movements of his own hand to better stimulate him, on opening his own legs to spread his. He didn't feel anything except for him, neither the cold floor, irrelevant next to the steaming heat of his body, nor the hard bench, insignificant compared to the softness of his skin, not the wind howling outside, faint before the musicality of his vibrant moans, and he let the passion guide himself, following its inspiration and summoning new coils of black sand to give attention also to his narrow hips, his nipples and the sensitive area under his testicles. He didn't let himself be stopped by cramps, nor by fatigue, more than willing to bear one and the other and also the fact he couldn't breathe easily to satisfy him, and to give him, for the umpteenth time, but for the first, the oldest, simple, and yet complex, pleasure a creature could desired.

Less than a minute later, he felt the orgasm rousing in Frost, and he denied it to him, abruptly stopping and not getting moved neither by his muffled protests, nor by the weak thrusts the other gave in a vain attempt to satisfy himself; as soon as he was sure the critical moment had passed, he began to stimulate him again, always careful not to overdo it, always cautious to keep him below a certain limit to prolong as much as possible that sweet torture, and, when he realized he could no longer tame him, he never paused again, and, with a few, stronger caresses, he conceded him what he yearned for.

Emitting a muffled gasp and arching, Jack came, his belly muscles shaken by violent contractions and his semen, in the end, and finally, sprayed in minute drops on his abdomen; as it used to happen before the pregnancy, the whole thing lasted only a few seconds, but, unlike the usual, that climax was not the final peak, and the boy, rather than losing his strength and slump sprawled on his partner, began to fidget, visibly shivering and trying to break free.

Noticing his discomfort, Pitch didn't hesitate to release him, dispelling the laces of dark sand with a
simple gesture and hugging him tightly to prevent him from slipping, and he remained in that position, assisting him and ignoring his own cock erect and dissatisfied, for all the necessary time. Once he was sure he had calmed him down, then, he settled him back against his own chest, letting him rest his head against his shoulder and smiling in front of his haggard face, and, gently sweeping the tears the partner had shed, he whispered him: «Is it all right, Jack?».

Initially, the interlocutor didn't answer, remaining motionless, his eyes half closed and his breath reduced to a hiss under the lovely caresses he was receiving; just as the Boogeyman began to think he hadn't been heard, however, the boy shook himself, and he confusedly stammered: «Sorry, I didn't remember it were so... intense».

Chuckling, the man commented: «Why are you sorry? Do you think I didn't enjoy seeing you coming like that? I find incredibly satisfying managing to cause you an orgasm so intense as to upset you: it's one of my favourite pastimes. I'll put effort to replicate the experience as soon as possible».

Still dazed by the experience, Jack was unable to express an opinion about it, simply looking around as he listened and nodding distractedly when he didn't hear any more sound, and Pitch judged that the conversation and the passionate night had ended there; not bothered at all by this fact, because more than satisfied by what he had done, he prepared to stand up and carry his lover in the room, but at last Frost recovered, and, throwing back his head and clinging to his neck, he kissed him.

Amazed by his initiative, the Boogeyman couldn't help but indulging in it and following the partner, leaning on him and opening the mouth, letting himself be wooed by his curious tongue which lingered to play with his, and then withdrew, which returned to creep to caress his palate, and then hid again, and he inwardly chuckled; the boy, on the contrary, while continuing to playfully tease him, remained serious and passionate in his moves, and when, at last, out of breath, he broke that union, he murmured against his lips: «Replicate now: take me».

Startling in surprise, the man replied: «Now? You don't seem to be much in cond...».

«You're so boring!» snapped Frost.

Snorting loudly, the boy leaned forward and lifted his legs with difficulty, first the right one, then the left one, both bent, propping on the partner's knees and succeeding, finally, in placing his own on the bench chest to have better support, while remaining in the other's arms, and in the meanwhile he muttered: «Boring, boring, boring! When I do the, how do you call me? Bashful, right? Yes, bashful. I was saying, when I do the bashful I'm cute, because I know how to do it, but when you do it... actually, sometimes you're good at it. But not today. Today you are really boring. As if I didn't know you can't wait to slam me against the closet and have fun, right? You forgot what Guardian I am, and that I know everything about fun? Ah, but you'll admit it, you'll admit it soon and quickly, Pureblood».

Extremely puzzled by that speech half ridiculous and half delirious, the Boogeyman didn't know how to react, then he tried to cajole his lover, murmuring: «Come on, Jack, put your legs back down, so I'll...».

«Shhh» promptly silenced him Jack.

Frowning, the man decided to give him a chance, and stood still while the other settled better against his erection not yet relaxed, sucking, in the meanwhile, two fingers; however, as soon as he saw him spreading his thighs and bringing the phalanges just moistened between them, he shook suddenly, and exclaimed: «Jack, what...?».

He didn't have enough patience to complete the question, nor to wait for the answer, and it was
almost rushing that he groped his right forearm to control by touch what eluded his sight, but Frost was quicker than him, and, after blocking him, he whispered: «No. Too late. You had your chance, now you can only watch».

In a different situation, Pitch would have never tolerated such a ban. He was the King of Nightmares, the Emperor of Shadows, the absolute master of himself and of everything he laid his eyes on, and he didn't contemplate the idea of stopping on others’ orders for any reason and at no time: there was nothing more to add. At that moment, however, with the excitement almost at unbearable levels, the breath laborious because of his lover's proximity, the skin hot next to his and the awareness Jack was preparing himself, he didn't feel the slightest annoyance at those words, perceiving a hidden desire never admitted being finally fulfilled, and he meekly obeyed, letting out a sigh almost suffering and withdrawing his hand.

Groans, chills, calls, contractions, first sensed in the other, then felt in person, devastated, devastating, a pain for the body and the soul, and for this reason even more galvanic, then provocative rubs, sensual provocations in a crescendo which, at every second, seemed to have reached an unsustainable peak, and which, instead, the next second, reared up: Pitch's whole world had been reduced to this. Overwhelmed, he just underwent, rolling his eyes back to better imagine what the partner was doing, lifting a little his pelvis to pretend he was thrusting into him and digging his nails into the wood to resist the temptation to do so; now brought to his knees, he arched his spine, then he relaxed, ending up with his head dangling on the boy's shoulder and his eyes turned towards his groin, and when he saw his hand rhythmically appearing and disappearing beneath it, he didn't resist, and murmured in a hoarse voice: «Jack...».

He didn't say anything further, both because he was too worn out and because, actually, he intended only to show his desire and appreciation, and not to ask; Frost, for his part, didn't seem disturbed by that unfinished call, and, panting, he stammered: «How long are, ah!, are you going to make me wait?».

It was a matter of a blink of an eye: a moment before, the Boogeyman was still sitting, prey of desires he couldn't fulfil, under and at the mercy of his lover, and a moment later he was standing, following instincts which for no reason he would have refrained himself from satisfying, on his lover and having him at his mercy.

«No, you don't need to» weakly protested Jack, spotting him rummaging among the bottles of the desk he had been bent over.

«Shut up» ordered him the man.

Although annoyed at the idea he had to delay again the intercourse, he didn't think even for a moment to give up the lubricant, too fearful that, with the rebirth of just ten days earlier, the boy's body had completely returned to the condition in which it was three hundred years before, and, thus, by no means elastic, nor used to brutal penetrations; consoling himself with the sight of his back and his tight butt, both in plain view, thanks to the exposed position in which he had forced him, he continued his research, and when he spotted the reserve bottle of argan oil he had retrieved a few weeks before, he seized it without hesitation.

He had some difficulties in uncorking it, and even more in dipping his fingers in it without knocking it over, but, in one way or another, he succeeded in his intent without messing up; he didn't find any obstacle in preparing Frost, neither with a phalanx, nor with two, and when, stimulating him with three of them, he heard the partner begging him to put a stop to those foreplays and make him his, he could only agree and follow him, penetrating him on the spot with one fluid movement.

Normally, arrived at that point, he would have stopped, at least for a moment, just long enough to
enjoy the sense of wholeness and suffocating narrowness just achieved, and to recover from them, but this time he didn't manage to, because the desire he felt had been tamed for too long to be refrained. He thrust immediately, lying on the lover, he thrust deeply, then deeper, offering him his left forearm to bite and biting him on the neck, he thrust faster, faster and faster, reaching the climax in him in less than half a minute, and yet he thrust again and again, satisfied like never before, but never enough, eager to give him as much as possible, and conscious to be able to do so, subjecting him almost violently and mercilessly slamming his thighs against the edge of the table.

Exploiting the irrepressible excitement he felt and his experience, the man managed to extend the intercourse for nearly a minute, during which he was finally able to appreciate the other's broken moans, no longer drowned out by his heart went crazy, and the shivers which crossed him, so intense they shook him, and for a moment he believed he could have continued indefinitely, invigorating little by little his own erection and keeping it sufficiently swollen not to interrupt the penetration; shortly after, however, deceived by tiredness, he stumbled, moving away more than necessary from the boy and ending up slipping out of him, and, realizing that his cock was too relaxed to violate him again, he gave up, and got ready to take care of his lovers.

Before he could even lift a finger, Jack suddenly shook himself, scraping his nails on the wood as he somehow moved away from the arm he had bitten, and trying, without any apparent reason, to climb on the desk; seeing him in trouble, Pitch grabbed him under the right knee and helped him to put it on his goal, but at that point, partly feeling in the mood for pranks, partly because eager to finally look the other in the face without impediments, he seized his calf and ran it over his own head, finally resting it on the left shoulder and forcing the boy to turn around.

«Ah!» exclaimed Jack, taken aback.

Too weak to oppose, he let himself be dragged, awkwardly rolling on the table and then heavily falling on it on his back, but the tumble, more than hurting him, seemed to excite him, judging by the sensual way in which he bit his lip. Amused by that reaction, the Boogeyman let out a low laugh, then he leaned over him and asked: «You want more, Jack?».

Arching, the boy moved to meet him, embracing Pitch's hips with his left leg to better draw him to himself, but at last, finally opening his eyes, he whispered: «It's not that I don't want that. It's just that I think that, at that point, I'd definitely split in two».

Seduced by his sensual movements and his opaque irises, the man took a while to realize the meaning of his sentence, and when he succeeded, instead of appreciating the joke, he clouded over, and instinctively demanded: «Did I hurt you?».

«Nothing I didn't like» promptly replied Frost.

Smiling at that response, Pitch calmed down, and started to gently caress the boy's cheek, while the boy kissed his wrist; realizing only in that moment he was exhausted as and more than Jack, he leaned with his free hand on the table, and pondered whether he should go back to sit on the chest, but the lover anticipated him, and murmured: «Pitch... beddy-bye?».

Chuckling at that childish request, and at the even more childish pleading expression the other had raised, the Boogeyman allowed himself a few seconds to look at him, lingering especially on his abdomen adorned with tiny, numerous pearly drops, then he concluded: «First bath, then beddy-bye».

From the darkness of the mute oblivion, a sound emerged, at first faint, then more and more intense,
tearing the wall of silence with its high and whimpering notes and violently proposing itself to Pitch's ears, and, albeit reluctantly, the man shook himself to check what was going on.

After a few seconds of general daze, in which the Boogeyman could nothing but mumbling incomprehensible words and vainly struggling on a soft and unidentified surface, a glimmer of conscience kindled in his mind, and he recognized his daughter's voice; before he could even think to move, however, a hand was suddenly and with very little grace slammed on his face, and a second individual muttered: «Nah, don't worry, I'll go».

Grounded and, at the same time, finally awakened by that blow, the Boogeyman widened his eyes, and easily spotted his lover, worn out as he was, tangled among the twisted sheets; too tired to react, he remained under his palm, even when the other levered to get up, but when she saw him heavily falling on the mattress, and he heard him uttering a cry, he got worried.

«Jack, what happened!? Are you feeling sick?» he asked, sitting up.

«Ah! Ouch...» weakly whined the boy.

Urged by the excitement of the situation, which, among the child's wails, the partner's shivers and the obnubilation still persisting, couldn't be more confused, the man hastened to bend down and check the boy, but the latter snapped: «Pitch, please, go and pick her up before she has a breakdown!».

Agreeing that, indeed, it was better to first attend to who hadn't learned to be patient yet, Pitch nodded and stumbled down the bed, and when he reached the cradle he exclaimed: «What's up, huh? What's up, Eos? Too hungry to wait for a minute?».

It was enough that simple sentence to quiet her cry, and a caress to steal her a delighted smile, and when the Boogeyman, picking her up, he saw her reaching out to hug him, he commented: «Oh yeah, it seemed to me I had smelt a tantrum here! You're growing a bit spoiled, aren't you? Come on, keep quiet for a moment, since here there's someone else who really needs help».

Chuckling, Eos let him carry her, first kicking a little to draw the attention, then calming at the gentle kisses her father placed on her palms, and yet she didn't take long to get distracted again when she was brought next the other parent, squealing with joy to call him; Frost, for his part, got excited as and more than her in seeing her, and when he had her close at hand, although not rising, he touched her with his fingertips, and whispered: «Hi, Eos! How's my little girl? Did she sleep well? Give me a moment, dear, now I'll turn and take you in my arms, I just have to find a way... ugh!».

Noticing that the lover still had some difficulties in moving, and that at any attempt he tended to keep the thorax very stiff, Pitch put two and two together, and dared: «Do you have a backache, Jack?».

Stubborn as always, the boy didn't answer and continued to lever on his elbow to turn around, but in the end, defeated by fatigue and the blankets which enveloped him, he surrendered, and admitted: «Yes. As always. I'm a tired and beaten-up colt».

Choking back a laugh, the Boogeyman waited for his daughter to finish fiddling with the other's fingers, then he declared: «So, tired and beaten-up colt, all you need is an energetic massage. Come on, lower your arms and relax: I'll make sure to soothe your pain».

Without waiting for his consent, he crawled on the mattress, gently sitting on his thighs, then, after placing the baby against the pillows and exposin g Jack's back, he began to massage him. He proceeded calmly, evoking two whole handfuls of magic sand to slide more easily on his skin, and he primarily focused on his lower back and shoulder blades, spots he knew ached more; advancing in circular motions, he then gradually drifted away from these areas, slowly turning his attention to
his spine, and using his palms or knuckles depending on how much contracted he felt the muscle under himself, and soon, with amazement, he realized he had company.

Complying with her spirit of imitation, in fact, Eos had laboriously tilted towards Jack's head, and she had started to caress him, pressing here, scratching there, without a particular criterion, but always perfectly coordinated with her father, whose gestures she followed with a concentration such as to appear under hypnosis. Intrigued by that attitude, which he judged premature as ever in a baby girl just ten days old, Pitch pretended to ignore it, continuing his work and discreetly peeking at her out of the corner of his eyes, and he was surprised to see her gaining more and more confidence and expertise, but just when he was about to whisper the news to his lover, the latter intervened, and demanded: «Pitch, but... is Eos massaging my head?».

«Yes» promptly confirmed the Boogeyman; «I was about to tell you. I presume she got curious, and decided to try. It seems she's enjoying a lot this activity: she's struggling, and yet she doesn't look willing to stop».

Oddly, Frost didn't comment, nor move, remaining still under the pampering of the one and the other and only occasionally frowning; after a minute, however, when Pitch freed him from his own weight, he couldn't help himself, and he exclaimed: «Oh, Pitch!».

«What's wrong? What happens? Does it still hurt?» asked the man, not knowing what to think, and, so, thinking the worst.

In response, the boy nimbly wiggled out from under his legs, and, after embracing his daughter, he emphatically declared: «How can she be so cute!?».

Taken aback by the unexpected turn, Pitch froze for a few seconds, but in the end he couldn't resist, and he let out a low laugh, resting his elbow on the bed to prevent himself from falling and enjoying the sight of his lover and the infant busy exchanging kisses and ecstatic exclamations; as soon as the emotion prevailed on the hilarity, however, it didn't take long to him to turn serious again, and then answer: «Actually she's programmed to be so cute. Better yet, the human being is programmed to get moved in front of her».

«What does that mean?» asked Jack, intrigued.

«You've noticed her characteristic features, right? A round head, a high forehead, big eyes, full cheeks, a rounded body, in general a soft look... the human brain has evolved to appreciate these characteristics, even to feel pleasure in seeing them, and it can't help but melt down when creatures with those features move, especially if their attempts are clumsy. In short, a child is naturally irresistible».

Showing a genuinely surprised expression, the boy exclaimed: «Really? I would have never imagined! How strange, huh? But, indeed, it makes sense: the more children look irresistible, the more we tend to look after them. Talking about this, this means you find all the children beautiful and irresistible! What a plot twist».

Pleased with his discovery, he grinned, continuing to gently massage the baby, but casting deeply amused glance at his partner; the Boogeyman, for his part, felt nothing short of outraged by that insinuation, and, baring his teeth, he barked: «Do not be silly, I'm not human!».

He regretted almost immediately having blurted out in that way, mortified by the fear he had caused to the newborn, and by the embarrassment which instantly transpired from his lover's clear irises, and, for a moment, he was tempted to get up and leave, pretending a binding task; shortly after, however, Frost intervened, and countered: «I see my joke succeeded well, huh? Don't get angry: you
know that teasing people is my job. The only thing I care about is that you love Eos».

The man didn't miss the sweetness with which the other talked, nor the gentle caress with which he had touched his knee, and he instinctively knew that Frost had retracted just to make him feel more at ease; infinitely grateful to him for his care, he raised a little smile, the most he could do, to show his gratitude, then he confirmed: «Of course. For me, Eos is and will always be irresistible as ever».

Nodding with a solemn air, the boy gave one last kiss to their daughter, then he handed her to his lover, who promptly took her from his arms and began to rock her in his own; lazily stretching on the mattress, he stayed there, enraptured, to observe the spectacle of life, the new generation annoying the old one with kicks and grunts, and, yet, tying it to itself with the simple charm of its presence, and after a few minutes he demanded: «Pitch, would you go on a trip? All together?».

Pitch, who, while lingering playing with the little girl, had not lost a move of the other, was surprised a little by his request, but not disappointed, and, in order to understand well what he had in mind, he asked: «You, Eos and I? Why not? Did you already think of a place to visit?».

«Actually, no» confessed Jack, pensive; «And I have no preferences. I'd just like to go somewhere nice and quiet, neither too hot, nor too cold, maybe with a nice lawn and many flowers, or with a pond, in short, a place which could please Eos and where she could feel comfortable ».

Agreeing with his idea, the Boogeyman mused a bit, then he declared: «I think I know a good place. It's a small recreational area in a park, carpeted with a nice soft grass, surrounded by trees and pretty little pathways and provided with a pond with swans and ducks. Typically, it's little popular, because it's the farthest from the road, and in the morning is largely deserted, so we could enjoy it in peace. Oh, I almost forgot: in this period, the clearing should be in bloom».

«It looks perfect!» commented the boy, excited; «Then we get ready?».

«Absolutely» concluded the man.

And, avoiding the curious hands of the newborn, which, always and invariably, ended up firmly clinging to his nose, he got up, and prepared to start the new day.

A whole hour had passed after the trip idea had been accepted, an hour during which the boy hadn't struggled in the least to prepare himself and the girl, feeding her, changing her and even bathing her, but which, on the contrary, hadn't remotely been enough for Pitch to prepare what, in his organized and apprehensive mind, he deemed to be undeniable and necessary for such an outing. A thermos full of hot water and a bottle with the right amount of formula from the kitchen, oil, talc and every kind of medicament from the changing room, towels, blankets and hats from the wardrobe, and then a handkerchief here, a patch there, even a handful of soluble cookies, nothing had escaped the grip of his rapacious hand, and everything had ended up in the large, dark bag which, somehow, had appeared on the bed: it seemed that, rather than for a walk, the man was getting ready for a move. He hadn't shown the slightest embarrassment for the considerable delay he was causing, nor for the increasing difficulties he encountered in packing new objects in that poor sack now deformed, he hadn't hesitated to wander back and forth over and over again through the same rooms, compulsively rechecking every corner and drawer to make sure he hadn't missed anything, and he hadn't listened to anyone's advices and reassurances, wheedling the Guardians he respected most and driving away with no grace the others, and now Frost, who initially had been amused and touched by his attitude,
was starting to get upset.

«Do you need a hand?» he asked, hoping that, by participating, he could accelerate the process.

«No» distractedly muttered the Boogeyman, making his eyes wander around; «It's just... I have a feeling that I forgot something, but I can't figure out what».

«Maybe North's Palace?» suggested the boy; «You've grabbed pretty much every object it contains, you just need to take the roof and the foundations and you'll be all set».

It was only when he concluded the sentence that he fully realized what he had affirmed, wincing at the thought he had been so direct and provocative, and yet glad he had finally managed to have his say, and he instinctively curled up, preparing to a reproach which punctually arrived, booming in the room.

«Boor! Boor and fool! You think I'm doing this for my personal enjoyment? A newborn has hundreds of needs, and at any time a thousand misfortunes could happen to them, you should appreciate my organization, instead of making fun of it!».

«And it's so!» hastily confirmed Jack; «I appreciate very much what you're doing, and I'm moved by the care you're showing after Eos, but, indeed, you've already done everything possible: that's enough. Don't you remember what you told me just a week ago? “You don't need to abase yourself to become a good parent, and, rather, if you did, you couldn't properly take care of Eos”. Well, I'll add this: you don't need to overdo to become a good parent, and, rather, if you did, you could never properly take care of Eos. Look at yourself, Pitch: you've been there, drowning among concerns and objects, for an hour, while she's been here waiting. Does this seem nice to you? Does it seem right? There's a time for duty, but also a time for fun, and now it's the turn of the second: forget all that stuff, pick her up and enjoy her with me as we walk».

«But...» began the man.

«I know what you're gonna say» preempted him the boy; «And you know what? You're right, you're absolutely right, it's true that a baby has many needs, and it's true also that the unexpected can come at any time, but let's be realistic: what could happen to her at the park? She's not even visible to humans, the only real risk is that she could fall or cut herself, but she'll be in our arms all the time, we just have to be careful! Come on, trust me: all we need is you, me and her».

Showing an expression half lost and half hesitant, Pitch protested: «But what if she gets hungry?».

«We'll get back» promptly assured him Frost; «Whatever she'll need, we'll get back. It's okay, she's still very young, I didn't intend to stay out more than an hour or two anyway, then we will adapt to her wishes. Now, can we go?».

Well aware that a reasonable discourse wasn't enough to dispel his partner's doubts, the boy cast him a smile and spread his arms wide, inviting him to join him; shortly after, he almost rejoiced in seeing him approaching the bed and overturn the whole contents of the bag on the mattress, but when the man, instead of giving up everything, began to rummage in the pile, he clouded over, and murmured: «Pitch...».

«Cut it out, I'm just looking for the snowglobes!» retorted the Boogeyman, piqued; «Moreover, Eos is almost bald, and her head is delicate, she can't go out without a hat, and a towel to place on the lawn on which to lie down and relax a bit wouldn't be a bad idea, would it? Will you concede me at least these two objects?».
After leaping on the baby's stomach, kissing it repeatedly to cover up with that game the laughter which had arisen spontaneously in his throat, Jack conceded: «Of course, those two objects are fine».

«Thank you, Jack» replied the man, trying to sound as much sharp and offended as possible; «Shall we go now?».

«Sure!» cheerfully agreed the boy.

Without wasting any more time, he laid his daughter on his shoulder and crawled off the couch, directly beside his lover and patiently waiting for him to throw a snowglobe, and when the ball exploded, opening the portal, he restrained himself, and let the other lead, meekly following him in that psychedelic passage; when the glittering shards of light gradually left room to a blue sky and a soft lawn, however, he couldn't help himself, and he ran, leaping forward and stopping as soon as the scent of cinnamon and ginger gave way to the cool one of the wood.

«Oh, Eos, look, look what a beautiful place!».

The clearing where they had arrived was undoubtledly one of the nicest he had ever visited in his long life. Irregularly shaped, but perfectly clipped, it sprawled on an area neither too broad, nor too narrow, gracefully making its way between two walls of leafy trees and gently sloping to a sparkling lake. A soft grass covered it, so green as to seem painted, and so thick as to be mistaken for a carpet, flowers of every shape and colour adorned it, tiny, but not less pretty, and a dirt path crossed it, sinuously meandering among the flowerbeds and the shrubs, twisting around a lovely central gazebo, dividing to coast two recreational areas and then reuniting to reach an old pier. Everything, in that place, was perfectly clean and well kept, from the lawn to the shrubs to the children's toys, freshly painted, and yet, everything seemed spontaneous and natural, almost blossomed by itself to contribute, with its perfection, to the beauty of that place, and Frost was moved by that particular: at that moment, nothing could be more valuable for him than safety combined with the pleasure for eyes and hands.

«Ha, ha!» exclaimed the little girl.

«Yes, let's go exploring!» immediately pleased her the boy.

Pandering her astonished eyes, he took her along the path, jumping here and there in order to show her everything that could look interesting, and a little amazed in seeing that, although not intimidated, the baby didn't seem particularly attracted by any of the plants he held out to her; determined not to give up, he insisted in his purpose, working to find a stem of a curious shape which could drive her attention, but by then his lover called him back, shouting: «Come here, Jack!».

A bit disappointed by his failure, Jack returned to his partner, out of breath, and told him: «But you know that Eos doesn't seem very interested? She doesn't even want to touch some plants! Maybe I'm doing something wrong».

«No, don't worry» reassured him Pitch, placing a hand on his shoulder and guiding him to the pond; «You're doing nothing wrong. Simply, Eos, like all babies, is naturally little attracted by plants. This is supposed to be a defence mechanism, since most of the plants are toxic, and a child has neither the ability, nor the conscience, to distinguish the edible ones from the others to avoid. Do not get sad, I've taken account of this factor when I chose this park, and, indeed, I'm accompanying you to a place you'll like for sure».

Speechless in front of that explanation, which he had never expected to receive, and which, more than ever, increased the admiration he felt towards the other for his vast knowledge, the boy only nodded, his mouth opened and his eyes almost widened, and, for, the first steps, he struggled to not
stumble; annoyed by his daughter, who, taking advantage of his distraction, had grabbed his lip, he shook himself and then continued to walk smoothly, deftly manoeuvring among the path stones, the child's curious fingers and his lover's protective arm.

«Good, this corner is just perfect» announced the latter, stopping in front of a flat and clear spot a few yards far from the lake; «We can stop here. Now I'll lay down the towel, then I'll go on the other bank to take a handful of bird feed, so we could draw here the ducklings and show them to Eos. Do you like the idea?».

«It's perfect!» immediately agreed Frost, a bit out of breath; «But we could directly come with you».

«No, it's better if you don't» dissuaded him the Boogeyman, pulling the towel out of the bag; «That area is not open to visitors, so it's difficult to reach, and quite ugly. Besides, I wanted to ask you, are you alright? Indeed, you ran a bit, but you look completely out of breath».

After helping him, not without difficulties, to stretch the blanket, the boy took a break to breathe, then he confessed: «You know, I think I'm kind of hot. It's nothing serious, anyway! There's no need to go away, I can easily bear it».

Narrowing his eyes, the man looked him up and down, no doubt considering whether they should leave that place, but in the end he seemed to get convinced, and he conceded: «All right. After all, you're way too warmly dressed: try to take something off, and see how you feel».

«But I'm hot also down» countered the boy, who, in fact, began to feel his clothes sticking to his body.

«But you can take off your trousers, too» insisted the man.

«No, I can't: I forgot my pants» candidly revealed Jack.

A hearty laugh rose in response, shrill, unstoppable, so contagious it involved even Eos, who could know nothing about that comic issue, and when it subsided a cheerful voice asked: «How could you forget to wear your pants?».

«But I don't know!» explained the boy, gesturing with his free hand; «I couldn't find them, I didn't want to look for them, and then I said to myself: “Who cares, I won't wear them”. Now, however, I regret this decision a bit: I'm not willing to go around here completely naked, I'd feel uncomfortable, and then, when I sit, I'd sting my butt on the grass».

Disposing of the hilarity with a final chuckle, Pitch shook himself, then, wiping away his tears, he said: «Come on, take off your trousers and don't worry: I'll weave you a new pair of pants».

Grateful to the other for his offer, Frost nodded, and, after thoughtfully lying the child on the cloth, he began to undress. He proceeded rather quickly, first taking off his hoodie, then hastily pushing the laces still tied to the ankles and lowering his trousers, and it was without embarrassment that he stood in front of partner, his legs parted to leave him a better access; with not little effort, he resisted to the tickle the other, unintentionally, caused him, squirming a little under his palms, but managing to stay still enough to let him work, and he rejoiced when he heard him announcing: «It's done! I'm going to retrieve the birdfeed. I'll be back soon».

«Okay» answered the boy.

With an agile somersault, he moved away and joined his daughter, helping her to straighten up and wave at her father; when the man disappeared behind a grove, then, he remembered his recommendation, and, after retrieving the hat from the bag, he put it on the newborn's head, saying:
"Here a little hat for you, Eos!".

Surprised by the gesture, Eos startled, and hasted to take the hat off, risking almost to tip over, just to grab it; once she had held it in her fingers, however, she seemed pleased by its consistency, and, after studying it for a while, she decided to put it back on again.

"You like it, huh?" commented Jack, guiding her hands to make her wear it correctly; "It's really nice! Pitch is good at choosing you clothes, every time he changes you, he makes you look like a doll, while I... well, I just make a bit of a mess! But, for now, you don't care about this, right? Come on, come here to relax with me".

And, after lying on his back, he grabbed her by the hips and made her sit on his stomach, bending his legs to offer her a comfortable backrest to lean on.

While indulging in pampering and games, stroking her soft thighs and exploiting the abundant fabric of his blouse to hide himself and suddenly reappear, making her laugh, a patter echoed faintly in the distance, and a shrill voice declared: "I mean, you realize that!? A scandal! I had to tell you".

"Absolutely!" immediately agreed a second person.

Guessing that the newcomers were two women, the boy didn't bother that much, and he continued to entertain his daughter; when they appeared at his right, he instinctively glanced at them, and was surprised to see them wearing layers of make up, despite the sporty outfit, but the girl was quick to take offence at that distraction, and so, regardless the interest he felt for them, he was forced to forget them, and turn to the only girl who, indeed, wanted to give attention to.

For a few minutes, both the couples minded their own business in silence, the father and the little girl pampering each other, the ladies doing some stretching exercise, and the gentle lapping of the water was the only sound to reign; shortly after, however, one of the visitors let out a subtle whine, and blurted out: "But that guy shouldn't be at school!?".

"Martha!" scolded her the other in a low voice; "Are you crazy? Come here, next to me".

Shrugging, the interlocutor declared: "I don't care if he hears me!".

"But I do care!" protested her friend, reaching her and leaning on her shoulders to continue the training; "Haven't you seen in what an embarrassing state he is?".

Although not interested in their gossips, Frost couldn't spare them to himself, doomed by his acute hearing to catch any a word, and so, invariably, he had no difficulty in sensing Martha replying: "How couldn't I have noticed? I can't even understand if they're a man or a woman with those clothes! They're probably a trans. Disgusting".

"Indeed" commented the counterpart, appalled; "That blouse looks like the one Helen insists on wearing, despite she doesn't suit her at all. However, I wasn't talking about that! Didn't you see the colours he's wearing, and his skin, and, for God's sake!, his hair? He must be a punk, and such rabble is not to be trusted".

"Drug addict, for sure. That's sad" piled it up the first woman.

"More than him, his daughter. Poor thing, so beautiful, and so unfortunate: she'll be ruined even before she'll be grow n. Have you looked at her eyes? I've never seen such blue ones in my life".

And, at that moment, the boy realized he had been the topic of the two nosy sportswomen's discussion, and he got frightened, not for the comments they had addressed him, but for the fact that,
in order to express them, they had necessarily seen both him and the little Eos.

Chapter End Notes

Next chapter will be published on Friday, 9th of October
WE DON'T HAVE TO BE ALONE – CHAPTER 34

Snorting and wriggling, Pitch pulled himself out of the waterfowls area, and, triumphant as ever, he lifted a bag full of feed: finally he had succeeded. Oh, he had struggled not little, in those five minutes, to accomplish his mission, first hampered by the thick bushes, then from the slippery bank and finally by that annoying swan which had resigned to move away only when he had kicked it, but in the end he had succeeded! After all, he was a winner and a capable man, accustomed to never fail and to get everything he wanted, therefore, what else could be expected?

“Pitch...” it seemed to the Boogeyman to hear in the distance.

«Yes, yes» he absently replied, actually not understanding neither the hypothetical question, nor his own response.

Getting lost again in his own smug self-talk, he walked, his chest stuck out, but his hands discreetly busy evoking new magic sand to repair the damage caused to his garments by brambles and pecks, and it took less than a second to him to develop an improved version of what had happened to tell to his partner; before he could congratulate himself for the brainwave, however, a voice arrogantly intruded, and shouted: «Pitch! Pitch, where are you!?».

Dumbfounded, the man picked up his pace, hurrying towards the almost desperate call to see what was going on, but not communicating in any way his own position, and so it was that, just as unexpectedly as violently, he found himself crashing into something unidentified, which hit him in the stomach and sent him head over heels.

«Pitch, you're here!» exclaimed the aggressor, alternating gasps to sad whimpers.

Recognizing Jack and their daughter, Pitch struggled to extricate himself from the bush in which he had fallen, and in the meantime he snapped: «Jack, what the hell! What came over you? I was coming back, you didn't need to... damn, did you get hurt!?».

Nothing short of terrified by the sharp cuts covering the boy calves, and, above all, by Eos' stressed look, he lunged forward to check them both, but the other preempted him, kneeling in front of him and crying: «Pitch, they saw me! The two woman saw me!».

«Enough!» blurted out the Boogeyman, now definitely confused by the situation, but determined to take action to solve it; «Let's calm down, or we'll end up harming ourselves for no reason. Give Eos to me, I'll try to relax her, and you, sweep those scratches a bit. Do they hurt? Follow me, let's go in a cleaner place: I don't want you to get dirty and catch an infection».

Although visibly tempted not to listen to Pitch and to continue his own fervent speech, Frost obeyed him, handing him the baby, roughly wiping his shins from mud and leaves and meekly following
him to a grassy hump nearby, but, as soon as he reached it, he could no longer restrain himself, and,
again, he exclaimed: «Pitch, Pitch, you don't understand, those two women saw me!».

Momentarily ignoring his words, the man assisted him, gently removing from his skin all the dirt he
had left, and in the meantime, cradling their daughter until he felt her quiet again, and only then he
dared to straighten up and reply: «What women? And, most importantly, how could they have seen
you? They're adults, it's strange that they still believe in you».

«The two women arrived in the little park just now!» excitedly explained the boy; «One is called
Martha, I don't know about the other, they were there doing exercises and gossiping, I wasn't
interested, but they talked so loud, I couldn't help but hearing, and they were talking about me!».

«Ah, talking» observed Pitch, still far from understanding, but beginning to glimpse the outline of the
matter; «And, tell me, what did they say?».

«They were nothing short of disgusted by me, they started saying that I should be at school, then
they said I was in an embarrassing state and that it wasn't even clear if I were a man or a woman,
could you believe this?, and then they said I'm a trans, and then a panc, yes, I think they said “panc”,
but what's that? And what's a “trans”? You couldn't...».

Overwhelmed by his speech, the Boogeyman couldn't immediately block the partner, and he stayed
there, knelt in front of him, listening to him, gathering information and trying in vain to make sense
of them; as soon as Eos, annoyed by that cross talk, called their parents with a mumble and an acute,
he took the opportunity to intervene, and specified: «No, Jack, not this. I'm not interested in the
opinions they expressed about you, both in general and because it's clear these are biased and tainted
by prejudices. Tell me, rather, what made you understand they were talking about you. Did they
uttered your name? Did they indicated you, by any chance?».

Breathing deeply to calm himself, Jack began to massage Eos' back to soothe her, then he confessed:
«No, nothing of the kind. It was the woman whose name I don't know who started, she blurted out:
“But that guy shouldn't be at school?”, and indeed I look like a secondary-school student, the other
told her to get closer, in order not to be heard, and there was nobody else in the park, so of course
she was referring to me, then they started talking, they said I'm a trans and a panc and then also a
drug addict, and they talked about my skin, they didn't really said it's really light, but it was clear they
found it strange, and then they talked about the blouse, and...».

«Jack, no offence» interrupted him the man, who had already jumped to the conclusion of the
suggestion; «All these supposed clues you're providing are incredibly generic, they could apply to
you as much as to someone else, and frankly I lean more towards the latter, because, as I told you, I
find strange that not only one, but two adults, still believe in you enough to see you».

«And how many of these “someone else” have a little girl with eyes so blue they've never been
seen?» retorted the boy.

«They saw Eos!?» exclaimed Pitch, wincing.

Casting him a scared glance, Frost confirmed: «Yes. You see it? It took to you less than a second to
think about Eos: this clue is not generic».

Although disturbed by this revelation, the Boogeyman didn't give up, and insisted: «Not really. Eos'
eyes might be incredibly blue, but she's not the only child who has them, and then her main feature
consists in the tentacles of darkness which animate them, but the two women haven't mentioned this,
as far as I you say».
Snorting, the boy blurted out: «But really! Why can't you believe me? You're so annoying! Just follow me, so I'll show you».

Without waiting for an answer, nor checking to be indulged, he turned and strode to the small park; agreeing that that was the best way to quickly and definitively close the issue, the man followed him closely, arriving on a narrow path.

«Look, perfect, they're still there» said Jack, slowing down; «And they finished their exercises, so they'll resume running. It seems they're heading over here, doesn't it? Then I'll stay here, right in the middle of the path, so they'll have to work around me to pass. Wait behind me: you'll manage to see them well».

Nodding absently, Pitch pulled back a few yards and squinted to keep an eye on the situation, in the meantime playing with Eos to entertain her and kill the time; as the boy had predicted, the two women in question, just visible in the distance, took the track and headed toward the flustered family, and so this, albeit animated by different intentions, prepared to welcome them.

Teased by his daughter's curious fingers, the Boogeyman didn't pay much attention to the scene, and he noticed only sideways his lover planting himself on the ground, his legs slightly open, and crossing his arms; knowing well how it would have all ended, he didn't turned a hair when the sportswomen run through Frost without much trouble or ceremony, nor when the boy jumped away, dumbfounded; as soon as the ladies, however, instead of giving him the same treatment, worked around him, falling silent and glancing in his direction, he sensed that something was wrong, and was moved to turn and check.

«And this one here!?» exclaimed the blonde in a low voice, tilting her head behind herself.

«Martha, come on!» rebuked her the redhead.

«Do not tell me to shut up, we ended up in the midst of a horror show, I can't not comment this mess!» retorted her friend.

«Yes, but try not to be heard, okay? I don't want to be chased! But was the little girl the same we spotted before? Her romper suit looked identical. Anyway, for God's sake, with that armour, what's that man going to do? Maybe it's better calling the police? Indeed, if he came from the theatre company which planned to...».

Rapid as they had come, the two got lost in the distance, taking away comments and contempt, but leaving behind themselves a dismay not even a hurricane could have swept, and the man, filled with it, stood there, motionless, his mouth open and his eyes still staring at the unsuspecting authors of the impossible just come true. Rapid as he had been proved wrong, the man changed his mind, finally believing to his partner's thesis, but equally unable to give an explanation about it, and the boy, having understood that, reached him, and whispered: «Pitch? Are you okay?».

Pitch couldn't say how much time passed since the other's question, if only a second or a lifetime, but when, in one way or another, he managed to shook himself, it was only with difficulty that he stammered: «They... they saw me. Those two women saw me. And they saw Eos, too».

«I know» murmured Jack, caressing his forearm; «I saw well, and I have a theory about it, but we'll have to make a test to verify it».

And, without ever needing to turn around, the Boogeyman knew that this test would have been done at any cost.
Snorting, Pitch settled better among the bush branches, then he raised his head again to check his daughter.

In his opinion, the plan Jack had conceived bordered on the absurd. Convinced that the only one, among the three of them, to be really visible to the women was the little girl, the boy had established nothing less than leaving her on a bench, simply wrapped in the cloth on which they should have laid all together and not protected at all, and therefore to keep aside, waiting for someone to show up and, passing nearby, to react in some way to her presence. He had refused to listen to reason when his proposal had been contested, indifferent both to common sense and to evil words, he hadn't had problems, when finding himself alone, in carrying it out all by himself, and no regret, at the end of the preparations, in moving away from his daughter, already upset, and drag the partner with himself, but, while his patience seemed endless, the latter's had dried out long ago, and so the man blurted out: «This situation is ridiculous, I'm going to retrieve her!».

«No!» exclaimed Frost, grabbing his forearm.

Wriggling away with a yank, the man retorted: «Enough, Eos is starting to get scared, and the more time passes, the more she risks to turn around and fall off the bench, as parents it is our duty to protect her and take care of her, not to use her for stupid experiments!».

«No, stop!» insisted the boy, holding him from the waist; «I know she's scared, what do you think, that I hadn't noticed that? That I'm not suffering in seeing her in that state? Every time she looks for us it hurts my soul, but I have to know if she's visible to humans or not, and you have to know that, too, then we'll resist together! Please, I need just a minute, even less, I already hear footsteps in the distance, and I assure you that Eos will not fall, because I tied the cloth to the seatback of the bench! Please».

Not at all touched by the other's pleas, and yet actually curious to find out once and for all whether Eos was visible or not, Pitch wavered; hearing footsteps in the distance, and reassured by the last statement, he decided to give up, and commented: «The fact remains that never in my life I found myself in a more idiotic situation, and it's sure that I'll never again!».

«It won't happen» seconded him Jack; «Now shut up: we have to listen».

Muttering, the Boogeyman knelt again behind the bush, making sure not to remain too in view, but neither too hidden, because, according to his judgement, it was possible that Eos wasn't visible in herself, but thanks to the proximity to Spirits who had much more experience and expertise in this regard; holding his breath, he watched the passers-by, by coincidence the very same women who had caused all this mess, getting closer, moving his gaze from them to the frightened bundle he would have liked to cuddle and vice versa, and when they met, just a few meters away from him, he froze on the spot.

«Martha, what's that?» asked the redhead, slowing down.

Blatantly ignoring the couple crouched behind the bush, which, strictly speaking, since she had skimmed it, she should have noticed, the blonde answered: «And how could I know? It'll be the bundle of a trump. Better steer clear from it, or we'll take fleas! What a disgusting thing».

Not convinced at all, the former stopped and diverted towards the suspicious pack to check it, and, as soon as she bent over it, she jumped back and exclaimed: «But this is a baby!».

«A baby!?» cried her friend, suddenly freezing.
«Yes, and, judging by their look, I would say they're a girl, and the same we saw twice this morning! But did they abandon her? Degenerates! After all, that was to be expected from two persons like them. I hope she's fine! We should help her» replied the unnamed woman.

«That's out of the question!» countered Martha; «If she's the child of those two freaks, she'll certainly have some diseases, and I have no intention to get infected! Also, what would I want with a baby?».

«But Martha, come on!» protested the former; «We can't leave her here alone, she's too young! We don't have to keep her, we should just call the police».

«And so being associated with the discovery?» retorted the latter; «Think what a shame, just no thanks!».

«Enough! » suddenly yelled Jack.

Heedless of his own safety, he lunged forward, directly through the bush, making havoc of its branches and his own legs, but not losing neither momentum, nor determination, and, after summoning with an angry gesture a blizzard in miniature, he leapt on his daughter to protect her, and barked: «Don't you dare touch her, harpies, this is my daughter, and I'll never leave her! Shoo, go away!».

Taken aback by the unexpected gust of chill wind, the two women shied sideways, whining complaints as they tried in vain to protect themselves, but when the snow was dispelled, revealing the boy in all his raging pugnacity, they got frightened to death, and they began screaming, hugging each other.

«Jack, come here!» called him Pitch.

Having now well understood both the matter about Eos and her powers and how the situation would have probably degenerated, he didn't waste a second to retrieve the snowglobe from the bag and throw it to his left, and, after stumbling to his lover and grabbing him by the waist, he dashed inside, running as fast as he could, and leaving behind himself that little park so pleasant, and yet so shocking.

«So, to recap: Eos is visible to humans, she's so in herself and independently from what she does or who's next to her, and, if a Spirit touches her, she makes them visible, too. Did I get it right?».

Only twenty minutes before, such a calm wasn't even in North's dream. He had missed more than a beat when, while quietly walking around the Globe to oversee the work in progress, some unidentified assailants had descended on him out of nowhere, a whole strand of his beard in a vain attempt to attack them, and his self-control when Pitch, standing, had started to insult him for his alleged rude manners, and he had struggled not little to refrain himself from smashing the man on the spot, but, willing or not, he had had to, because the news that Jack had, in the meantime, told him were shocking, and needed to be immediately discussed and analysed. It had been so that, on the momentum of the fervour he still had in his body, he had gathered all the Guardians, personally driving them out of their respective Reigns and dragging them to the private lounge where he used to tackle the thorniest issues, he had quieted down and encouraged the still upset couple to tell, chapter and verse, what had happened, and so that, hearing them concluding the report and fall silent, he had stepped forward to begin to unravel that strange and tangled knot.

«I'd say so» answered Frost, moving his daughter on the table to better support her.
«Mh, strange, really strange» commented Santa, stroking his beard.

«Not necessarily» countered Toothiana; «Eos is a unique creature, born from two powerful and not alike Spirits and pervaded by magic since her conception and even before, we can’t know for sure what her true potential is, and, therefore, what's strange for us may be normal for her».

«Strange or not, there must be an explanation about it» intervened Bunnymund.

Surprised in hearing him talking so early, the master of the house turned toward him, studying him to try to guess how he felt, and failing miserably in front of his impassive expression; meanwhile, the fairy, determined, insisted: «Not necessarily. In this case, the explanation may be simply “because it's Eos”».

«I understand what you're getting at» intruded Pitch, tapping his fingers on the table; «And the thing itself may also make sense, both because Eos is particularly special and because she's young, and therefore unable to control her powers, but, frankly, no. The Man In The Moon has snooped everywhere in this matter, I refuse to believe he doesn't have a hand in this».

«That's true» agreed the Guardian.

Renouncing to understand his friend's mood, North said: «Well, if we assume that Man In The Moon has a hand in it, which is indeed possible, we explained how, but not why. For what purpose has he already made her visible? She's still young, even if she wanted, she couldn't fulfil her duty as a Guardian: it seems all the more premature».

Annoyed, the Boogeyman pointed out: «I'd like to inform you that, regardless of the plans your dear boss has conceived about Eos, she and she only has the right to decide what to do in her life, and that she'll be free to refuse the appointment as a Guardian».

«And also the task that requires and which follows, of course» confirmed Santa, calmly; «There's a reason why I said “even if she wanted”. Moreover, we should also see what her hypothetical task is, because we can't take for granted that it's an active or challenging duty, but better leave this aside for now: we have enough irons in the fire, and too few pincers to handle them. So, in your opinion, why has he given her this power so soon?».

Looking around, bewildered, those present stalled, some cuddling the child, some shrugging and puffing out their cheeks, and eventually Toothiana suggested: «To be sure she could have the highest chance possible to be rescued if she had found herself alone? It's the only advantage I can think of».

«But that's a useless advantage» retorted Jack; «I'm afraid to leave her alone even here in North's Palace, I'd never abandon her somewhere outside, and the same goes for Pitch».

Nodding, the master of the house added: «And also, even if you stayed away from her for a long time, Man In The Moon could make sure to keep her safe: although he has revealed himself to be cynical, I think he'd be more reliable than any human, because he knows who Eos is».

Clearly disgusted by that last statement, Pitch was about to reply, but at that moment a gust of golden sand appeared in the middle of the company, and so he fell silent; enchanted, he watched it thickening into a chubby, bald silhouette standing in front of a small bundle, splitting into spirals which departed from the first to the second and then dissolving, not before mimicking the gesture of two hands rubbing each other as to refuse a task, then he translated: «He gave her this power now just in order not to have to think about it later. You can always wash your hands of something you've already done. Yes, indeed, it may be the explanation to the prematurity of this power: it's perfectly in line with his usual, annoying, disrespectful and careless of his neighbour mode of operation. A
bastard is always a bastard».

Overlooking the insults, which, however, wasn't to be excluded she agreed with, the fairy declared: «Yes, I think this explanation makes much more sense. Anyway, I suppose that giving her this power now has been convenient also from a physical standpoint, because the thing should have taken a while, and I'm sure that neither Pitch, nor Jack, nor any of us would have conceded him a second in the future: if we had spotted him devoting attention to Eos, even just with a moonbeam, we would have driven him away. Moreover, for the child it'll be easier to handle and live with this power being born with it, rather than receiving it overnight».

While she explained her thesis, Eos, not interested at all in the conversation, laboriously turned, looking around for something to explore, and she almost cried with joy when, on the table, she found the cracks that her dark father had carved in it; amused by her reaction, Frost encouraged her to study them, supporting her chest to help her bending without falling and guiding her fingers along them, and when he saw her completely absorbed in that new occupation, he asked: «In your opinion, then, why do the Spirits who touch her become visible?».

«Perhaps because she's too young to hold back her power?» suggested North, brooding.

«Or maybe just to justify her movements» proposed, instead, the woman; «Every time you've been seen with her you were not just touching her, but holding her up, right? If you had been invisible, to those women it would have seemed that Eos was flying, and it would have been rather disquieting».

«Not that they got less disquieted when they spotted us» commented the Boogeyman in a low voice, casting an amused glance to his lover.

«It could, but the reason could also be another» suddenly intervened Bunnymund; «Being able to be seen by a child even when they don't believe in you is an advantage not little, let's face it, the most difficult task, for us, is impressing without being able to reveal ourselves, and it may be that Eos is the solution to this problem. Whether it's so or not, anyway...».

«Do not believe that I'll let you share Eos and bring her around the world just to fulfil your stupid Guardians' tasks!» barked Pitch.

Looking up to the sky and pointing at him with a paw, the Pooka completed: «... as I was about to say».

«If you knew what my answer would have been, you could have spared us your stupid intervention» hissed the Boogeyman.

At that cheap shot, the Easter Bunny gasped, bristling with anger, but he managed to refrain himself from answering back, and he seemed to definitively fall silent; after just ten seconds, however, he shook himself, and said: «One question, Jack: why did you get so scared when you realized that those women could see you and Eos? I wasn't joking when I said being visible regardless is a great advantage, and you know better than all of us how terrible is striving to accomplish your duty and not achieving any result. I would have expected to see you on cloud nine about this, both for yourself and for your daughter».

Taken aback by the question, Jack paused, his mouth open, but silent, and his expression confused, and he could do nothing; as might be expected, however, to his rescue promptly intervened Pitch,
who snapped: «Because he didn't expect it and he obviously got shocked, because it's a novelty not easy to handle, because the two women weren't friendly at all, because their stupid comments were cruel and aggressive and have unjustly made him feel good for nothing, because he risked to see Eos being taken away from him, and because of a million other reasons that, frankly, are so obvious that I don't understand how you couldn't guess them by yourself!».

«But how is it possible that you always have to answer for him!?» cried Bunnymund, exasperated.

«Gagaga!» loudly exclaimed a voice.

Startling in amazement, North turned to the source of the noise, and when he spotted it he got stunned: the newborn, until then busy with other issues, had straightened up, and, puffing his chest and waving her fists just like her father had just done, she had imitated his angry speech.

Instantly, all those present, apart from the two disputants, laughed, some limiting themselves to a chuckle hidden behind a demure hand, some shamelessly collapsing in their chair, and Eos seemed to approve these reactions, given the wide smile she welcomed them with; embarrassed by all this, or maybe just satisfied of having had a say, the Boogeyman quieted down, gently pinching his daughter's cheek, while the Pooka, impassive as always, just stood still.

«But look what your daddy is teaching you!» whispered Frost, dragging the child towards himself; «Do not learn these bad things, you should never talk back to other people! Back to us, Bunnymund, although he intervened when he should have not, Pitch said the truth. The fact that the two women were able to see us didn't really put us in danger, but, at the time, since I didn't expect it, I got scared, and their cruel comments have done nothing but worsen the situation. I know it sounds stupid, but yes, for a while I've been afraid that they could decide to follow me and take Eos away from me. I'm still not comfortable with this role, even if I like it and I'm doing my best, I'm always afraid that I'm not doing enough, that I am not enough, therefore, when someone expresses an opinion on me about that, I tend to panic. If only I could have stayed calm, indeed, I would have appreciated it, like you said. Be sure that, from now on, I'll appreciate it, a lot».

Slowly lowering his ears, the Easter Bunny replied: «This is your life and that is your daughter, Jack, you decide what to do about both, and you don't owe me an explanation. Are we done?».

Dumbfounded by that conclusion, Jack was about to speak, but Pitch forestalled him, sharply confirming: «Yes, we're done. Come on, Jack, let's go to the kitchen to prepare the milk, since, judging by how she's stirring, it's obvious that Eos is starting to be hungry».

It was clear to North that the boy would have wanted to protest, maybe to talk about new topics, maybe, more likely, just to close in a more gentle way that long discussion, but Eos had actually begun to stir, and she didn't let him the possibility to; resigning himself to her needs, he hastily greeted everyone and followed his partner, but before leaving the room he hissed: «Pitch, I'm fine with the fact Eos has no patience, but I expect more from you!».

«That'll be the day!» answered with no ceremony the man, passing the threshold.

«Pitch!» chided him Frost, outraged; «You can't go on like this, and it's not a matter of gratitude, you're hurting people with your attitude!».

«Didn't you say that Eos shouldn't learn how to discuss?» retorted the Boogeyman; «Don't set a bad example».

Renouncing to eavesdrop the conversation any longer, Santa waited for the two voices to fade in the distance, then he commented: «I think that Eos will have her say very soon at this rate! Now...
where's Bunnymund!?».

Showing a sad expression, Sandman shaped his sand to represent the Pooka in flight, and Toothiana confirmed: «Run away as quietly as hastily through one of his tunnel while we waved at Jack. I barely had the time to see him».

Mortified, the master of the house muttered: «And I didn't see him at all...».

Soaring, the fairy came beside him and reassured him, saying: «Do not worry, North, it wasn't your carelessness, but one of his classic not really slick trick. I'm going to talk to him, okay? And, if it doesn't work, I'm sure Sandy will be happy to send him beautiful dreams in the next days. Believe me, he'll recover soon».

Staring at the Bringer of Dreams nodding vigorously, North replied: «All right, go and try. Make sure to get down to tacks of brass and not to turn it into a joke: I did and, as you see, he stopped talking».

«I will, no doubt» promised the woman; «I'm leaving. See you when I'll finish».

And, while feeling guilty for not having offered her help, Santa let her go, because he knew he couldn't do otherwise, and, as he watched her colourful tails disappearing through the door, he intimately prayed that she could succeed where he had failed.

Taking a deep breath, Bunnymund settled better on the bedding of herbs and leaves, then, after letting out a sigh, he returned to look at an indefinite point in front of himself.

The Pooka was in his den, a simple, intimate cave hidden beneath a bump on the border of his Reign, and, although he felt indifferent, he found no reason to be in another place. He didn't feel like doing anything, neither working, nor having fun, he didn't feel like seeing anyone, neither his best friend North, nor the eggs which roamed around there, he didn't feel like, in general, not to stay with himself, but he couldn't avoid this, and thus he had resigned to accept himself, remaining motionless to annoy himself as little as possible and praying to fall, sooner or later, into a dreamless sleep.

«May I come in?» asked, suddenly, a woman's voice.

Wincing in fright, the Easter Bunny flattened on the ground, undecided about what to do and tempted to escape, but when a little hand brushed aside the curtain of vines which hid the entrance of the grotto and revealed Toothiana's silhouette, he calmed down, and exclaimed: «Oh, it's you!».

«Yes, it's me» confirmed the fairy, casting him a smile; «So, may I come in?».

Quite embarrassed by her gentle insistence, Bunnymund hesitated, torn between the desire to drive her away to return to his apathetic melancholy and the fear of being, in that case, assailed by questions; after a brief reflection, he concluded that a short conversation was the best and least risky middle way feasible, and therefore he conceded: «Yes, you can come in».

After landing, the woman crawled inside, a little hindered by her wings and tails, but clearly determined not to give up, and when he reached the other she declared: «This lair is so pretty! A little narrow, but decidedly intimate».

«It's ideal for me» simply replied the Pooka.
«The conversation we had before, on the contrary, wasn't ideal for you, right?» retorted Toothiana.

Surprised by the direct approach, the Easter Bunny tergiversated: «We all know that Pitch is not able to participate in a conversation without insulting everyone, and I'm the one he can stand less: I didn't expect anything different from him».

«I wasn't talking about Pitch» countered the fairy.

«If you weren't talking about Pitch, then the answer is no. He was the only problem» sharply answered Bunnymund.

«Odd that you left not when he insulted you, but after» insinuated the Guardian.

«Odd that I left at the end of a conversation» retorted the Pooka.

«Without even warning» pointed out the other.

«I was in a hurry » abruptly justified himself the former.

«Oh, come on, when will you decide to admit the only real problem, for you, was Eos' presence!?» snapped Toothiana.

Angry for the guest's intrusiveness and uncomfortable for the subject which had been proposed, the Pooka frowned, and, remaining well curled up, he muttered: «I don't see why Eos should be a problem for me».

Swelling her feathers, the fairy exclaimed: «Because I literally felt your soul falling to pieces when she burst into tears in front of you a week ago, and because, since that day, I keep hearing the sound of the shards shattering further every time I see you, especially if she's nearby! Why do you deny the obvious? It's stupid and, above all, harmful. Come on, do not clam up: let's face this issue».

Troubled by the interlocutor's intuition, and not willing to allow her to see his teary eyes, the Easter Bunny reacted with all the violence he could, disdainfully turning to have his back on her and barking: «I have no need to face any issue!».

«You're just like Pitch, from certain points of view, and they're far more than you imagine!» asserted the woman, clearly exasperated; «You need to talk about this problem because it makes you feel bad: let's talk».

Well determined not to give in, Bunnymund didn't answer and curled up on himself, hoping that this would have induced the other to give up and go away; a few seconds later, however, he felt a gentle weight resting on his own side, and a firm voice stating: «I'm not leaving until we've spoken».

Weirded out by that behaviour, the Pooka pointed out: «You're not heavy at all».

«But I can be rather annoying» countered Toothiana.

Dumbfounded, albeit agreeing with that statement, the Easter Bunny refrained himself from making further investigations into this matter, and he relaxed, thinking that, after all, it wouldn't have been hard for him to ignore that silent form of protest; already five minutes later, however, he regretted having underestimated the matter. The more time passed, in fact, the more that weight, physically light, got psychologically unbearable, crushing him, tormenting him, reminding him every second what for days had haunted him and making him imagine how the next days would have inevitably evolved if he had done nothing, silent, apathetic, full of sadness from morning to night and of nightmares from night to morning, and eventually all of this was too much, and, throwing in the
towel, he turned and yelled: «All right, all right, let's talk!».

«Oh, good boy!» praised him the fairy, slumped somehow above and below him; «You took little to get persuaded. Could you help me freeing myself first?».

Raising his lip in a silent snarl, Bunnymund pulled away and helped her friend to extricate herself, but immediately had her slumping on himself, and exclaimed: «You're so clumsy! Let's go out, you can't even stand in here».

«Don't be ridiculous!» contradicted him the woman; «I might be not as agile as you, but I'm pretty good, and in fact I didn't fall: I lied down. Come on, speak: I'm listening».

Annoyed, the Pooka protested: «I didn't give you permission to lie down on top of me».

«You've been annoying until a minute ago, the least you could do is letting me rest on the softest thing you own. Come on, speak» candidly insisted Toothiana.

Sensing that, in truth, the other had lied so close to him only to better comfort him, and already feeling the first benefits of this contact which, actually, had something incredibly reassuring in itself, the Easter Bunny let himself go, and confessed: «Well, there's not that much to say. The reaction Eos had when she saw me, the way she burst into tears, saddened me: that's all. I don't resent her, anyway».

«But you resent yourself, don't you?» observed the fairy.

Closing his eyes to dispel the bad thoughts, but ending up only better visualizing the small tear-streaked face which had upset him so much, Bunnymund admitted: «Yes».

Delicate fingers began to gently caress his shoulder, all too similar to what he would have liked to touch, and, in turn, to those who once used touch him, and, not bearing them, he drove them away; not offended at all by this gesture, the woman didn't protest, and, opting for a more rational approach, she said: «Well, let's be honest: in part, that refusal has been caused by you. When you showed up in front of her you were clearly frightened, you stopped too far away and backlit and you didn't behave in a blatantly friendly way, in short, you hindered her, and not a little, but this is not a drama: you can try again. You've just been unlucky the first time, you got emotional, and then you came forward last, when Eos had already been stressed enough. I'm sure that, if you can relax, and meet her at a time when she's relaxed, too, everything will be okay».

«And what if it won't? What if she'll burst into tears again? Maybe I'm the one who's not okay for her» anxiously replied the Pooka.

Kneeling beside him to better stare at him, Toothiana answered: «Unfortunately, I cannot guarantee you that the next time everything will be okay. Success doesn't depend on you, but on her, and please notice that I'm not referring to her rational side, which she doesn't have yet, but to her instinctive one, which is dominated by childish and, for us, inexplicable fears. You can only try, and, if it doesn't work, give her some time and try again. Do not lose hope: aren't you its Guardian?».

Raising a smile, the Easter Bunny commented: «That's true. But, actually, I'm good at spreading hope, not at harbouring it for myself».

Casting him a melancholic glance, the fairy said: «Eos is not born by chance, Bunnymund. If you won't have hope for yourself, she will for you. Be stubborn, and time will reward you, and, when it do, all this will seem to you just a minor setback».

At that statement, Bunnymund felt a pang in his heart, painful, the umpteenth, too equivalent to the
previous ones not to appear harbinger of infinite future ones, and, unwillingly resigning himself to his
destiny of perpetual suspension, he turned his muzzle, pursing his lips not to let out a lament.

«Is there anything else you'd like to talk about?» asked the Guardian, thoughtful.

Aware that she had already guessed everything, the Pooka murmured: «Not now».

And, grateful for the understanding the other showed him, he didn't speak any more, and he slowly
fell asleep under her caresses.

Chapter End Notes

Next chapter will be published on Friday, 23rd of October
WE DON'T HAVE TO BE ALONE – 35

Dark. Silence. Immobility. Not scary, not wrong: simply, the calm of the damp earth waiting. Then, the miracle of life: a little sprout, then another, then another. Roots, stems, leaves, buds ready to hatch, and, from there, eggs, many, so many, in groups of three, six, some already dyed, other huge. Rivers and waterfalls of rainbowish tempera, forests of tendrils of a thousand shapes, even coloured pollen: the grandest Easter ever. Galleries, dozens, hundreds. Soft grass, hurried steps. Calls and laughter. Hands of children, scent of sweets. Smiling faces and chocolate bunnies. The former blending with the latter, but in a strange way, with deformed results. The rhythmic beat of a drum. Or maybe was it a foot? No, it was definitely a foot. New rabbits smiling, but this time no more grotesque: simple, tender Pookas. Just females and pups, the only occupants of the Great Den, the firsts busy creating the spring and everything sweet existing in the universe, the seconds playing and learning. Frantic races, pursuits till the last gasp. Ruffled furs, drooping ears. Circles of muzzles turned to the sky and then all around, meeting, then parting. One in particular advancing, pretty, beautiful, with soft lines and full cheeks, and two eyes the colour of the sea. Closer and closer, hotter and hotter; then, suddenly, cold. Screams, shouts, clangor of battle; claws, blades, ferocious mouths. Tentacles of darkness everywhere, above, under, aside, even in those irises pure as a precious stone, which now, indeed, resembled other irises, less ancient, still alive, but not less distressing, and so it was that, wincing, Bunnymund awoke.

He didn't headbutt the ceiling of the low room where he was, too accustomed to rest in it to risk to, and he didn't stumble in his paws on the bed of moss and leaves which covered the floor, too used to tread on it to slide, and yet, a few seconds after opening his eyes, he violently fell backwards: an intolerable burden dragged him down, and he couldn't fight it.

Those eyes... those beautiful, and yet terrible, eyes. The eyes of his mother, disappeared aeons ago to give life to a galaxy; the eyes of his friend, the most graceful, the most gracious, the one he'd have wanted to donate a galaxy to earn her as a partner; the eyes of Eos, born from thousands of galaxies and who thousands of galaxies could have admired, but not him, no, not him. Why had it had to be like that? Why, for the umpteenth time since he had dared to budge a paw out of the protective tunnels which had functioned as an extension of the maternal uterus in his early days, everything had gone wrong? Why did the fate persist in tormenting him? Wasn't it enough that he had come into the world too soon? Wasn't it enough that he had suffered hellish pains to walk on those rickety legs he had ended up with, and to train them enough to strengthen them so that they could become almost normal? Wasn't it enough that he had survived, alone, the only fool who hadn't waken up at the roar of the war, and who, when this had reached him, seeing only death around himself, had fled like a coward? Wasn't it enough that, in the latest centuries, he had also started to lose the ability to travel through time, to the point he couldn't go back for more than a few minutes, and only with huge efforts? No, no, of course it wasn't! The fate hated him, enjoyed tormenting him, and voluntarily continued to pick on him! It was tearing him apart, piece by piece, and that refusal had been the most painful hit under the belt it had ever struck him with. Those eyes... those very eyes. Those eyes
which every time seemed to come to give him hope, and which then, instead, took hope away. He had tried to resist, oh, how much, how much he had tried, how much he had fought, for himself and for others, to become stronger and to protect, to set aside his past and make splendid the present of those around him, but now he was starting to feel tired. He struggled more and more to go on, his task of Guardian didn't give him the same satisfaction as before, any success, big or small, was as difficult to get as ephemeral to persist. The victory of a year and a half earlier had seemed different, special, the opening of a new beginning, and yet, as soon as Jack had admitted he loved Pitch, and given all of himself to save him from death, it had revealed to be only the umpteenth and most lugubrious toll in a life which no longer made sense. The others kept saying that the Boogeyman had changed, and yes, he had damnly changed, the Easter Bunny had noticed that, and too well, but this was what troubled him: for what purpose fighting, if the border between good and evil wasn't even defined? He had tried, but he had failed: whatever he had done had revealed to be wrong. He had held on a little more, but not now: that was enough. With those eyes, he had been deluded and then hurt for the last time, and, if he couldn't have them, and, from them, make the broken past bloom again, he would have plunged in the latter, and never come out from it.

And so, with this plan in mind, he curled up, and let himself be pervaded by memories, painful, sure, but with a known conclusion, and, because of this familiarity, a little more bearable.

Painfully stretching his limbs, Pitch entered the hallway which, for months now, he used to take every day, and went to the room he shared with Jack and Eos.

He had left about a couple of hours before, following the whims of a Nightmare born, he hadn't figured out how yet, right there in North's Palace, and what he had anticipated to be a brief sortie had soon revealed itself an infinite trip. The beast, in fact, had shown a highly unusual behaviour, first wandering here and there in the tundra as greedily as senselessly, then, having found a remote village, ignoring the children and beginning to furiously dig into the ground, and finally trying to return to the place where he had been generated, where, strictly speaking, the chances to find a source of sustenance to grow were null: absurd. In addition to this, never, in all that time, it had attempted to take an equine shape, remaining deformed and almost gluey, but becoming more and more corporeal, disturbingly similar to the creatures appendages of Behemuth, and, for this reason, the Boogeyman had finally resolved to suppress it, absorbing it in himself: he doubted that the demon had returned, but better being safe than sorry, especially when it was her child to be in danger.

«I'm back» he announced, even before entering the room.

In truth, tempted by his own suspicious nature, he would have preferred to continue to ponder, investigate, test and spy, in order to give a complete and definitive explanation to that fact so strange and finally find closure, but he was well aware that such an operation would have taken days, if not weeks, and it would have had an uncertain outcome, especially considering that the monster in question was now gone, therefore, weighing the pros and cons, he had opted for his family; trying not to let the concerns he felt shine through, he passed the threshold, and there he realized he had made the right choice.

It was no longer necessary, for him, to force himself stopping mumbling, nor smoothing his frown, nor holding back the darkness overflowing in his eyes: in front of the scene which stood before him, he couldn't help but cheering. It was inevitable, for him, to light up when he surprised his lover and his daughter huddled on the bed, naturally he found himself softening the gaze when he understood that neither of them had seen or heard him, and without realizing it that he turned his muffled complaints in an awed exclamation, because, though he was now accustomed to those interactions, they never ceased to delight him. Eager to participate, he advanced, discarding the stealthy approach
with surprise appearance in order not to excessively overexcite Eos and, thus, further delay the bedtime already passed, and he only raised a hand to greet them, and it didn't take long to Frost to notice him.

«Oh, look, Eos, Daddy's back!» he said, emphatically.

After picking up the infant, he turned her around and showed her her father, and she rejoiced at the sight, showing a large smile and starting kicking.

«You're happy to see him, aren't you?» demanded the boy, repeatedly kissing her head; «You've waited him for so long, and you just wouldn't sleep! Tell him, tell Daddy how many tricks you played on me to stay awake!».

As having understood the exhortation, the girl giggled, and tried to move away the loving parent; amused, Pitch asked: «Really? What did the rascal do?».

«You can't even imagine!» replied Jack, engaging his daughter in a playful fight; «At first she's been a good girl, she took care of her plush, she tried to play with building blocks with me and she drank all the milk I gave her, but when I attempted to rock her, the rumpus started! Kicks, shouts, whims never seen, and how much she got offended as I tried to dissuade her! There was no way: she didn't want to sleep, and she didn't. I'd have wanted to assert myself, but how could I force her to fall asleep? I don't control the magic sand like you or Sandy, and anyway I wouldn't use it unless it were absolutely necessary. I think it's not such a great tragedy if, for a night, she rests a bit less».

Hearing that speech, the Boogeyman felt proud of his partner, impressed by the maturity and the determination which, in the end, he had managed to develop just in a couple of weeks, and, in order to encourage him, he praised him, confirming: «You've acted very well, Jack. Children are unpredictable, even the good ones may have bad days, and, when it happens, you should try to understand them, not to punish them. Using the magic sand would have been a futile and deleterious gesture, and it wouldn't have helped neither her, nor you. However, I'm sorry to know that Eos, in order not to fall asleep, tormented you to this point. Did she hurt you?».

Embarrassed by the compliments, the boy took a while to pull himself together, but when he succeeded, he hastened to clarify: «Oh, no, don't worry! The most aggressive action she did was throwing a building block on my knee, but, with the little strength he has, I hardly perceived the blow. She was just stressed, and I was stressed a bit, too, we had a moment of misunderstanding, but we solved everything in five minutes. She's a smart girl, you know? When she calmed down, she realized she hadn't behaved well with me, and she spent nearly half an hour stroking me and covering me in kisses. She even... wait, let me show you».

Without further explanation, he began to clear out the bed, kicking the building blocks on the ground and roughly smoothing the blankets stretching his feet, then he announced: «Look what she learnt to do! Call her, she'll do the rest».

Although confused by the absence of more precise guidelines, the man decided not to ask any questions, and he moved closer the bed; after making room for Frost, who had joined him, and mimicked his pose, he turned towards Eos, now alone on the big bed, and called: «Eos! Eos, my child, I'm here».

Opening her mouth in a perfect “o”, the baby stared at him, in her hands the teddy bear which she used to sleep with, in her eyes an unspoken question; fantasizing about what her doubts might be, Pitch killed a minute, then another, then another, but in the end, bewildered, he demanded: «Well? Is everything going as planned or what? To me it doesn't seem she did anything out of the ordinary».
«No» simply answered the boy, not even letting understand if he was confirming the other's suspicions or denying his impressions.

Dumbfounded, and yet, at the same time, curious, the Boogeyman didn't protest, and waited; equally dumbfounded, Jack waited in turn, and soon he suggested: «Let's try to pull back. Not much, just a couple of steps, and together. She did that until a few minutes ago, she couldn't have forgotten! I'm sure she just needs an additional incentive ».

Giving up investigating, the man obeyed, taking only two steps back and keeping calling Eos, and the infant, seeing him escaping, did something incredible: she began to move. It took a moment to her to take the attitude, perhaps indulging in the hope her infantile charm would have drawn everyone back, perhaps because she was still slow in elaborating emotions, and another moment to get going, but, when she succeeded, she was quick to accelerating, stretching her legs forward, levering on her feet to drag herself and swinging her arms to follow the move.

«But...?» exclaimed Pitch.

Instinctively, he leaned forward to meet his daughter, but the boy stopped him, and said: «No: she can do it by herself».

Too amazed to be able to object, the Boogeyman let himself be hold back, witnessing enraptured that peculiar method of locomotion, mimicking with his head the newborn's ridiculous hops and feeling almost in awe in front of the determination with which she proceeded; when he saw her too close to the edge of the mattress, he reached out and grabbed her, lifting her up to an inch from his nose, and, in a whisper, he demanded: «All this effort just to get to me?».

«For you, she'd move a mountain!» commented Frost, tickling her foot.

Satisfied with the attention she had received, Eos relaxed her concentrated expression to raise a joyful one, and she launched into a string of oohs and giggles as tender as incomprehensible; fascinated by her chaotic attempt to communicate, the boy waited until he was certain she had concluded, then he observed: «So, have you seen? Sure, it's a somewhat strange move, hopping in that way, on her butt, but it seems it works, don't you think so?».

«Yes» confirmed the man, nodding; «It's strange, and it works well. In truth, she's not the only one who moves like that: no child is born already knowing how to crawl in the classical way, everyone proceed by trial and error, and it's not uncommon for each to conceive a technique of their own. However, sooner or later, they learn. In the end, crawling on all four is the most efficient way to move».

Throughout the explanation, Jack didn't let out a breath, listening to every word with increasing wonder and almost lighting up from the inside, and finally he asked with emphasis: «And what if I tried to teach her? If I tried to crawl on all four in front of her, and maybe to help her getting in the right position, do you think she would learn?».

«Definitely» assured Pitch; «Children learn primarily by imitation, and, judging by what she has done since she was born, I'd say that Eos is a mistress of this art».

Mindful of the two times when the child had perfectly imitated her dark father, the boy let out a laugh, so amused he had to lean on the partner not to fall; when he had disposed of the hilarity, however, it took little to him to get serious, and murmur: «She's growing so fast...».

The Boogeyman didn't miss the note of sadness in the other's voice, nor his pupils looking away, and he hastened to ask: «Does this disorient you? Are you afraid it's all growing too fast?». 
Shrugging, Frost answered: «I do not know, I... I was thinking about my sister. I don't remember much of the period when she was a newborn, I was young, too, after all, but I remember I was bored, and that I've been bored for long. At that time I wasn't interested in taking care of her, I just wanted to play and my mother, fearing I might harm her, had forbidden that, but now... now everything is different. I do want to take care of Eos, I do want to make sure she's fine and happy, and share with her time and experiences, but it's not easy, and, if she grows so quickly, it's even more difficult. If I could swap, I mean, make my little sister's childhood last little and Eos' long, I wouldn't think twice, but I can't, and therefore, what should I do? I'm very happy of her achievements, and yet I have to admit they often floor me. I'm afraid it's all slipping through my fingers».

Moved by his lover's speech, the man pulled him in the embrace he had already wrapped his daughter in, and said: «I can assure you one thing: you're taking care of Eos perfectly. You're an exemplar parent, participating and loving, and my opinion is not biased: I'm seriously convinced of this. That said, I understand your fears. Eos is the only child you've ever had, she arrived suddenly and she's a special creature, it's normal that you occasionally feel confused in handling all of this, and, above all, afraid of losing the important steps of her growth, since it's happening so fast. You know... I have no idea how long her childhood will last, but, if you want to participate in it, you can consider the idea of working a bit less. I'm not proposing you to forget all the children who believe in you, I know you'd risk to disappear, but you may visit them a bit more occasionally, or, better yet, drop less snow. After all, winter is coming to an end, it wouldn't be strange for them to see the snowfalls becoming less frequent and intense».

The boy, who all the while had bitten his own lips, doubtful and uncertain, immediately replied: «I just wanted to talk with you about this. Although I love bringing snow in the world and entertaining children, until Eos won't be able to follow me, I'd rather spend with her as much time as possible, then I had an idea. As you suggested, almost every day I'd go out for an hour or two and drop a little snow, just enough to make schools get closed and let the children play for an afternoon, and every time in a different place. Then, since this doesn't seem enough to me, I'd like, at the end of the month, to take a whole day to fly over the Earth and bring the largest snowstorm ever. Some sort of prize, or goodbye gift, something that will last for long and satisfy everyone. What do you think? I love my work as a parent and as a Guardian, and I'd like to fulfil them both and make everyone happy».

Amazed by his plan, Pitch commented: «I think it's an excellent idea. Then, quietly, we'll agree on days and times».

Satisfied, Jack smiled and snuggled against his partner, sliding the baby from his arms into his own and supporting her as she yawned; soon after, in a quiet voice, he pointed out: «What I said, however, applies only to me. Don't feel constrained, when you want time for your business or for yourself, just take it, without worrying».

«You fool» simply replied the Boogeyman.

Rather uncomfortable at the idea he might have had to provide further explanation, and so admit his feelings toward one or the other, he started muttering to himself something incomprehensible and got ready to pull back, but in that moment a booming voice intruded, announcing: «Eos' room is complete, Jack! Ready to use it?».

Wincing, the boy turned in the embrace and glanced toward the entrance, then he exclaimed: «Oh, it's... already? I didn't expect it».

The man didn't need to turn to recognize North, nor to stare at his lover for more than a second to realize that the news just reported had floored him, and, mindful of the hesitations he had showed about that right the day before, he murmured: «If you do not feel like doing that, just speak, and we'll...».
«No, no» immediately countered Frost, his expression still waving, but his tone resolute; «We already talked about this, Eos sleeps less than us, every time we get up early and go to sleep late we risk to disturb her, and then it's better for everyone to have their own space, right? Come on, let's go: I want to see the room, and anyway Eos is already yawning».

Without waiting for an answer, he definitively wiggled out of Pitch's arms and headed towards the door; Pitch, for his part, didn't get worried, knowing that the boy was strong and that, even if he had had a moment of weakness, it would have not taken much to put it right, and he followed him.

«Come, come» invited them Santa Claus, stepping aside to leave the passage clear; «I'll show you where I put... Pitch, watch your step...!».

Proud as ever, the Boogeyman didn't give weight to that warning, and advanced, undismayed; after only one step, however, a sharp pain hit him, spreading from the central metatarsus to the whole foot, and he froze in place.

«Go first, Jack, go, I and Pitch will come in a moment!» instantly cried the master of the house.

Showing a large smile, he passed his sinewy arm around the boy's shoulders and pulled him close, preventing him from turning around to check and pushing him with as much kindness as decision into the corridor; as soon as he saw him disappearing through the threshold, he approached the door, and, shutting it, he anxiously asked: «Pitch, how do you feel? I was about to tell you, I noticed that building block on the ground, but you were striding so decidedly!».

The man stood still and silent for a whole minute, his muscles contracted and his eyes shut, while fits of pain crossed his leg; in the end, with difficulty, he managed to lift the limb and then rest it on a clear area, and he opened his mouth, but no sound came out of it.

«I understand you, I understand you» reassured him North, patting his back; «It's the most excruciating pain in the world».

And, too hurt to do anything, Pitch just grunted back.

Letting out a low, vibrant sigh, Pitch rolled over in layers of sheets and dreams, then he smiled, satisfied.

He had just spent one of the best nights of the week: the first visit to Eos' nice new room, a bedding quick and without whims, and finally a passionate intercourse with Jack. He didn't remember all the details, nor how long it had lasted, nor, actually, if it was already over, since invisible hands and mouths seemed to alternate on his body, but he was certain he couldn't have wished for more, and then he absently nodded, enjoying his own condition.

After an indefinite time, something intruded into that indistinct and muffled idyll. Cold. A scream. Hurried steps and a little, livid body. Pointless hugs and despair.

Wincing suddenly from the half-sleep he had slipped into, the Boogeyman sat up and opened his irises; panting, he looked around in vain search of his lover; realizing what had happened, he jumped off the bed, his legs trembling, rushed into the hall, gasping, burst into Eos' room, tears in his eyes, and there he stopped, stunned.

Frost was on the right, naked, standing upright in front of the crib, and he stared at it, his lips parted.
and his gaze worried; few steps behind him, however, there was Voluptas, comfortably crouched on the ground and, albeit vigilant, perfectly quiet, and the man understood: what he had seen was not a real and already happened event, but the fears the boy was feeling.

For a while, moved by the scene, Pitch couldn't react, and just stood motionless, witnessing and experiencing the other's fear; then, struggling, he managed to shake himself and move forward, slowly, silently, shadow among the shadows in that room lit only by the glare of the snow, and when he reached his partner, he touched his shoulder with his fingertips.

At that contact, the boy reacted positively, not only not getting scared, but also arching his spine to invite him to continue, and the Boogeyman didn't hesitate to satisfy him, adhering to his back and holding him in a protective embrace; sensing he still felt uncomfortable, he reached out for his daughter, willing to pick her up to concede her a night in their bed and, thus, to reassure the partner, but Frost intervened, grabbing his wrist in a click and preventing him from violating the infant's nest.

Albeit aware he wasn't talented to that point, the man swore he had distinctly felt the inner turmoil which upset the boy, that mixture of fear, shame and courage that was bringing him to his knees, and he decided to respect him, asking for no explanation and praying that his own presence could be a sufficient consolation; determined in his own aim, he waited as long as necessary, gently caressing his lover's hips, allowing him to lean over their peacefully sleeping daughter to check her from head to toe a first time, then a second one, and eventually he was rewarded.

Without a shiver, nor hesitation, Frost nodded and turned, placing his fingertips on the other's heart and casting him a glance a bit enigmatic, and, with equal determination, Pitch bent down and picked him up, as he used to do during his pregnancy. Walking in a soft tread, he brought him back into the room they shared, making sure to leave the doors ajar and Voluptas alert, and after laying him on the mattress and curling around him, he placed a kiss on his forehead.

«I'm sorry» whispered the boy, point-blank.

Not annoyed at all, the Boogeyman stared at him with a sympathetic look, and just shook his head.

«But it's a stupid fear» weakly protested Jack.

«There are no stupid fears, Jack» countered the man; «Only well-founded fears and irrational fears».

Nervously biting his lip, the boy stirred a little, then he demanded: «And mine? What kind of fear is?».

Pitch took a few seconds to respond, partly because he was afraid to hurt him, partly because he was really uncertain, and finally he said: «A hybrid between the two. It can happen that a child suddenly stops breathing and suffocates, dying. However, I don't think this is Eos' fate, and, if it occurred, Voluptas would call us».

«Irrational» ruefully commented Frost, cowering.

«No» countered the Boogeyman; «Instinctive».

«It's not a great justification, and anyway it's not good» murmured the boy, mortified.

«It's a fact, and, unless it becomes an obsession, it will never be a problem» asserted the man in a firm tone.

In order to show that he wasn't willing to listen to more protests, he smacked a kiss on the other's lips, then he pulled him close, pressing him against his chest in a position which, while not
uncomfortable, would have not allowed him to speak easily, and Jack, to his great joy, adapted without complaint. It seemed to be all concluded, in a conversation made more of unspoken words, and in an embrace worth a thousand words, but after a few minutes the boy whispered with difficulty: «Pitch, can you make me sleep?».

«Sure» immediately conceded Pitch.

And, as he cuddled him, he understood: his little snowflake wasn't really changed, his nature sometimes playful, sometimes childish, sometimes fiery and always affectionate hadn't mutated, but it had got enriched of a new hint, more mature, perhaps apprehensive, but very thoughtful, a motherly shade nursery which had something touching in itself and which, probably, would have never disappeared, and, in the end, that was fine.

FINO A QUI

«Could you just cut it out!?» suddenly snapped Pitch.

And Bunnymund, who was crouched in a corner of the room, painting toy soldiers, looked up at the sky.

Excerpts of the quarrel between the father and the fairy reached him, but he gave them no weight: it had no interest in participating in that. As usual, the object of the discussion was Eos, at that time sitting on the fur carpet and completely unaware of the storm which surrounded her: the former claimed her all to himself, focused on the animals in miniature he had created to delight her, the latter pretended to intervene, and kept distracting her with smiles and magic tricks, while the Pooka... the Pooka didn't want anything. He had recovered a little from the black day spent in his den a week before, at least enough to get up and move, and the work he had thrown himself into had done the rest, limiting the desperation to brief moments and guaranteeing him sufficient calm not to feel a lump in his throat every time he saw the newborn, but from then to saying it was all fine there's a big jump: simply, he had resigned himself.

«Oh, Pitch, come on, she's a curious child, it's normal she gets distracted» stated Toothiana.

«She gets distracted because you're being silly! Don't you see how... where is she!?» exclaimed the Boogeyman.

Dumbfounded by the question, seemingly meaningless, the Easter Bunny turned towards the two contenders, expecting to find them nervous and about to scuffle, but he was soon proved wrong: neither of them had raised their hands, and, on the contrary, they both looked upset, busy staring at the rug, now clear, wher, until recently, laid the child.

A low growl vibrated in the air, at first faint, then more and more booming, accompanied by tremors and wild tentacles of dark sand, and the man bellowed: «Where is she!? That vile bastard, he did it again, he took advantage of my distraction, and you, fool, you've only facilitated him! There will be no barriers nor chains able to stop me, I will fly up on that damn satellite and tear it down, piece by piece, I'll...!».

«Pitch, for teeth's sake!» interrupted him the woman, grabbing him by the shoulders; «Let's at least pretend to look for her before crying kidnapping! She will have just crawled away, don't worry».

«In such a short time!?» hissed Pitch, beside himself.
Eager to help his friend, Bunnymund intervened, commenting: «Children can be very nimble when they want».

«Said the one who hasn’t even been able to present himself to Eos without making her cry, an expert, really!» cruelly snapped the Boogyman.

«Pitch!» readily chided Toothiana.

«Never mind» casually soothed her the Pooka, who, indeed, had taken the hit without major damage.

Not reassured at all by that exhortation, the fairy snorted and puffed out her feathers, then she established: «Now we all take a deep breath, calm down and look for Eos. Come on, let's start. You too, Bunnymund».

Taken aback, and, indeed, even a little irritated at the idea he had been involved for no apparent reason, the Easter Bunny protested: «What have I got to do with this? I didn't start quarrelling as you!».

Instantly, the woman turned, and, perhaps because exasperated by the situation, perhaps, more likely, because tired of seeing him standing aside, she glared at him; sensing that opposing would have served nothing, Bunnymund bit his tongue, and conceded: «All right, all right: I'll look for her, too».

After neatly storing varnishes and brushes, not without grumbling, he crouched down on the floor, and he began to look around: where might Eos have got into? Perhaps in the half empty basket of firewood? No, too high to climb. Maybe in the middle of the regiment of toys ready to be painted? No, too crowded to offer refuge. Behind the velvet curtains? No, too heavy for her to move. And what if, as a leveret, she had simply rolled under the sofa, well protected by its long lining?

Hopping quietly amidst the chaos of feathers and gusts of shadows, he reached the piece of furniture and slide his head under it; as he expected, he found the girl there, placidly busy crawling and exploring, but, unlike he expected, he saw her spotting him, and resolutely heading in his direction.

Frightened by the click, he tried to leap back, but he only managed to awkwardly stumble in his own paws and fell to the ground, his ear stuck against the sofa foot and his nose pressed against the parquet; now helpless, he pulled back as much as he could and shut his eyes, preparing himself for the worst, and yet, instead of a desperate cry, he felt something hitting him: a small, soft palm.

Amazed as ever, the Pooka widened his irises, and found himself facing a scene he would have never expected to be able to witness: Eos herself was sitting next to him and busy stroking him. The infant appeared to be nothing short of charmed by him, fascinated by his soft fur she petted unabated, amazed by his appearance to the point her eyes were about to pop out, overexcited by his mere presence, and there was no trace of fear or turmoil in her.

«But then you're here!» barked a muffled voice.

Shortly after, the sofa was lifted into the air and thrown away, but the Easter Bunny didn't pay much attention to that, and, evidently, not even the newborn, considering the enraptured perseverance with which she continued to cuddle him.

«You could have warned me before, instead of staying under here to entertain yourself, idiot!» commented Pitch.

Blatantly ignoring the meeting which was happening there, he bent down and picked up Eos, dragging her away, and at that point she cried, a nostalgic and pleading cry, and at that point, whether he liked it or not, the man was forced to face the truth. It took him a while to admit it, his
look confused, even more to accept it, his expression annoyed, but in the end, against all odds, he gave in, and blurted out: «So, are you blind or what? Eos is calling you, it's rude making her wait!».

It was with a start that Bunnymund acknowledged that concession, and with reverential fear that he approached the one who had taken away everything from him, and who, yet, now was offering everything to him, his nose quivering in leaning on his shoulder, his whiskers entangling in his black hair, and, when the newborn touched him, he understood: he could have never had anything he wanted, not his past reborn, not an enemy completely evil, not a life free of suffering, but, indeed, all of this was what would have made his life worth living, and, in all of this, Eos would have been the best and sweetest consolation.

Chapter End Notes

Next chapter will be published on Friday, 13th of November. Tomorrow morning I'm going to the Lucca Comics and I won't be back until Sunday, late in the night, so, if you leave me a comment, please, have patience until Monday for my answer.
WE DON'T HAVE TO BE ALONE – CHAPTER 36

«Now lift her a little» politely asked Jack.

Slightly tightening his grip around Eos’ chest, Bunnymund lifted her up by a couple of inches, just enough for her feet not to touch the tub water, then he demanded: «Is it enough?».

«Yes!» promptly confirmed the boy; «You exposed her well, no need to do anything more. See, I must wash her well everywhere, even under, and I manage to do that better if someone keeps her still and lifted».

«Obviously» seconded him the Pooka.

«She's really delicate here, you know?» explained Frost, bending down to gain a better view; «Sometimes I'm almost afraid to hurt her, her skin looks like a rose petal, it's... mh...».

Gradually, his voice got lost in silence, as well as his attention in the delicate task that he was carrying out, and the Easter Bunny couldn't help but feel moved in front of that scene. How sweet was it to finally see the other serene and proud, and the little girl safe and sound, and both exchanging tenderness and attentions? How nice was it to attend the birth and the development of a relationship so old and common, and yet so new and unique? And, most importantly, how wonderful was it to be able to participate in it?

«Done!» suddenly announced the boy; «Time to rinse her».

After summarily cleaning his hands from the foam, he bent down and retrieved from under the table a small watering can, its tank bulging and its colours bright, such as those that parents use to give to their children to introduce them to the passion for gardening; gradually drawing from the cauldron placed on the ground, he filled it to the brim, then he tipped it, spraying his daughter with a gentle stream of warm water.

Aware that Eos and her well-being came first, Bunnymund didn't get surprised when he felt the liquid trickling down his paws, nor he complained about the fact Jack made no attempt to avoid it; when, however, he saw him voluntarily insisting precisely on that area, he dared to ask: «Jack, do you really need to keep going here? This part seems clean now to me».

In response, keeping an impassive face, the boy stretched out, and began to consciously water his arms.

«What are you doing!?» snapped the Pooka.

Hindered by the infant, he awkwardly backed, sweeping the bunches of dried herbs hanging from
the ceiling and crashing a pile of pails; realizing he was almost with his back on the wall, he leaped to the side, and attempted to circumvent the table, however ending up running around it, chased by his friend and always keeping the child raised in front of himself; concluding that the best thing to do was, while politely and gracefully, getting rid of her, he slipped under the desk and placed her in the half empty washbowl, but at that point the room was already flooded, and his hair was in the same identical conditions.

«What the hell, now I'm all wet!» complained the Easter bunny, sadly crouching on the ground. Rolling on the boarding together with the watering can, Frost let out a loud laugh, then he replied: «But Eos love when it's all wet! Right, Eos? Huh? Isn't right that you like to play with water until you wet even the ceiling?».

As understanding the solicitation, Eos shrieked with joy and clapped her open palms on the water, making it splash around. «See?» insisted the boy, blatantly ignoring his colleague's discontent; «She has the time of her life with water. You should see her at the thermal baths then! Did you know that, as soon as I dive her, she begins to move her legs and arms as if to swim, and if I let her go for a while she manages to splash around, and almost to keep afloat? I never thought that that was possible! But Pitch explained me that this ability is quite normal in babies».

Overlooking that last revelation, which he would have preferred to attend to, rather than hearing a theoretical explanation about, Bunnymund demanded: «At the thermal baths? Why did you bring her there?».

«Pitch took her there first» answered Jack, crawling up to his daughter to assist her; «My powers had just suddenly returned and I was out to vent them, he found himself alone with Eos and, you know, probably, given the fact he hadn't get used to her yet, the fatigue and the chaos here at the Palace, and then all the responsibilities, he had to make her her first bath! He surely felt under pressure, and he preferred to go to the thermal baths. It was a good idea, however, because he relaxed, Eos had fun, and they could know each other and begin to establish a good relationship together».

Perhaps pleased by that awareness, perhaps delighted by the sight of the girl busy wallowing, he dropped his speech to show a broad smile, and he lingered playing in turn; touched by the scene, the Pooka didn't even consider the idea of insisting to make him continue, and he approached the couple, gradually craning his muzzle to insert himself. Squinting, he plunged into the chaos of laughs and drops, shaking his whiskers whenever he got hit and responding with blows with his paw to the liquid surface, and rejoiced in realizing he resulted not only not unwelcome, but even desired by both sides, fully enjoying that moment of pure hilarity.

«Oh, sorry, in the end I didn't answer!» suddenly exclaimed the boy; «What a scatterbrain I am, huh? However, I was saying, when Pitch told me that I got curious, and I wanted to see with my own eyes what happened, when we tried it again Eos enjoyed it so much, and she let us washing her throwing fewer tantrums, then, since that day, we take advantage of that, trying to go to the thermal baths as often as we can to spend a nice time all together».

At first amused by the distracted and confused attitude of the other, the Easter Bunny was tempted to tease him; when Frost, however, continued, demonstrating all the enthusiastic affection he felt for the creature he had given life to, and, more generally, the determined passion in playing his role as a parent, he didn't have the heart to, and countered: «In a sense, you had already answered me, but I was pleased to know more. Why didn't you bring her to the thermal baths today, since she like that so much?».
At that simple question, Jack clouded over, looking down to the puddle he had created on the boarding, and he confessed: «I don't feel safe going there alone. I could tell you that the heat often makes me feel dizzy and lose strength, but the truth is that I'm terrified of drowning. The water is not my element. Only if Pitch is with me I can overcome fear».

The revelation struck Bunnymund, who didn't expect neither such an intimate admission, nor such an ancient fear, and, suddenly, he felt closer to the other, not completely understood, but certainly enough similar not to be totally alien to him. Raising his hair a little to follow the chills of that awareness, he basked in it, then he softened his gaze and, lying a paw on his friend's shoulder, he consoled him, revealing him: «Neither I am a great lover of water, you know? I understand you well».

Grinning, the boy replied: «What a pity, you're so cute when you're soaked».

«Said the drowned rat!» retorted the Pooka.

He didn't miss the short tongue Jack stuck out, such as he hadn't missed the gaze of deep gratitude the boy had sent him earlier, and he knew for certain that he had acted in the best way on both occasions; eager to prolong the game of tricks and complicity, he grabbed a sponge and threw it to him, but the victim didn't follow the provocation, and, after deftly dodging the blow, he announced: «Enough. We've been quite lucky, since Eos didn't throw any tantrum, better not pulling the rope and overexciting her, or she'll never get out of there. Would you like to help me with the towels?».

«Of course» readily agreed the Easter Bunny.

After helping Jack to take his daughter in his arms and stand up, he vigorously shook himself, stretching as much as he could to make sure to well raise his fur and, thus, free it from as much water as possible; resigning himself to tolerate the residual moisture, he crawled out from his useless hiding place and looked around to make up his mind about what to do, then he headed towards the shelved wall to retrieve a clean towel. He took a few seconds to choose among the dozens present, by himself inclined to grab a random one, but, a bit for anxiety, a bit for emulation, induced to study it carefully before approving it, and when he found it, the softest among the softest, he unrolled it, shaking it out a little to remove the sharp wrinkles while bringing it to his friend.

«Oh, yes, perfect!» commented the boy as soon as he saw him coming; «That's the softer cloth North has, the best for Eos. Did you choose it on purpose? You've been so kind!».

«That's nothing» evaded Bunnymund, spreading a bit his ears.

Slightly embarrassed by the compliment, as well as hindered by the situation, he handed the towel to his friend and withdrew, looking for a secluded spot from which to observe without disturbing; before he could get away more than a step, however, Frost called him back, and asked: «Would you like to wipe her? Only if you feel comfortable with it, obviously!».

Gasping in surprise, the Pooka came forward, completely forgetting to respond, since the proposal had involved him so much, and approached the child from a side; shivering, he bent down on the changing table on which she was sitting, and sniffed her a little, wrinkling his nose every time she turned and touched him; finally, grabbing a piece of cloth, he began to gently blot the skin.

«Bunnymund» urged the boy in a mocking tone; «She doesn't bite, you know?».

After letting out a yowl in a low voice, the Easter Bunny countered: «First you talked my head off, explaining me that she's delicate, that she must be handled with care and treated with kindness, and now you mock me? For all the eggs, I'm just trying to do a good job without hurting her, don't you
see how much she's moving!».

As further proof of this, at that precise moment Eos squealed and hurled on the paw which was looking after her, kicking and risking almost to tip over in the attempt of freeing it from the cloth which hid it.

«See!?» piled it on Bunnymund, pointing at her as he supported her.

«Oh, Bunnymund, it's always so funny teasing you! You're so touchy, never once you fail to give me satisfaction!» exclaimed Jack, tears in his eyes.

Vexed by the joke, the Pooka pricked up his ears and barked: «You idiot!».

Blatantly ignoring his friend's laughter, he went back to work, struggling against those little fingers which did everything to hinder him and get him to play; soon, however, other fingers stopped him, longer, but almost as thin, gently wrapping around his stubby phalanges, and a gentle voice whispered: «Come on, don't get angry; I just wanted to make you relax a bit. You did a great job with Eos, and I appreciate it. Ah, look how she's laughing, she appreciated it, too! Now we'll dress her, but first I have to put her the diaper on. Can you hand me the baby powder and the argan oil? They're on the shelf above you».

Although touched by the compliment, the Easter Bunny made sure to show a deeply offended expression, both as he retrieved the requested items and as he laid them on the table; sulking, he watched the colleague finishing sweeping his daughter, rested her on a clean cloth and gave her a few moments of amusement, among tickling pinches and funny faces; finally, smoothing his frown, he volunteered himself, asking: «Is there anything I can do?».

«Oh, you are really helpful!» commented the boy; «But you've already drenched all your hair, I'd hate that you'd grease it, or cover it in dust. Don't worry, just watch from there».

Raising a dazzling smile, he slightly moved his friend away and grabbed the argan oil bottle; after pouring a small amount of it on his palms, he heated it up, rubbing them one against the other, then he distributed it on the child's torso and limbs with gentle, circular motions, until it completely absorbed; finally, not before cleaning himself in his shirt, he grabbed the powder puff, and began to bad it on the newborn's butt.

«You humans are so strange» muttered Bunnymund, partly fascinated, partly confused by all those operations.

«Why?» demanded Frost, dazed.

«All these complications to wash yourself and get ready, when a few licks would be enough to settle yourself perfectly» candidly declared the Pooka.

Instantly, the boy burst into a laughter, soon followed by Eos who, although she couldn't understand the topic, never had problems in getting infected by others' hilarity, and he exclaimed: «But can you imagine her, all sticky and with those four hairs she has on the head combed head upwards? It would be such a sight! Better not trying, though. After all, fighting against water, soap, towels, baby powder and oil has its own charm, hasn't it? If you don't have fur, of course. Sorry, I'm almost done: I only have to put her the diaper on and dress her and then she'll be ready. Be patient just for a moment».

Fearing he had been misunderstood, the Easter Bunny hastened to specify: «No, Jack, I was joking! Don't rush, take all the time you need». 
He worried a little when the other, instead of answering, had his shoulders on him, frantically fumbling in a drawer, as if he felt under pressure, and he was about to pull his shirt to clarify the misunderstanding; as soon as Frost, however, turned, showing an expression serious, but calm, the Pooka realized he was not in a hurry, but just focused, and he cheered up, letting him. A bit to give him room, a bit because he was actually little interest in those technical issues which, hampered by his large paws, he could have never been able to take care of, he began to look around, casually lingering on the chaos which ruled the room, on the carvings which decorated its wooden walls and on the windows, at that time rigorously sealed, which lit it up, and he asked himself: what could they have done next? Staying together was granted, at least for a few hours, if possible for the whole afternoon, but, exactly considering this, it was necessary to find a good pastime to have fun. Did Jack have something in mind? Maybe he would have taught him how to prepare the milk for Eos, and he would have allowed him to hold her and give her the bottle? Maybe the baby girl needed to take a nap, and the guy would have asked him for help to make her sleep, leaving her in his care until her awakening? Or, maybe, he would have tried to involve everyone in a game? But if wasn't so? What if Frost still hadn't come up with anything? Wouldn't it be a nice gesture, from his part, as newcomer in this magnificent relationship, suggesting something? Wouldn't it be a nice gesture, from his part, as a guest, hosting, and inviting the parent and the daughter to his den to spend an exciting and, at the same time, quiet day, away from the problems and, therefore, next to the solution to that approach for him not yet fully happened?

«Finished!» emphatically announced the boy; «Our little Eos is ready».

Absently scratching his head, as if trying to bring order to his own thoughts, Bunnymund turned, and when he saw the girl, he gasped: he would have never expected that beauty and sweetness could be blended in such perfection. Her restless feet, as always shifting, were protected by tiny shoes, of flat-suede on the plant and white, shiny satin on the inset, her torso and legs were covered with a beautiful dress, consisting of several, candid layers, overlapped from the softest and warmer one to the lighter and more transparent one, and closed on the chest and the arms by silver tapes, her head was wrapped by a pretty bonnet, softened by lax folds and trimmed with broderie anglaise, and not a focal point was devoid of thin embroideries and delicate laces, elegantly distributed to adorn without weighting down, and yet they weren't her clothes, although unquestionably magnificent, to dazzle, but the creature who wore them, so radiant to seem shining on her own. Not an inch of her ivory skin, whose colour was perfectly enhanced by the same, but colder, tone of the fabric which embraced her, had redness or imperfections, not a corner of her face sullen or melancholic wrinkles, and not a mottle of her big eyes something other than pure joy: it was evident that, even through countless adventures, she was born out of pure love, and bred with pure love, and therefore only pure love she could effuse.

«She's beautiful, Jack» he commented, bending an ear.

«Isn't she?» repeated Jack, settling her hat; «You can't imagine how many times I get lost as I watch her! Pitch, then, knows to dress her like a princess».

Although he had understood the reference, the Pooka couldn't refrain himself from asking: «Pitch? Did he choose the clothes?».

«Oh, yes» promptly replied the boy; «I'm totally incapable in that area! Rather than dressing her up, I cover her, and rather randomly: if rompers didn't exist, I'd be cooked! Could you believe that, when Eos was three days old, I put on her feet two socks of different colours? Pitch was almost horrified, he gave me a real mouthful!».

Despite the other seemed amused by that memory, the Easter Bunny got annoyed, and retorted: «There's no need to humble yourself, nor to praise Pitch as if he was the only capable person on the
whole planet».

Gasping in amazement, Frost pointed out: «But I'm doing neither of those things, actually. I'm objectively unable to choose some nice clothes for Eos, while Pitch is objectively skilled in this: what's the harm with telling the truth? I don't mind admitting my shortcoming, because I'm not particularly interested in clothes, and I'm happy to give Pitch his credits, because he's helping me a lot in taking care of the child, and complimenting him is the least I can do to repay him, and because I love supporting him in his passions, as he does with me in mine».

Bunnymund, however, had got too nervous by the earlier affirmation, and, in general, by the subject of the discussion, and so, almost without realizing it, he barked: «Poppycocks! You don't have shortcomings, the problem is that he has too many manias!».

He regretted a little having blurted out, not so much for what he had said, which he anyway considered true, but for the way he had done it, overly aggressive compared to the placidity with which his friend had spoken; the latter, however, surprised him, casting him a glance more curious than angry, and questioning him in a quiet tone: «Bunnymund, what's the real problem? Or, better yet, why is Pitch the real problem? What did he do so terrible for you to consider him such a hateful person?».

And, instantly, the Pooka froze. From one point of view, he could tell he had been waiting for centuries that question; from another one, that he would have never expected it; from yet another, that he would have never wanted to expect it. He had asked himself that umpteenth times in the past, in some moments on the wave of rage, in some of sadness, and, drifting from one or the other, he had never had big problems in finding an answer, angry, sure, even violent, but perfectly justified; for eons the equilibrium had remained unchanged, horrible, but balanced, the hatred well distributed between the two parties and, therefore, not needing to be re-discussed or reformed; then, suddenly, everything had been subverted. To be honest, he would have had to admit that the first evolution had taken place a dozen decades ago, when, in a feeble attempt to crush the Guardians, Pitch had exposed himself and proven not to remember anything of his life before their come; the most shocking revolution, however, dated back just a year earlier, and had been so drastic to be undeniable. Yes, it was so, whether he liked it or not, he couldn't deny it: the Boogeyman had changed. He hadn't become good, he could have never, but he had transformed, bringing out his human side, indulging in merciful acts, showing compassion, understanding, love: in short, doing everything before he had always showed to despise, and, therefore, questioning the basis of the Easter Bunny's mentality. Oh, he had been good to keep this hesitation cool, he had worked so hard to remain polemic and contentious, always ready to air the old enemy's flaws not to have to look at his virtues, always ready to sow discord to conceal the chaos which harboured in his heart, but how long he could have continued? Already on several occasions he had given in, and not because he had been forced, but because he had got moved, and yet, when the kind gesture had ended, and the gallery had closed behind him, he had always found himself shaken, insolubly torn between the ancient mourning and the recent affection, and unable to reconcile them.

«Bunnymund, are you okay? Did I say something wrong?» called him the friend in a worried tone.

Two blue irises stared at him, suspicious, alarmed, frightening him with their clarity, which seemed to inspect his soul, and yet irritating him with their ignorance, and for a moment Bunnymund was about to burst, breaking the silence that, more or less involuntarily, he had maintained, and throwing at him all the weight of the unspoken truths about his childhood, and the cruelty with which this had been torn apart; then, however, other two looked at him, of the colour of the universe, the past one, so regretted, the present one, so painful, the future one, so uncertain, but, because of this, potentially so joyful, and he finally came to a conclusion: the Golden Age was over, but, perhaps, also the Age of Terror could be considered ended.
«He's Pitch, isn't he? I don't need a reason to be angry at him».

He realized he had sounded a little stiff, his voice croaking, his pupils distant, but, in those conditions, he couldn't have done better; fortunately, his lucky stars looked down at him, and Frost, instead of investigating further, commented: «You silly! You're always the same. And, for the record, the same as Pitch».

The relief of having been believed, and therefore of having gained time to bring order to his conscience and heart, far outweighed the resentment which such an accusation could cause him, so the Pooka had no difficulty in refraining himself from grumbling; focusing on Jack and Eos' radiant faces, he managed to pull himself together enough, and, feeling a bit better, he decided to submit the proposal he had conceived a few minutes before.

«Jack, did you already thought about what to do this afternoon?».

Tilting his head, the boy answered: «Oh, right today?».

«Yes» confirmed the Easter Bunny, a little tense; «I know it's still early, but, indeed, this means that there's plenty of time, then, I don't know, I was thinking that, maybe, if you like it, and when you've finished preparing Eos, it might be nice going on a trip...».

«... with the family, at the little park I just went to check, for example. Yes, I think that would be very nice» sharply interrupted him a voice.

Dumbfounded, Bunnymund turned, and found himself, less than a foot far from his face, in front of Pitch, his arms crossed, his eyes narrowed and his lips puckered in a silent snarl.

«It's you» simply said the Pooka, his gaze impassive.

«Congratulations for the ability in recognizing me» replied the Boogeyman in a provocative tone.

«Do not start!» promptly silenced them the boy; «Bunnymund, I'm sorry, but this afternoon Eos and I already have a commitment with Pitch. Our first and last trip didn't go very well, and we weren't happy about that, so we arranged to repeat it today, in a place even safer. Is it okay, for you, if we meet later, or directly tomorrow? What did you have in mind?».

Taken aback by the news, which had broken the eggs in his basket ¹, the Easter Bunny didn't feel like insisting, and replied: «No, nothing special, don't worry».

Showing a doubtful expression, Frost murmured: «Are you sure? It doesn't seem so... You shouldn't be shy, I'm happy to talk about it! Think about it while I go changing my clothes. Pitch, can you make me the shorts of that last time? Mine are all wet, and also too warm».

«Of course» readily conceded Pitch, evoking a handful of magic sand.

After waiting for his partner to shape the desired object, the boy grabbed it and rushed to the door, shouting: «I'll get the shirt! Be right back!».

Eager to prolong the pleasant conversation as much as possible, Bunnymund waited, nervously scratching his neck and making his eyes jump from Eos, at that time busy studying with wonder her father's hand, to the door and back; soon, however, discomforted by the presence of the latter, and realizing that two more words would have ended up only increasing the embarrassment without letting him achieve what he wanted, he threw in the towel, and announced: «I leave you alone».

Incredibly, Pitch refrained himself from any comment, simply casting him an impassive look before
finally turning to his daughter, and that made the Pooka, who, at that time, could only dream such a self-control, even more nervous, if possible; forced to swallow the bitter pill, he hissed: «Have a nice afternoon».

And, without looking back, he walked away, not so much offended by the Boogeyman's veiled rudeness, which he had get used to, but by the fact he had been unceremoniously excluded.

«Pitch...? Pitch!» suddenly snapped Jack.

Wincing, Pitch replied: «What?».

Then, however, he resumed looking around suspiciously. Having found Bunnymund at his return, busy not only interacting with Eos, but even looking after her and about to suggest a private trip, had irritated him not little, seeing him leaving, considering his angry expression, hadn't reassured him in the least, and so, since that moment, he had decided to monitor the surroundings, at first keeping an eye on the various corridors of North's Palace, then scrutinizing the many hills of the pleasant park he had chosen with his partner.

«Would you mind listening to me?» asked him the boy, annoyed.

«I'm listening» countered the man, his pupils turned towards the sparse woods which bordered the path.

«So, what did I just say?» questioned him Frost, his expression more resentful than challenging.

Painted into a corner, Pitch prevaricated, and declared: «I haven't heard. Repeat it».

Snorting, the boy repeated: «I was exhorting you to enjoy the trip. I would like to spend a nice afternoon playing with you and Eos, not running after you while you look around suspiciously. What's the matter? This little park is isolated and closed to the public, nobody will come to disturb us, and, even if that happened, we can always just stay on our own, or move to another corner. You know, I think we shouldn't let ourselves be too influenced by...».

In that instant, the branches of a low and thick bush moved, without, however, any animal coming out from them, and so the Boogeyman cried: «It moved!».

Gently, but firmly, pushing away his lover, he lunged toward it, shifting its fronds with a slap and beginning to rummage among its leaves, and the boy, puzzled, exclaimed: «What just got in your mind!? It must have been a squirrel, or a bird, you don't need to overreact like this!».

«It was something bigger» sharply retorted the man, continuing his frantic search.

Initially, considering the silence which fell, Jack seemed to give up any protest, perhaps even to withdraw to protect himself; after a while, however, he recovered, and, proving he hadn't been convinced in the least, he demanded in a suspicious tone: «Pitch... are you looking for Bunnymund?».

«Yes» confessed, without hesitation, Pitch.

«I cannot believe it!» burst the boy.

Angered by his blindness, the Boogeyman turned and barked: «You can't believe it? But have n't you see n him while he was with you? Haven't you noticed how intrusive he was? He snooped so
much he was even wet and dirty with talcum powder, and, in case you hadn't realized that, he was going to propose you to spend the afternoon in his Den!».

Shifting Eos from his left shoulder to the right one, Frost pointed out: «No, Pitch, I haven't only seen him: I watched him. Bunnymund may seem gruff, but he's actually a gentle creature, affectionate and sensitive, just like you. He hasn't been intrusive: I myself suggested him to participate in the bath. And the invitation to his Den, which, for the record, no, I hadn't guessed, was surely only a gesture of courtesy».

Not willing at all to give up, the man chose to play the fear card, real ace in the hole for him, and he revealed him: «You weren't there when he left, but I assure you that he was angry and offended like never before, and that he cast a murderous look at me and Eos. He's envious, and beyond measure».

Raising his head while he gave few caresses to his daughter, the boy conceded: «I believe you. Without problems. Bunnymund is very touchy, he may have got offended because I haven't told him about our plans before, and I'm not going to deny it. However, I can also assure you that he's an insecure creature, especially when Eos is involved, so that's not really envy, but only panic. Trust me, Pitch: he loves her and respects us as her parents, he would never try to put a spoke in our wheels»

«But today he did!» insisted Pitch.

«Because he felt cornered!» explained Jack, his eyes clear and almost pleading; «He was already agitated because he had washed Eos, then he also had had to gather the courage to invite us to his Den, it's logical he got nervous when, without warning, we told him we had other plans in mind! He's not envious, Pitch: he's just a little insecure».

Huffy, the Boogeyman countered: «How the hell could I be sure about that?».

«Do you trust me?» replied the boy; «Do you trust me if I say that I'm sure there's nothing to fear from Bunnymund, and that I'm also talking with him about this matter, and Eos, and you, and that he is proving to be mature and respectful?».

The man felt a slight pang in his heart, the memory of a question identical, but passed, become suddenly vivid and painful in his mind, and, determined not to disappoint his lover again, he answered: «Yes. Yes, I trust you».

Holding out his free hand toward him, Frost urged him: «Then get away from that bush, and enjoy a serene afternoon with us. Please».

And so it was that Pitch abandoned his hunt, and never saw the emerald iris voraciously peeping through the thicker leaves.

A neutral and blurred background, sometimes still, sometimes in motion. Bright green blocks on the foreground, stacked. In the distance, noises and muffled grunts. Nearby, the voice of the boy so affectionate who've been taking care of her since she remembered, even when she still lived in that warm and deadened world in which she did nothing but sleeping. She liked him. A lot. He had big eyes, of which, if only she had been able, she could have counted the flecks, and a mouth so soft, always ready to give her kisses, and then, a smell so good. Fresh. She liked also the smell of the other, though. That tall, tall one, and dark, who had come to fetch her from the bright room which had frightened her so much, and to with he had never brought her again. She didn't like to remember that place, where she had felt so alone. She preferred the present, of pampering and smiles.
Fortunately, she was already forgetting it.

«Eos!» exclaimed the boy.

Rubbing her own nose, the girl turned. It wasn't yet clear to her the meaning of that word, “Eos”... however, she had noticed everyone pronounced it when they wanted her attention, and then she, as the good girl she was, every time gave it to them. The boy was still talking. He was so funny. Why, every time, he threw himself in infinite series of articulated sounds? One day she should have tried. She would have definitely enjoyed that. Maybe, she would have also been able to converse with him, of snorts and babbling. But not now. She didn't want to. What was he trying to do? Oh, yes: the tower. He crawled around it, pointed at it, then, probably, he was referring to that. He was also handing her a block, indeed. That tower was so cute. It could grow and shorten. But she preferred it when it became high. She took the piece which had been offered to her. She reached over and placed it on the top. Now, it was a little higher. But not enough. Around, however, there were no other blocks. What could she do to go on? It would have been a pity stopping at that point. On closer view, however, the blocks at the base were now useless. They stood down there, when they could have been on top. Yes, it was definitely better moving them. She took two of them, to be faster. The tower began to sway. The affectionate boy twitched. Suddenly, the wind came. Just a gust, not too strong, smelling freshly. It crashed down the tower. What a funny event! It had been a real show! The boy, however, had a strange expression. He wasn't crying, but not even laughing. What was going on? Ah, no, there was his smile, there his laughter burst! It had just taken him a few moments.
«I caught you!» exclaimed Jack.

Puffing and stumbling, he crawled out from under the bench, then he stood up and triumphally raised the building block he had just retrieved. It had taken a few minutes to him to gather them all, and he had struggled not little, considering that, urged by haste and fear, he hadn't managed to control how he wanted the wind gust he had evoked to save Eos from a sure scare and probable bruises, and so he had found himself digging in unexpected places, but in the end, with that last, rocambolesque slide, he had completed his mission, and he could consider himself satisfied.

With a smile and the frontal part of his blouse folded as a pocket and filled with blocks, he walked toward the corner which, until a few minutes before, he shared with Eos, but he didn't see her; not worried at all, he sought her with his eyes as he emptied the load on the floor, and, not finding her, he shouted: «Did someone see Eos, by any chance?».

Instantly, the whole Globe Hall mobilized, interrupting the work to look around and talk animatedly, and the boy, amazed, hastened to reassure those present, exclaiming: «Guys, there's no need to get alarmed! I asked you if you had seen her only to waste less time, there's no need for you to drive yourself crazy to find her! I'll look for her: she can't have gone far. Don't worry, keep working on your projects».

He stood motionless for a few moments, raising the more serene and convincing expression he could to dissuade the hairy giants from bustling over; then, as soon as he saw them shaking their heads and getting back to their duties, he imitated them, and began to look around. Where could the baby be? The narrow and low places seemed not to draw her much, so it was pointless probing the hollows under the benches and behind the columns. Maybe she had sneaked in North's laboratory, nearby, whose door was opened in a slit large exactly as her butt?

Chuckling at the idea of his daughter busy in the most absurd contortions just to pass, he advanced, pushing the door just enough to slide inside and slithering cautiously along the wall to surprise her, and, indeed, he spotted her, sitting on the ground, but, unfortunately, he was the one who got surprised: the newborn's limbs, in fact, were completely flayed.

«Eos!» shouted Frost.

Horrified and desperate, he rushed towards her, not knowing what to do, but determined to try anything to help her, and, albeit in a panic, he was astonished to notice the floor perfectly clean; repeating himself that everything would have been fine, he studied her closely, and was stunned to find her happy, and her skin perfectly intact; now completely disoriented, he touched her, but at that point it was Eos herself to offer the solution to that macabre puzzle, offering him an object he would have never expected to see in her hands: a big, dark red marker.

Sensing his own muscles becoming limp, the boy collapsed, tears in his eyes and, on his lips, a confused mantra of thanks to everyone and none, because nothing, nothing in his whole life had ever relieved him more than discovering that what he had mistaken for blood and meat was, actually, simple ink; shortly after, however, he realized the danger wasn't over yet, both because the dye, judging by the smell, seemed to be quite aggressive, and because his daughter placidly kept spreading it on her epidermis, so, gathering his strength, he took the object away from her, threw it in a box beside himself and whispered: «Oh, Eos... what got in your mind?».

Slipping silently through the gap between the cabinet and the wall, Pitch reached the room he shared with Jack and materialized, finding, however, himself completely alone. He was taken aback a little by the other's absence, because, considering what time it was, he expected to surprise him on the
bed, busy pampering their daughter to relax her and prepare her for the night rest, but not too much, because he was aware that, with a baby, accidents were always lurking, so, without questioning himself further, he shrugged and started to search them. First, assuming the couple had lingered to play, he went to Globe Hall, but he found only toys lined up drying, and a pile of building blocks left on the floor; imagining that Eos had get unexpectedly hungry, he visited the kitchen, where the clatter of dishes and the rattle of pans overwhelmed him, but where no familiar face peeped among the Yetis' grim, hairy ones; run out of ideas, he swerved toward the bathroom, and, when he reached the treshold, he smiled: the partner was right in front of him, his back on him, and, judging by how wet he was, he was washing the child.

«Finally I found you» he announced.

Turning, his head bowed and his eyes teary, Frost simply replied: «Hi».

Worried, the Boogeyman asked: «Jack, what's wrong? Why that funeral face?».

Trembling a little, the boy answered in an emphatic, but cracked, tone: «Look!».

Even more alarmed than before, the man approached him and, following his gestures, he began to observe his daughter, quietly sitting in the water-bowl and busy bursting the soap bubbles; moved, he lingered to play a bit with her, pushing the froth towards her chest, and when the baby girl, over-excited by his presence, raised her arms, he realized that they were covered in strange, pink marks.

«What happened to her arms?» he asked, dumbfounded.

«She painted herself with a permanent marker!» explained Jack in a flutter; «We were playing with building blocks, piling them to make a tower, she's good at it, you know? She likes it when it grows very high. We had finished the pieces, she got one from the basis to continue and, obviously, the tower was about to crash on her, in order to avoid that I evoked a gust of wind, but in that way I scattered the blocks all around, then I started to pick them up and it wasn't easy at all, some had slipped in absurd places, but I swear, I did that very quickly, but when I came back she was gone, therefore I started to look for her and I immediately understood she had entered in North's laboratory, then I sneaked in, too, and there she was...like this... all dirty. She even took off the socks and rolled up her rompersuit sleeves and legs to colour herself, she brushed the marker everywhere on her skin, even among a finger and the other, I don't know how she managed not to paint her face, too...».

As soon as he heard the first sentence, Pitch, intimately, breathed a sigh of relief: he had expected to face a serious problem, perhaps not completely solvable, maybe even caused by the hideous Man In The Moon, not some marks of indelible ink. As the speech progressed, however, he began to feel the other's discomfort, his voice too high, his sentences too hasty, his movements too sharp, and he distinctly sensed waves of fear emanating from his mind, so, putting two and two together, he asked him: «Jack, was the marker red?».

After a few failed attempts, the boy answered: «Yes».

Realizing what a terrible experience it had been, for his lover, to find their daughter in those conditions, and what an effort he had had to do to recover and help her, the Boogeyman wrapped him in a hug, and whispered: «I'm really sorry, baby».

Initially, Frost struggled to maintain his self-control, trembling and clearly tempted to escape that affectionate grip; at last, however, he managed to let himself go, both physically, his back against the partner's chest, and mentally, and he stammered: «It's been horrible! She seemed flayed, and covered in blood, and she wasn't crying, Pitch, she wasn't crying, just like you when Behemuth pierced you! I felt so relieved when I realized she had just coloured herself with a marker... It took me a while to
recover and realize I'm a real idiot. Better painted than wounded, surely, but this ink is aggressive, it
penetrated into her skin, and I can't remove it. All because I lost sight of her. I should have imagined
that three or four minutes could have been enough. If she had pulled towards herself a crate, or a
hammer, she would have died there, and alone, while I was playing under the Yetis' tables like a
fool».

Annoyed by his attitude, the man countered: «Jack, that's enough. I understand that what you
experienced has upset you, but you're exaggerating: insulting yourself is not the right solution.
You've lost sight of Eos, that's evident, but only for a short time, and in a safe environment, and,
moreover, to work for her; the fact that, meanwhile, she decided to sneak away and get in trouble
doesn't make you a bad parent. In the future, perhaps, try to be a bit more careful, and do not hesitate
call Voluptas when you're busy, but this time nothing serious happened, so don't stress yourself
further».

«That's not true, the ink doesn't get out!» insisted the boy.

«What have you tried to do?» questioned Pitch, quiet.

«I washed her» replied Jack; «Twice. Every time I left her in the water and I continued to slowly rub
the soap on her skin until it wrinkled, then I pulled her out and dressed her up, waiting for her skin to
return normal to start again. The marks have faded a lot, but they haven't disappeared, and they don't
seem about to: I don't know what else to try».

Scratching his chin, thoughtfully, the Boogeyman suggested: «It's possible that you haven't managed
to completely clean the skin because, in the meanwhile, it has got dehydrated, so we might try to use
argan oil. I'd cover her with a generous amount, much more abundant than we usually do, and then
I'd wipe her with cotton balls or gauze. In the worst case it won't work, but it surely won't do bad.
However, since the marker is North's, I think the smartest thing to do is asking him for advice».

«No!» the boy shouted, wriggling; «I worked so hard to get here without being seen by anyone,
there's no way I'll ever confess this disaster!».

«But why!?» snapped the man.

«Because I was a fool to let that happen and I feel embarrassed!» insisted Frost.

Rolling his eyes in exasperation, Pitch was about to retort, reiterating that it was not absolutely the
case to humble himself in that way, that what had happened was undoubtedly solvable and that the
partner, that afternoon, had done a great job with Eos, as always; when he crossed his gaze,
however, and he saw the turmoil deep in it, he understood that any attempt would have been futile,
and therefore he decided to demand: «What if I painted myself with the marker, and then went to
North to ask him for help to clean myself?».

A spark of gratitude suddenly shone in the boy's irises, illuminating them with a new light, but, after
some hesitation, he protested: «But I'm sorry, you'd end up stained, too».

«What an indescribable tragedy» commented the Boogeyman, trying to sound as funny as possible;
«I, the King of Nightmares, the Emperor of Shadows, disfigured by a spot of permanent marker on a
finger. How could I handle such a plague? Will I risk my career?».

Finally, a chuckle escaped from Jack's lips, and he suggested: «I could do it anyway, though».

Ruffling his hair, the man countered: «No, do not worry: I will».
And, after giving a light kiss on his lips, and enjoying his smile, he turned away, to fulfil a task
perhaps a bit strange, but which, as a partner and a parent, he would have never wanted to refuse.

Puffing, Jack rolled over in the bed, then he stared at the ceiling, frustrated. There was no way: he couldn't sleep. He had talked for long with Pitch, both during Eos' fourth bath and after, he had discussed the real seriousness of the fact and how he should have felt about it, he had gradually been able to get the problem into perspective and, in the end, even to lucidly face it and constructively analyse it, recognizing the qualities he had showed and developing strategies to remedy the shortcomings which had obviously emerged, but, despite everything, the serenity hadn't arrived, and neither the partner's gentle cuddles, nor the silence of the night, had been enough to facilitate his sleep. Even at that time, after hours, he could feel on himself fear and nervousness, like ants scuttling on his epidermis without respite and without mercy, so real to make it burn, and the need to contort to sweep them off, though imaginary, was becoming uncontrollable: he had to do something, and soon.

Grunting, he turned back again, moving exactly in front of his lover, and, as soon as he spotted him, he couldn't hold back a smile: he adored surprising him in his sleep, when he wasn't aware of what he did and, therefore, he naturally let himself go, smoothing his frown to show a human expression and allowing others to pamper him without protests. Aiming to take advantage of this, he reached out to his chest and gently stroked it, from the sternum to the shoulder and back, and he wasn't surprised to feel him moving and drawing him in a hug as warm as lazy; moved, he continued, a little hindered by the awkward position in which he had been trapped, but not willing to push him away, to the point he allow the lover to curl up around himself, and, when he had been completely wrapped, he had an idea: there was a perfect way, for him, to vent the accumulated stress.

Bending his lips into a sly grin, he began to slide his palm downward, slowly, painstakingly rubbing them against the other's exposed nipple, then along his faint abs and finally on the love handle; wriggled just enough, he reached his collarbone and redrew it with light kisses, climbing to the base of his neck; putting aside the embarrassment, he gave voice to the pleasure he felt and to the one he foretasted, feebly moaning together with him, and so it was that, in the end, he woke him up. He perceived immediately his passage to the state of consciousness, the sigh he had uttered too acute and short not to have been conscious, as he realized, considering the incoherence with which he stirred, that he was still quite confused, and he decided not to give him respite, flinging to his lips and pressing the thigh against his groin; he got deeply excited when he felt him responding, opening his mouth and leaping on him to finally give the go to that intercourse, and yet, within himself, Frost realized that, first of all, he wanted to do something for him, so he gathered his strength and pushed him away.

Fortunately, the Boogeyman didn't show any resistance to his gestures and laid back on a side, his arms and legs backward, perhaps because he wasn't completely in himself yet, perhaps, more likely, because he had understood his intentions; whatever the reason, Jack was grateful to him, and, without further ado, he prepared himself to his goal.

Initially, he proceeded calmly, slowly detaching from his lover and retracing the line of his jaw with his tongue; then, hastening, he slide on his jugular, marking him with a chain of bites increasingly distant from each other; finally, unable to wait any longer, he jumped directly to his cock, and took it in his mouth at once. A vague sense of nausea hit him at that gesture, but he didn't care, rejoicing, actually, in knowing that the other was already excited enough to have already almost reached a full erection, and beginning to bob his head up and down, back and forth, in the sensual dance he had performed dozens of times, but which he was never tired of repeating, to satisfy and, at the same time, be satisfied, to give and receive.
Overwhelmed by his passion, Pitch shuddered, and grabbed him by the hair, pulling to impose him a less frenetic pace; realizing he had rushed too much, the boy slowed a little, struggling to contain his own desires, but, after all, willing to offer his partner an experience as long and pleasant as possible, and, to facilitate himself this task, he laid down, too, resting his head on the other's right thigh. Hampered by the obvious friction, he could no longer count on the seesawing movement of the head, and he had to use his ingenuity, sliding with all his ability his tongue along and around the partner's cock, sucking it sometimes harder, sometimes more lazily, clenching his teeth and lips to give him light bites and smacking kisses, and using his slender fingers to stimulate him where, with his mouth, he couldn't reach him: on his nipples, just below the stomach, on his groin, on his hip, on his buttocks... on his buttocks. What if he hadn't stopped there? What if, for once, he had gone beyond? After all, Pitch had never hesitated to touch him everywhere, and, when he courted him in that point, he had always enjoyed it so much... Shouldn't this have applied on the other, too? Wouldn't it have been right for both, at least once, to change? Nothing but try.

Trembling in fear and expectation, Frost took a few seconds to get ready, during which he didn't fail to fondle the two firm glutei he admired so much, then he plucked the courage and insinuated the phalanges between them; sensing his lover stiffening, he decided to proceed with calm and caution, touching him slowly in order not to disturb him, and, in the end, he managed to find his entrance.

Almost instantly, a hand heavy as a shovel fell on his head, grabbing him by the locks and viciously pulling him up, and an angry voice barked: «What the hell were you thinking, huh, Frost!?».

Whining in fear and pain, the boy moaned: «Ouch...! Pitch... please... you're hurting me!».

At that complaint, the Boogeyman reacted readily, immediately letting Jack go and holding him from the shoulders to prevent him from falling; a little upset, but grateful the partner had listened to him, the boy settled better on his palms and knees and raised his face to talk to him, but, as soon as he saw him, he froze: never, since they had began dating, he had seen it so distorted by anger.

Disoriented, he opened his mouth, but no sound came out of it, nip in the bud by the menacing and gurgling growl which was hissed against him; unable to resist, he allowed himself to be yanked and tossed on a side, and there he laid, motionless: he couldn't believe what he had just undergone. After months of relationship during which he, the Spirit of Frost, unaware of what love and sex were, had given all of himself, both psychologically and physically, during which he had conceded him every vice and lent himself to any practice, the man had refused him. In that way, without any explanation, getting angry only because he had dared to take the initiative. In that way, without ceremony, knocking him away like a trash bag. Was that really the consideration he had of him? Was that really how, at least in the context of sexual intercourses, he saw him? As a simpleton, incapable and not having the right to conduct? As a nice toy, nice until he obeyed to his commands and annoying when he started to work in a non-scheduled way? As nothing more than a whore? He knew that word, now, uttered way too much in the alleys and in the rooms, but never, ever in his life he would have expected to apply it to himself. He had a pang in his heart at that awareness: he felt hurt and humiliated, moreover considering who had disappointed him, but, by virtue of that fact, confused. Was that the way it was? Seriously, in his resentful reflection, he had nailed it? So why in the past, and even that night, Pitch had, actually, let him free to propose and act, at least as long as he had slide the phalanges at that point so private? Something was wrong.

Propping on the mattress, Frost turned and found himself facing a scene, to say the least, shocking: the man... curled up. His legs bent, his arms wrapped around his chest, the tremors which, occasionally, shook him, everything, in him, shouted how he really felt, and his spine very straight and his shoulders widened, in their clumsy attempt to conceal, did nothing but repeat it: the Boogeyman was afraid.
Gasping in amazement, the boy called himself a fool for having thought, although only for a few seconds, the partner just wanted to use him, and he felt bad for not having guessed his real feelings, and to be, anyway, still unable to fully understand them; keeping silent, he approached him, lying behind him and wrapping him in a hug, and, as a sign of peace, he gave him a gentle kiss on the neck: if he couldn't help him, he wanted to at least to show him he was willing to be always at his side.

At that affectionate gesture, Pitch winced, so violently he moved the pillow with his shoulder and, then, struggled not a little to relax in that gentle grip; willing to put him at ease as much as possible, Jack began to cuddle him, and, plucking up the courage, he whispered: «I was just doing it for you, Pitch. I feel so good when you touch me in that special point, and I enjoy it so much, I just thought it would have been nice reciprocating, but, if you don't feel like, I won't. I want you to be happy and comfortable».

He felt so proud of his speech, so mature for the way he had managed to elaborate the other's fears and to prefer their solution to his own curiosity, that he didn't feel the need for anything more, and he snuggled against his partner, without waiting for an answer; after a few minutes, however, and incredibly, this arrived, echoing in the room in a sharp: «If you want to do it, just do it».

Amazed, Frost countered: «But Pitch, you seemed not excited at all about that, you were even afraid, it's not the case...».

«You heard me or not?» retorted the Boogeyman, visibly upset.

Determined not to force him, the boy insisted: «Yes, but...».

«Listen» interrupted him the Boogeyman, suddenly stretching out his legs and turning just enough to be heard well; «I'm not here to play shilly-shally. I gave you a chance. If you want to exploit it, do it, and right now. If you don't, stop pestering me, and let me sleep in peace».

It wasn't hard to guess that, behind his aggressiveness, lurked a fear still considerable; however, a better confirmation of consent could have never arrived from the King of Nightmares, then Jack resolved himself to accept it without hesitation.

Taking a deep breath, he crawled up to his lover to adhere to his back, and he began to massage his chest and kiss his neck: although he had already received the permission to proceed, he intended to do it calmly, allowing the other all the time he could need. Not impatient at all, he went on for long, insisting until he sensed him relaxing a little, and therefore hazardign, using his lips, teeth, tongue, moving his hands down and down, on the partner's sternum, stomach, belly, going down in turn, of an inch, two, three. Once he reached the coccyx, he stopped, assuming that the lover wasn't yet ready for a kiss so intimate, and, indeed, not feeling ready himself, and he swerved along his hip, retracing with the tip of the nose the soft junction between abdomen and thigh; when he reached the groin, he stopped again, breathing slowly on his cock semi erected to tease it a little, then he leaned over and took it, for the second time that night, in his mouth.

Initially, albeit not in an ideal position, he didn't have many problems in stimulating him, bobbing his head almost overturned back and forth and using the left hand, the only free one, to squeeze and caress his buttocks; after just a minute, however, smothered by the sheets, by the erection now full he was courting and by the excessive blood flow to his head, he had to give up, and resign himself to resettle.

Unwilling to interrupt the intercourse to do that, he contorted as best he could to move without losing his grip on the partner's shaft, and more than once he risked to ridiculously tumble on the bed; eventually, though, in one way or another, he managed to lie down, curled up under and in front of
Pitch and in the perfect pose to have free access to every intimate corner of his body, and, rejoicing for that, he resumed his work with even greater zeal and vigour, taking advantage of everything which, in the year he had spent with him, he had learned to do to give pleasure to him.

It was with naturalness that, a few minutes later, he inserted two phalanges in his own mouth, making them adhere to the other's cock not to deny him satisfaction, and with a few shivers that, once he had well wetted them, he slid them over and beyond the iliac crest to reach the seam between his glutei, and with his heart in his throat that he touched it, in search of the goal he prayed to know how to handle. It didn't take long to him to find it, the ring of tightened muscles substantially identical to his own, while still inviolate, nor to approach it, massaging it gently with his fingertips to make it open, nor to penetrate it, only with the index, just to start, and at that point he stopped, ecstatic: he had done it. Oh, he wasn't interested at all in having managed to take the lead so far, he didn't care about having his lover at his mercy, the thought of having subdued him didn't even crossed his mind: the only real victory, for him, was having heard a gasp acute in response to his touch; the only real victory, for him, was having the confirmation he had been able to give the partner a new, intimate, all-absorbing pleasure, that he would have never forgotten.

Excited as ever, he moaned in turn, and he continued to stimulate it, moving together the head and the hand to boost his chills; unable to refrain himself further, he slid the middle finger in his entrance, too, and he almost came when he perceived it opening without resistance, giving way to the hot and soft flesh behind it; now thrilled, he picked up the pace, but suddenly a hot and bitter liquid flooded the back of his mouth and throat, and he was forced to stop.

A little coughing, a little swallowing, he pulled his head away from the lover, just far enough to have a respite from nausea, but ready to continue; a few moments later, however, a strong and determined hand tore his fingers off the burning refuge where they rested, and, after grabbing him by the scruff, pulled him up, and a voice ordered him: «Now shut up, and remain motionless».

And, ignoring his pulsating erection, Jack obeyed, curling up against the Boogeyman's chest and silently sucking his own wet fingers, because what he had done had pleased him more than enough, and because, judging by the gasps the other had let out, that time boded to not be the last.

¹ “Breaking the eggs in someone's basket”, in Italy, means “upset someone's plans”. This time I opted for the literal translation because, although you seem not to have this same idiom, I think it's easily understandable, so I didn't want you to miss the reference to Bunnymund – it was just too perfect to be changed
Just in case you're doubting a baby could be so idiot to paint themselves with a permanent marker... here I am, twenty-four years later having done that. I guess the tip consistence was interesting.

I'm still not sure about when I'm able to publish the next chapter, therefore I decided I'll inform you on tumblr, as soon as possible. Anyway, I'll surely update the fanfiction within the 10th of January, hopefully even within this month.

Please [drop by the archive and comment](#) to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!