The Labours of Jamie Bennett

by Luthen

Summary

Jamie Bennett has a busy life. He's studying for a double degree, maintains an advice blog, and still Believes. A combination of the last two have gotten him in trouble with Cupid, who sets him weekly tasks. Lest he suffer a fate worse than death.

"Dear Uncle Jay,

First off. Don’t laugh. But I think I might be in a long distance relationship..."
“Dear Uncle Jay,

First off. Don’t laugh. But I think I might be in a long distance relationship. It’s with my best friend since childhood. We were thick as thieves, and ours was the only friendship that survived through to high school graduation. He went to college (he’s a hunky genius), and I went straight to work (I’m not hard work and deadlines).

The job I got is great but I travel alot. So he’s my main human contact besides my coworkers (who work separate routes). We text and call pretty much every day, and I’ve only just realised what he means to me. I’m not going to settle down any time soon, so what should I do? Leave things be, or make a move?
**Q: Dear Uncle Jay,**

*I’ve fallen head-over-heels for a fine-arts major – but I’m a theoretical physics nerd. Any advice on getting his attention? I suck at art, but admire it. Do you think it can work, or should I stick to my own kind?*

**Needing Expertise Regarding Dating**

“He’s so smart, and kind, and he does this thing where he tilts his head…”

Jamie sometimes wondered how his life had come to this: playing sympathetic ear to a love-lost Greek god.

“…he’s studying robotics, and his project is this autonomous healthcare companion. It’s really cool, and I’m going to bless it – not too much but just a little sapience…”

His night had started ordinarily enough. Jamie had been quietly doing homework in his dorm at college when a laurel-bearing raven alighted on his window sill. Jamie had left his window open to the chill fall breeze in hopes a certain spirit would make an early appearance.

Not that Jack was his only supernatural visitor. Jamie might be just an ordinary, over-worked, over-achiever, odd-ball of an undergraduate on the mortal side of things; however on the other side he was minor celebrity. The Last Light, a mortal who Believed widely and deeply enough to see every spirit.

“As your master wait twenty minutes?” Jamie asked the raven in Corvid. It was only polite.

The raven cocked its head in thought and then cawed, “Yes. Take an hour. Despite what Sunny-Boy might think it’s not the end of the world.”

Jamie snorted at the raven’s disrespectful nickname. But ravens were like that – The Raven had taught him mostly Corvid swear words to begin with. Jamie’s suspicions had only be confirmed when he scandalised North by asking him to attempt something impractical with a hedgehog.

Over the years his curiosity and friendly nature had earnt him a reputation as mediator and confidante. Despite being a protectorate of the Guardians (even as an adult), and definitely light-aligned – he was willing to hear less reputable spirits out. Jamie didn’t have the power to threaten to them, but it would be suicide to for them to hurt him.

Jamie quickly wrapped up his homework since “My presence was requested by a god” wasn’t going to cut it for an extension. Why he’d decided to do a double degree Jamie couldn’t say. It seemed like a good idea at the time. As had expanding his sounding-board service to the web and student paper. He had some Agony Uncle questions he needed to answer when he got home.

[Duty calls. Going to Mt O. Sorry to derail any surprise visit.]

The last thing Jamie did before standing to leave was message Jack about who he was going to visit. Standard operation procedure, ever since he started doing this. Jack couldn’t stop Jamie, but it comforted the winter spirit to know what his first believer was up to.

“Okay, how are we travelling?”
The raven broke into laughter before calming enough to croak, “To the roof Godspeaker.”

It was a standard instruction, but Jamie still shivered. It was a game in the spirit world minting new titles for people. There was power in names, and freely using someone’s name in the spirit world was crass bordering on criminal. Plus crafting ridiculous titles was kinda fun.

No one mentioned the raven on Jamie’s shoulder as he walked through the dorms and up to the roof. He wasn’t sure if the bird was enchanted, or magic itself, or whether people were just used to him being weird. He certainly wasn’t making a big deal of it, instead checking his phone after a text came in.

[No prob * diffs Over Scott tonite Call if u need me ( * ^ 3 ^ ) / ～ ♡ ]

Jamie snickered at Jack’s texting. The elaborate emoticon thing had started only a three months ago, and Jack had yet to repeat himself. The lazy spelling – that was trademark at this point. The one time Jamie had questioned Jack’s literacy; the frost sprite had refused to communicate in anything other than modified (and correctly spelt) literature quotes for a week.

[Will do. Love you too. [PS Who’s Scott? Should I be worried?]

But if Jack was going to continue to type badly, and in a non-autocorrect way, Jamie was going to poke fun at him. Yes, their brothers-by-choice bromance was pretty epic. Plus, being a little shit was a little brother’s prerogative. Not that Jack was much better.

Jamie really should have been expecting what was awaiting him on the roof. A flaming, golden chariot, with equally brilliant stallions. Actually they were basically horn-less rapidash.

“The Sun Chariot?” Jamie asked, “Isn’t this Helios’?”

“Time-share.”

Jamie raised an eyebrow at that but didn’t comment. Instead, he walked up to it and at the raven’s nod stepped up onto it.

“Hope I’m not going to pull Phaëton.” Setting the world on fire would be a tad awkward. Though Jack would take cooling it back down as a challenge.

“You don’t see the sun attached, do you? Doc might be twitter brained right now, but he’s not that stupid.”

Jamie let out a sigh of relief. He grabbed the reins and gave them a crack. The horses reared and broke into a gallop into the sky. Their whinnies were closer to roaring flames than normal, and sparks flew where their hooves trod on air.

All in all, pretty normal for pretentious supernatural transport.

[Yep He dreamy ♡ *(☆▽´-`☆)♡ ° W Relopng 2 greta grn U cn b best bro]

[I’ll need a couple days to rent a tux. I hope you put a ring on it]

Despite standing up in an open chariot, Jamie didn’t feel the least bit endangered by their supersonic travel. He had faith the horses knew what they were doing, and that if something did go wrong he’d manage. Thankfully the chariot could travel a bit faster than dawn without the sun. Otherwise it
would’ve been hours rather than minutes for it to reach Mount Olympus.

The Mytikas Peak and gorges around sparkled like stars planted on earth. Jamie looked down on the palaces of the Dodekatheon and saw the dark holes of those who’d faded. It was sad how little belief there was in the world these days.

The horses rode down towards a stately palace and alighted on a wide balcony. The stonework was ancient Greek but in between it all Jamie saw a surprisingly cosmopolitan mix of decorations. Actually it looked like Apollo was in a bit of a nipponophile phase.

Speaking of the god, there was a golden, Greek, youth sprawled on a sun lounge a little further along. Like many a spirit, his appearance was supernaturally exquisite. In this case Apollo was the perfect image of an athletic young man and could be anywhere between late teens to mid-twenties. Toned but not bulky, just a light dusting of hair, but still a softness to his face. However, Jamie had been exposed to enough glamours and allures that he’d built up an immunity. At this point he found “perfection” to be boring really.

“Hello, you asked for me?” prompted Jamie. Since the god’s attention seemed riveted on a glowing phone screen.

At the disturbance, the Greek looked up, dropped his phone and sprang up to hug Jamie. The poor mortal barely had time to react before the god had flopped back down on his sun lounge. Apollo waved for Jamie to lie down on a recliner that hadn’t been there a second ago.

“Right, right,” the old/young god started babbling, with copious gesturing, “I’m so happy you could make it! I, like, really need your advice. You’re good at that right? I need some advice, like,” here Apollo leaned over to whisper behind his hand, “relationship advice. Well you see it’s about a man. A mortal. And I just don’t know what to do!”

The god actually swooned, forearm over forehead and all.

Jamie took a moment to collect his thoughts (and check Apollo wasn’t going to start raving again). God and mortal, not unprecedented. In fact, Apollo had done it a few times in the past. With both guys and girls. Still basics first.

“What kind of scientist?” Please say paranormal researcher.

“Robotics and healing mostly,” replied Apollo, his mood (and the background music) lifting again as he got to explain why his crush was the “most perfect mortal ever”. Jamie honestly tuned it out a little, trying to come up with a course of action. A roboticist probably didn’t Believe in any spirit, and might not have since early childhood. Hopefully Apollo could do what Jamie thought was the best course of action. “…really cool, and I’m going to bless it – not too much but just a little sapience. It’ll make the prototype better right?”

“Yeah,” agreed Jamie, “Now. Are you able to cross the Veil?”

Crossing was a tricky task. A supernatural creature had to suppress all their magic – Jamie had heard it described as ontologically holding one’s breath – so non-believers could see them. North was the only Guardian able to do it – the others were too inherently magical. Though Jack might if he really
worked at it. For spirits who had been around before the Guardians shifted at the end of the Dark Ages it was an each way bet. Their remembrance of walking with mortals sometimes got in the way of needing to actively appear to them.

“Not for long,” admitted Apollo, “Just a couple of hours.”

“Okay, that’s enough to give him your number or email in a café or something right? Nobody knows you’re a god on the internet, right.”

“…yeah.”

“Before you do that, I’ll send you a little primer I’ve written up. Plus some links to decent dating advice. Don’t want you scaring him off with sleazy pick-up lines.”

“Thank you,” said Apollo. Or more accurately gushed for ten minutes, with another picto-second hug.

“Why did you ask for my help, rather than Eros’?” asked Jamie, genuinely curious, “Is it ‘cause he’s family?”

“Cupid is no family of mine.” The bitter grief in Apollo’s voice was reflected by the light dulling and a sick feeling in the air. “He Faded long ago. I have no quarrel with those who hold his title now. I just… rather not deal with them.”

Jamie let the topic drop. He was curious, but not going to be jerk and push. He’d ask around when he got home. Instead he prompted Apollo to gush about his crush a little more, and threw a few more suggestions. They talked for another hour, before Apollo sent him on his way.

On the flight back to his college, Jamie checked his phone and was unsurprised by the dozen messages live-blogging Jack’s misadventures over Scotland. Apparently his epic romance with Scott had fizzled out. Despite Jack completing a series of ever more ridiculous tasks culminating in stealing the Stone of Scone.

[It 2 hvy }{I ुղ ोी I dump Scott liek a cat 5 blzz \(\Sigma J\) Π]

[Good on ya. Don’t let anyone boss you around.]

[Jamie! U dun w godmodding?]

[Yes, on my way back to dorm now. Are you coming round?]

[No cn d00. \( Bethlehem \) The storm rage on \` \` \` \` \` \` (. o o) >` \` \` \`]

[Okay, good luck.]

It was late when Jamie got home but he had stuff he needed to do before he crashed. A little homework, and answer today’s Uncle Jay question. He powered through the first then flipped through his inbox for the second. Jamie grinned when he found a message resonate with the talk he’d already had that evening.

Satisfied with his work, Jamie shut down his computer, spun in his chair. And froze.

There was an arrow pointed at his nose.

His eyes crossed to focus on the point, then refocused back up the bolt to the archer. The spirit – it
kinda had to be – was a guy in pink with wings. His hair was a riotous mix of bright reds, pinks and magenta, but his red-eyed stare was dark with threat.

“You have transgressed against me, mortal, and I shall have my due.”

Jamie gulped.

A: Seems we have a case of opposites attract, NERD. I say give it a shot. If a “nerd” can admire art, why can’t an “artiste” appreciate physics?

First thing to you need to remember is that neither of you are flat characters and just your labels. If all you see him as is an artist (and even worse, some stereotypical one) it’s not going to work. And also for your own sake remember you’re more than just a physics nerd.

As for getting his attention, well, you’re going to have to venture out of your science cave. If he has an exhibition, go. If he’s answering questions talk with him about his art. If there’s no exhibition I’m sorry but you’re going to have to approach him wherever it is he caught your attention. I’m guessing the Student Union or a café of some sort?

If you’re feeling brave, ask him out for coffee. If not, ask him anyway.

I’m not saying ask him to be your boyfriend straight away. While one-coffee-date relationships happen, they’re prone to burn out. Get to know each other first. Might turn out you clash. As I always say, trust is the foundation of any relationship.
Chapter Summary

Jamie learns why Cupid snuck into his bedroom.

Jack doesn't like it.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Q: Dear Uncle Jay,

My boyfriend keeps asking me to “prove” my love for him. At first it was cute, just little things. Like getting him a coffee, or staying the night. He asks for more these days.

Don’t misunderstand, he’s not asking for me to do things in the bedroom. Or taking advantage or anything. It’s more stuff like doing his paperwork, skipping out on appointments or going to grab something like it’s an emergency.

Worse still, is that I have to nag him to do anything,

Exasperated Gopher Girlfriend

“This arrow is lead,” pointed out Cupid.

Jamie’s gaze snap refocused on the metal threatening his face. It wasn’t actually very sharp, and matte grey was uncommon when dealing with the supernatural. In the time it took to do that, the lobe of Jamie’s brain dedicated to encyclopaedic mythology expounded on Cupid. The lead arrows were the opposite of his golden arrows. They made the target repulsed by desire. There was one drifting up to between his eyes.

“I see you know what that means,” said Cupid, as if talking about the weather rather than major mind-altering magic, “I’d be well within my rights to pin you with this. But… I don’t think I will.”

Cupid dropped his bow and let himself fall back on Jamie’s bed, lounging as if he had every right to be there. He rolled onto his side and propped his head up with one arm, the other drumming the arrow against his hip. He grinned but Jamie habitually ignored the allure conveyed by it. Cupid frowned but didn’t change position.

“How exactly did I transgress you?” Jamie asked, quite certain of the answer. He used the pretence of crossing his arms defensively to press a detail on his bracelet. The band looked like any ordinary charity rubber bracelet – blue with snowflakes etched upon it – but it was charmed with Jack’s magic.

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“And who told you I did such a thing? I can’t have my reputation as a confidence keeper sullied.”

Reputation was almost everything in the spirit world. Jack’s had certainly done him no favours when he became a Guardian. The bracelet on Jamie’s wrist pulsed twice. Jack had received his distress signal and was inbound. Jamie’s gaze flicking to the weather-station clock on his wall.

“And again, with the evasions. I am the God of Love, I knew of Apollo’s crush. I also heard when my titles were spoken by each of you. So don’t claim ignorance of your crime.”

Cupid punctuated his last point by, well, pointing the lead arrow at Jamie. Even though it came no closer than a couple of feet, he had to reign in the urge to flinch.

“Then what are you going to do?” Jamie asked.

“I have a far better idea. Rather than curse you to flee from all positive emotional attention until you die old and alone,” Cupid’s voice was disinterested as he inspected the point of the lead arrow, before brightening, “I’m going make you work to pay off your debt!”

“How...?” asked Jamie hesitantly. His wall clock was reporting a sudden drop in both air pressure and temperature.

“Well. If you are going to go about playing cupid, then I’m going to show you how much work it is. There are three months until Valentine’s and you’re going to help me prepare for it.”

Jamie guessed he was getting off easy. However, this more lenient punishment was also more fluid. He needed to know all the conditions. Cupid could speaking perfectly honestly and still mean to enslave him for the rest of his life.

“Seems fair,” admitted Jamie, careful not to actually agree. “What would you have me do?”

“Nothing impossible. Just a few errands, fetch me things, complete some of the more tedious aspects of my duty.”

“And for how long?”

“As I said, until Valentine’s Day. Once that is past, you’ll be free of my command.” Cupid tapped the arrow against his lips, which Jamie noted were appropriately cupid bowed. “I am a generous spirit, so I won’t demand more than one night’s work a week.”

“How did you get in here anyway?” asked Jamie. He was meant to be safe here. A series of wards, alarms, and agreements with the locals should’ve at least warned him. None had been triggered.

Cupid blinked and frowned at the change of topic.

“It was easy. This is a public space, no true threshold to speak of. Besides which, when there’s a soul in love it’s easy to gain entr–”

Blizzard, enter stage left.

Jamie’s windows screeched as they were wrenched open. All his notes took flight in the sudden gale. Hail drummed a tattoo on his walls. Jack Frost perched on his window sill, staff pointed at Cupid.

“If you value your sorry existence, you will leave now.”

This wasn’t Jack the snowball fighter, ready for some harmless fun. This wasn’t Jack, Jamie’s best friend and brother. Or Jack the Guardian, Moon’s chosen and protector. The spirit crouched ready to
pounce was winter’s wrath incarnate. No mercy for those who dared make light of its danger. Jamie knew the clouds above were a blizzard capable of razing his college. Held back only by Jack’s friendship with Jamie.

Cupid’s response was to stretch languidly and slowly sit up. His only concession to Jack’s display was to mantle his wings as a cloak. Cupid stood, and Jamie noted a sandaled foot planting itself on his bow. The love spirit stood proud in the face of Jack’s fury. The wind buffeted his hair and snow dusted it pastel. His pink cloak billowed, revealing a deep red leotard.

“Very well, I shall take my leave. I have informed the Busybody of his sentence,” Cupid turned to face Jamie, his expression perfectly polite, “and I’ll return for you.”

In a flash Cupid was gone, replaced by rose petals whirling in the wind.

With the target of its ire gone, the blizzard retreated from his room. Though the Wind made some effort to put things to rights. Jamie chuckled and thanked the force of nature, even knowing he would have to resort everything. Jack meanwhile was sheepishly scooping up slush and tossing it out the window.

“My RA is gonna freak.”

It was hardly the most insightful observation, nor the most helpful. But Jamie never particularly felt the need to censor himself with Jack. Friends should be honest with each other, right? Still, it made the icy guardian laugh. Though Jamie huffed when Jack continued to laugh beyond what was acceptable.

“Well you better chip in on my bond next year, ’cause Manny knows you’re gonna cost me it.”

That stopped Jack’s laughter – sending him straight to pantomime horror at the thought of adult responsibilities. Like rental bonds, or work.

“No! Anything but that! I’ll have to get the money from North and he’ll make me do,” Jack’s voice had slowed and softened until he was barely whispering, “chores.”

Jamie looked down at the frost sprite grovelling at his feet, raised an eyebrow and turned back to sorting his papers.

“Not my problem.”

Even after countless occurrences Jamie still flinched when cool arms wrapped around his shoulders. Or maybe it was the icy breath passing round his neck and under his jaw.

“Speaking of problems, am I going to have to freeze a pink panther? No wait, pink panther was awesome. Anyway, what did you do?”

“What makes you think I did anything?” rebutted Jamie as offended as Jack had been just a minute ago.

“Because I trained you well.”

“Well, I didn’t mean to,” sighed Jamie, deciding that Jack’s ego didn’t need any boosting right now. “I was summoned by an old god and he wanted some advice about modern dating. Unintentionally stepped on Cupid’s toes.”

“And what is this sentence?”
“Valentine’s version of dishwashing,” Jamie said with a shrug (earning a grunt from his frozen shawl), “He wants me one night a week until next Valentine’s Day.”

“I don’t like it.”

“I gathered, but no going all big bad Guardian on him.” Jamie reached up and back to ruffled Jack’s hair, “You’ve done your scaring, that’s enough. Even I can’t say his punishment is unfounded or overdone.”

“Still don’t like it.”

“And I still have a thousand words on modern culture stories to write tonight,” whined Jamie right back as he crossed his fingers and booted his laptop.

“Bah.”

“Humbug?”

There was a flash of light behind Jamie and he was pushed forward as Jack spun to face it. They were like that for a moment in silence before Jamie registered a scent other than crisp ice.

“Is that roses?”

“Uh, yeah,” came the absent reply from Jack, along with a couple of nudges Jamie guess were the shepherd poking whatever it was with his crook.

“Can I look?”

The request was kind of insincere, since Jamie was wheeling around Jack before he had a chance to answer. Jamie’s nose had been correct. There were roses, but more than that. On his bed were a few dozen big, filled to bursting, pink (of course), expanding files. Covered in an obscene amount of rose petals. The cherry on top was a heart-shaped envelope.

Ever curious, Jamie reached over Jack’s outstretched arm and plucked the out of season valentine. The card was a pretty average, frilly and yet more pink. At least the calligraphy inside was simple black.

Dear Mortal Meddler (not you Ice Brain),

Would you be my Valentine?

Here’s your first task. I need these dating profiles sorted. I’m sure you’ll be able to work out how things should be put together. I’ll be around to collect these next Saturday night.

You’re Cupid

Jamie handed the card to Jack, and started sweeping rose petals into his bin. It was overflowing at this point. He hoped no one would ask him about it when he had to empty it in the morning. Jamie wasn’t in any mood to start whatever impossible trial the files were going to be, so he just started stacking them in the corner.

“Still with the not liking it,” grumbled Jack, even as he started helping.

“Shut up.”
A: Get out. Get out now, EGG.

I’m sure you understand this, but he’s using you. There is no way that’s a healthy relationship. I’m thankful he’s not overstepping bounds in the bedroom, but that doesn’t absolve him.

Love should be proved all the time, in the little things. The unspoken questions answered. The habits shared. Large romantic gestures are nice, but should be used sparingly. They’re certainly not romantic if demanded.

Chapter End Notes

Oops, intended to get this finished for Valentine's Day. Oh well.

Also, I'm unhappy for the chapter names, so any suggestions welcome.

Next chapter will probably be following Jack.
The Other View

Chapter Summary

A day in the life of Jack Frost.

Snowballs and serious discussions with North.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Q1. Dear Uncle Jay,

I’m not asking about my love life but my friend’s. He’s started going out with a girl and I just don’t trust her. My friend’s too naïve sometimes and this girl has a history. I just don’t want him to get hurt.

Do I just watch it go wrong, or do I sabotage?

Bitch Fearing Friend

Q2. Uncle Jay-man!

My girl’s pop is redonk overprotective. Like I whacked one guy and now he pulls a shotgun everytime I show. What do?

Jivved About Crazy Knobheads

Jack cackled, snagging a cloud with his crook as the Wind swirled him south. From the pristine beauty of the Artic, over polite Canada, to the patchwork Midwest. The winter spirit thought it was about time for a several-state-wide snow day. He loved his calling – he refused to call it a job. That implied work and pay and adult-boring-stuff.

In some ways Jack’s life had and hadn’t changed since he became a Guardian. He had friends, and something of a family, now. He had his purpose and memories back. But there hadn’t been a huge upheaval to his daily routine. He just wandered, bringing snow and joy.

He still spent a lot of time alone – everyone he knew lead busy lives. However he spent a lot less time lonely. More and more children saw him, believed in him. And well it was a good thing he had unlimited texts and snapchats.

[jk ( ^__^- ) 1 wont’ buttery Chico ☆*:·.o(≧∇≦)o .:☆ Not 2 muh!]

[???
I have no idea
[and it’s too late to translate Jack-speak.
[Talk to you in the morning. Good night.]

[Nite nite! (ʃƪ˘³˘) \]
Jack slipped his phone back into its secure little pocket and surveyed his “work”. A nice even coating of snow perfect for snowballs and sledding. Enough to close schools across eight states but not so much that it was going to kill. Jack felt quite entitled to give himself a pat on the back.

After he did just that, Jack closed his eyes and laid back on his crook. Floating hundreds of yards above his latest creation the winter spirit meditated.

Not that Jack would ever admit to doing such a thing. And he certainly couldn’t let Bunny know about it. His reputation would never recover! But still, the best way for him to learn where his power was needed most. Bits of the world needing snow and/or a little fun. Admittedly before he became a Guardian he’d often done the bare minimum and been heavily biased towards the “fun” requests. Now he was better. Mostly.

Anyway, right now nowhere needed Jack’s attention. He was free to do whatever he pleased. And while he could go Edward outside Jamie’s window, Jack would prefer not to creep on his best friend. So time to visit a fellow Guardian. Tooth and Bunny were out, each being more travel effort than he felt like right now. Glancing at the golden trails Jack deduced that Sandy was probably sailing in the tropics tonight.

“North, then!” Jack laughed into the Wind. Hey it was accurate both metaphorically and literally. Rather than subjecting him to his earlier travels, Wind took him up the East Coast this time. Jack waved down at the lights, just in case. Even though the eastern seaboard was edging into the small hours of the morning. Who knows, maybe one of his believers was playing truant on Sandy? Not that Jack supported such a thing.

Soon enough Jack was sailing under the aurora. The real one that is; North hadn’t pulled his panic lever in months. No one had ever quite explained the difference between the auroras but Jack managed. He thought it might be that the Aurora Guarealis homed in on the Guardians. Still pretty though.

Also pretty was the Workshop. A sprawling compound of lights and ice. Despite his open invitation, Jack still considered it fun to try and sneak in. Plus, it doubled as security checks for Phil!

Jack was doing fairly well tonight. He’d made it past the perimeter (as always, bar that one time in 2019), up to a small window in a lesser used wing of the main building. Once inside he merely had to navigate to North’s office, avoiding all elves and yeti. Piece of cake, right?

Half way there – and forty minutes later – Jack was yanked into the air by the scruff of his hoodie. He didn’t bother fighting, just crossed his arms and huffed.

The yeti garbled.

“Patrick?” Jack guessed, and was rewarded with an affirmative grunt.

Identifying yeti and elves was difficult, and Jack suspected North didn’t always get it right. Plus Jack could tell the yeti names for themselves were no way related to whatever human names they got called. Jack had tried learning their real names, but his pronunciation was so terrible the yeti had told him to stop.

More caterwauling. And now they were moving. Or more accurately Jack was being carried somewhere.

“Yes, I know I know. Open invite. But this is more fun!”
An unconvinced huff.

Patrick gave Jack the silent treatment the rest of the way to North’s office. The yeti didn’t paused when they arrived, slamming the door open and tossing Jack in.

The massive crash of shattering ice wasn’t Jack’s fault.

“Knock! Why so hard to remember?” shouted North, before turning to his damaged sculpture and noticing the ice sprite sprawled on the ground next to it. “Ah! Jack! Nice of you to fall in.”

“Drop in,” answered Jack automatically, before gesturing at the sculpture, “What’s this gonna be?”

“Was toy dollhouse for little boy in Marseille. With dragons. Fruitcake?”

“No thanks.”

That explained the bat wings scattered around the fairy-tale castle. It was kind of neat. And was that treasure hoard in the basement?

“Reports say you work over North America tonight,” North said in that statement-but-question-but-not-question way of his, “Also reports that leader of Nice List now on Naughty List.”

Jack looked up from where he was freezing dragon wings onto the princesses. Flying, fire breathing princesses, awesome right? He quirked an eyebrow, unless his Naughty List kingship was threatened Jack didn’t care too much about the Lists.

“So?”

“I wondered if you might know why.” And it really wasn’t fair when Santa went all loomy like that. Not that Jack let anything show.

“Why would you think that?” Jack asked hamming up being besmirched, “I mean I take my Naughty placement very seriously, but I haven’t gone around corrupting the youth.”

“Ah, but Nice champion is believer of you. And Santa knows you visit him a lot.”

“Wait, Jamie is still top of the Nice List?” crowed Jack, “Oh, he’s never going to hear the end of this.”

“Was,” corrected North, plucking the winged princess out of Jack’s hands and putting her aside, “Until yesterday, now middle of Naughty List.”

“It wasn’t me,” reaffirmed Jack, just to make things clear, “My apprentice managed this all on his own. Pissed off Cupid. Speaking of which, where does that feather duster live?”

North directed his level look of vaguely parental disapproval at Jack. The winter spirit huffed and went back to playing with the broken sculpture. This time turning the ruins into something Escher-y.

“No invading domains and attacking spirits,” ordered North.

“But, Cupid invaded Jamie’s dorm!” whined Jack before relaying his encounter with the love spirit and what Jamie had told him about the “transgression”.

Silence didn’t reign, but quiet did care-take as North mulled over the situation at hand. Jack busied himself with his reinterpretation of the dollhouse. Really it was more of a vertical donut at this point. After a little while, maybe a minute, Jack couldn’t hold it in any further.
“I don’t like it. How any spirit can just waltz in and claim some “grave injustice” over nothing and demand something ludicrous of my Jamie. There were like a hundred files that Cupid dumped on Jamie. Over –”

“Jack.”

“–what? Talking to a god, at that god’s request. I mean if Jamie had said no, then apparently Apollo might have been able to curse him too!”

“Jack.”

“And it’s not like Jamie tried to cast a love spell or anything. No magic, just talking. You know what I think Cupid’s problem is? I think he needs to get f–”

“Jack!”

Said spirit’s mouth shut with a click, finally noticing North had been trying to speak. Kinda mortified, Jack’s cheeks frosted in his version of a blush. He was trying to keep the ranting to himself. Or at least directed at Manny away from listening ears.

“There is nothing to be done,” said North. The sentence could be construed as placating if not for the implicit order in it. “Jamie is not a child. He committed an offence against a spirit. A minor offence earning a minor punishment. Lead arrow would be excessive, Cupid used it only for scary bluff. We can oversee the penance, but we can’t shout it off.”

Jack tapped his reimagining, making sure it was all iced together, then started poking around the office. He thought better when he was moving, and well he could go get in a fight right now. North’s office hadn’t changed much, still packed with little knick-knacks. Jack had been told the stories of most of them by now. North did make a point to shuffle a couple in and out each month, so Jack had something to talk about. Not that he wanted stories of North’s adventures today.

There was one shelf Jack had mixed feelings about. Well at this point it was a whole case. One of the two showcasing ice sculptures. Jack was touched that North wanted to display his little ice scraps. But also a little patronised, he still had trouble not looking for ulterior motives in every nice thing. Still that was the case Jack leant against when he dived back into their “discussion”.

“Fine then. I’ll keep an eye on this situation. Make sure that Cupid isn’t up to no good.”

North looked up from his preliminary carving of his next ice block. The Escher-donut-castle stood to one side – and Jack knew it was going into the Vault. Santa knocked another hunk off with his hammer and chisel before setting them down.

“Is not necessary. Cupid is up to good!” exclaimed North, and Jack knew what was coming next when Santa’s hands went to his sides, “I feel it in my belly!”

Jack leant on his crook with all the teenage disbelief he could muster. No matter how many times North’s belly was right, he was sceptical. Unless Bunny was around, because then Jack was obliged to side against him.

“I’m still going to do it.”

“Bah, fine,” North waved dismissively, “but sleep first. Cupid said a week no? You can rest.”

Jack considered arguing but if he did North would win. And if he did just fly out to play sentinel over Jamie, North would set off the aurora. And he’d be so humiliated.
So he quietly slouched out, playing up the kid sent to his room fiction. It wasn’t entirely inaccurate. Jack did restrain himself to freezing only two elves. He barely gave the guest room designated his a glance, before flopping face first onto the bed. He didn’t have time to get comfortable before a sneaky strand of sand sent him to dreamland.

A niggling prodded Jack awake, metaphorically at least. He scowled and rolled away from it, but the pokes didn’t change. After a few minutes Jack gave up and swung an arm at the source. He hit nothing and convinced the one pester him had dodged Jack threw himself upright.

“Go away!” shouted Jack.

At an empty room. He frowned, then realised it was his weather sense. All his hard work yesterday needed a little touch to keep it spread nicely. Otherwise it’d clump and go all blizzardly on him. He’d have to deal with that. Ignoring the lure of a fruitcake breakfast, Jack threw himself out a window.

Floating along, Jack pulled out his phone and caught up on his threads and feeds. First of course was catching up with Jamie.

[Good morning Jack]

[Morning mooring (★^O^★) Jim Jim! ☆ξ(oสอน o• )]
[N 。∠(*´艸`) say we can’t stop Cupid (ļ-owner ľ)]

Jack frowned at the second half but sent it anyway. He had to find a better emoticon for North. And the rest of the Guardians actually.

[You knew that. My punishment isn’t that bad really.]

Jack snorted at Jamie’s naiveté. Really after all these years he hadn’t learnt that to always fight punishment?

[Butt (●’щ’) we can oversee ヽ(・_・) ヽ. Make sure its all gud(-_^)]

[Okay, well come around tonight. I’m going to give these files a shot]

Jack smiled, it was fun surprising Jamie but it was nicer when he was invited over specifically. Extra happy flakes for the Midwest!

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A1. In the idealistic dream of open communication, I’m going to assume you’ve shared your fears with your friend BFF. If not, do that.

Don’t try sabotaging things. Any damage you do to their relationship will be overshadowed by the damage you to your friendship. Because these things come out in the end. If your friend won’t listen to you (or your other friends) he’ll have to learn on his own.

Be critical of the “history” here. It doesn’t take much, or even anything at all really, for someone’s reputation to sour. Just one jealous ex or someone shot down can start slander. So if you’re going to judge the girl, do it based on her actions now. Don’t pre-emptively judge.

Hopefully things will turn out fine. For whatever reason. The reputation is unfounded, the lady has changed her ways, your friend is a better match than her previous relationships.

If things don’t. Then you’ll want to be there for your friend, right? So don’t sabotage your own friendship attempting to sabotage their relationship.
PS. Don’t say “I told you so” if it doesn’t work out.

A2 (via private email). JACK Frost you are an idiot and sent that from your official email. Try harder next time.

Chapter End Notes

Next: The First Labour/Trial/What-have-you

Also North you jinx'd everything. Bad enough Cupid decided to plot against me.

Jack-speak Translations

He abuses bad autocorrect a bit this chapter, making things harder for Jamie and us. Also the first set of texts we enter mid-conversation.

[jk ( ₏__, ₏ ) I wont’ buttery Chico ☆*:.*. o(≧▽≦)o .:*☆ Not 2 muh!]
Just kidding. *wink* I won't bury Chicago. *making snow* Not too much!

[Morning mooring (★^O^★) Jim Jim! ☆ zipfile o•ω•)ﾉ]
[N .∠(*______) say we can’t stop Cupid (≡|’´) 0 , 0)]
= Morning, morning. *happy* Jamie! *woo!* North says we can't stop Cupid *angry face*

[Butt (●😨) we can oversee 【●】_【●】. Make sure its all gud d(_^-)]
= But *heheh butt joke* we can oversee *eyes peeled* Make sure it's all good *thumbs up*
Jamie (“assisted” by Jack) attempts to start sorting the pink mess left by Cupid. He quickly realises he's going to need some other help.

Jamie gets a kiss, and Jack gets a surprise present, too.

Q: Dear Uncle Jay,

Am I allowed secrets? Because my girlfriend doesn’t seem think so. I’m not talking about big poisonous ones, like affairs or serial killer tendencies. She wants to know every little detail. Like what my second favourite lunch was in middle school.

I feel trapped. I have to answer because none of the questions are objectionable on their own. I just don’t see the point of her questions. I’d prefer to learn about each other in the present.

Am I allowed to feel this way? Can I ask her to stop? Or should I just keep quiet?

Sheila Under Spurious Suspicion

Jamie’s dorm room was pretty standard: desk, bed, wardrobe. He’d been lucky enough to get a single – which was for the best since he didn’t need to argue with anyone about leaving the window open. There was a couple of extra bookshelves making it cosy rather than roomy. And for every non-fiction book on them there were two fictional, though for Jamie that distinction was malleable.

The walls held just enough memorabilia to express school pride, but the rest was decorated with Jamie’s interests. Mythological and folkloric prints, rather than pop culture posters. An accurate set of the Guardians above his desk, and large snowy landscape above his bed.

Clashing with Jamie’s comforting décor was a garish pink monstrosity.

“I know fairytale trials are meant to be impossible,” whined – and really there was no better word for it – Jamie, as he and Jack stared at the pile of pink files, “but there is no way this is one night’s work. Unless he meant us to head up to the Workshop and use the polar night for a season-long night.”

Jamie’s first impression of his first “task’s” scale, gained a couple of nights ago had missed the mark. Abysmally. As in far under-estimating it. While he’d shoved enough files in the corner to know it was going to be a lot of work, he shied away from counting them.

Forty two. Two score and two. Too many files.

“D’you think they’re all going to explode?” Jack asked, tentatively poking an unopened file with his crook.
Also the files were filled to bursting, literally. In the old fashioned sense of the word. The moment Jamie had opened the first one papers had scattered everywhere. He guessed these had a capacity of about two hundred pages. At least three hundred had escaped the file.

“Yes,” answered Jamie, as sure as Sandy’s silence, “So let’s have a look at this lot before we fill my room with a sea of paper cuts.”

Sure enough not only were the folders densely packed, the “dating profiles” inside were too. They looked to Jamie more like someone had tried to condense a full dossier onto a single letter page. Each sheet was covered front and back in data about the subject. Jamie skimmed one, trying to get a feel for the ridiculous task ahead.

“This would be way easier if it were seeds,” grumbled Jamie, skim reading one sheet, while collecting some other scattered pages.

“What?”

“You really should read some mythology,” said Jamie, before prompting, “Cupid and Psyche? Kinda relevant.”

“Bah, no,” denied Jack, “I’m not going to read old gossip magazines.”

Jamie didn’t push the argument, Jack’s point was very true. Bunny being an alien was hardly in the books, yet. Still, Jamie preferred to read and check, rather than stay completely ignorant.

“Okay, invasion of privacy aside this starts off making sense,” Jamie reasoned aloud, “Name, date of birth, orientation, bio. Then it weird. I mean what’s the difference between self-control and self-discipline?”

“Um… practise?” offered Jack, looking equally perplexed at a different profile.

“That makes just about as much sense as getting different numbers for them,” dryly responded Jamie. “And what do these numbers even mean? What unit of measurement applies to “cat person-ness”?”

“Does it matter?” said Jack, holding up the instruction card left on the pile, “He-who-shall-lot-be-blamed says to sort them. Just put them in name order.”

Jamie plucked the lacy paperwork from Jack’s hands. He reread the message, frowning slightly at the misplaced apostrophe. Perhaps Cupid had changed his mind writing the card, but Jamie had his doubts.

“Put together makes it sound like Lord Vold’amour expects me to pair them up.”

“Didn’t you get into this mess by playing cupid in the first place?”

“True.”

Jamie’s gaze slipped from his best friend back down to the not yet detonated files on his bed. Facing the monumental task again, he dropped into his desk chair and slumped in defeat. He wasn’t sure what to do. Jamie trusted his intuition saying that merely alphabetising the profiles wouldn’t be correct. Though Jack’s instincts were worth heeding too.

There was just so much paper. Jamie was a child of the computer age; his brain stalled at the thought of manually dealing with all of this. It would definitely be easier if Cupid had left him a hard drive or something.
Jamie hopped to his feet. He had an idea. Not into the mind of Cupid, but for how to make his own life easier. He grabbed a sheet and headed to his door.

“Hey!” Jack said, grabbing the back of Jamie’s shirt, “Where are you going?”

“Tech support,” answered Jamie, looking over his shoulder at Jack. Neither escaping the spirit’s grip nor releasing his own on the door handle. “I know a guy who can help me get this mountain onto my computer. Then sorting it will be easy.”

Jack looked over his own shoulder and frowned. The Guardian’s frown only deepened as he looked back at the door. Obviously contemplating the hallway beyond. Full of non-Believers. The frown shifted slightly into a look of determination.

“I’m coming with you,” said Jack, a nod underlining his resolve.

“Okay, but you don’t have to. I’ll be bringing him back here.”

“I know, I know. I’ll just stick close to you, okay?”

Jack’s proposed plan of action was understated really. Sticking close actually entailed riding piggyback on Jamie. Not that the mortal minded much. It’s not like the wind-riding spirit weighed very much.

Neither mentioned how retreating so deep in Jamie’s personal space kept Jack safe from the non-touch of non-Believers. Even when a pat on the back made them flinch. Jack at being passed through, Jamie at the full body chill.

“Sorry,” whispered Jack.

Jamie’s responding hum was “Not your fault” and “I’m sorry about it all” and “I feel/know/believe-in/am-here-for you” and everything they’d spoken about the horror of Jack’s intangibility.

Fortunately that was the only incident encountered on the journey. Soon enough they arrived at door which stepped beyond the standard name and maybe photo to having a tablet mounted on it with a biometric scanner. Jamie swiped his thumb – this guy preferred you didn’t knock – entered a quick summary of what he needed help with.

“You’re allowed to do this to your door?”

“Not really,” murmured Jamie, “I suspect he did the RAs a favour or something.”

“James Bennett,” stated a robotic voice, “Doctor Foley will see you now.”

The door swung open mechanically, revealing a grotto dedicated to all things technologic. Nothing wood remained, everything was metal and plastic. LEDs blinked merrily away in every corner and most of the rooms light came from a dozen monitors. Unfazed Jamie stepped in.

“Tucker,” Jamie said by way of greeting, “You’re not a doctor yet. Not even a “not that kind of doctor” doctor.”

“Well it sounds better than the Overly Stressed Senior will see you now,” countered the beret wearing, African-American, geek ruler of this domain, not looking away from his control centre, “What do you need to OCR twelve thousand double-sided sheets for automatic database entry and collation?”
“Said I’d do someone a favour,” Jamie answered with a shrug, “didn’t realise how big it would be. And he wants it done for the weekend.”

Tucker leaned forward to peer at one of his screens and after one last flurry of typing, turned to face Jamie. He held out a hand and Jamie passed over the sample profile he’d brought along. The tech genius gave it a cursory skim and levelled a deadpan stare at Jamie.

“This isn’t suspicious at all. I may be a hacker but I’m no black hat.”

“None of it’s illegal,” assured Jamie. What jurisdiction could charge Cupid with privacy invasion? “The owner of the data just asked me for more help than I can give.”

Tucker hummed contemplatively, before slipping the sheet into a scanner beside him. Jamie caught a glimpse of the image, before Tucker was busy typing away again. After ten minutes of Jack attempting to relieve his boredom at Jamie’s expense – mostly by blowing cool air down his shirt – the tech geek detached a portable hard drive and grabbed the sheet from the scanner.

“Okay, I’ve set this to handle the scanning, and processing. I’ll even help you find a photocopier no one will mind you using all night,” explained Tucker in a rush, before placing it on the desk and steepling his fingers, “But first I need you to answer me something. Do you believe in ghosts?”

“Yes,” Jamie confirmed immediately, as if Tucker had asked him about the existence of gravity rather than psyches hanging around after death.

“Quick answer,” said Tucker with a blink, then picked up another gadget and started fiddling with it, “Anyway, let’s go get you set up.”

“He’s hiding something,” muttered Jack, right into Jamie’s ear.

Jamie privately agreed, but Tucker wasn’t giving anything away. Nothing happened on the trio’s journey to Jamie’s room (where Tucker shared in their amazed horror at the volume and pinkness of the files) and down to photocopier in an office already closed for the day. Tucker reassured Jamie that campus security wouldn’t be alerted and the lecturer whose office it was would be perfectly fine with it. Jack reassured Jamie that he kept stepping down the Naughty List.

“Have you seen a ghost before?” Tucker asked into a pause in their small talk. The office, though empty and minimally lit, was hardly silent with the photocopier churning through profiles.

“Yeah, a couple times. In fact,” mused Jamie, rolling shoulders since Jack had finally stopped playing koala, “there’s one haunting the library. I’m helping him get his latest novel published. It’s called The Ticking Hands.”

“There’s a ghost here?” asked Tucker. Jamie couldn’t tell if the tone was excitement, fear, or exasperation. The tech geek held up the camcorder-esque device and frowned at like it was an elf playing innocent, “Like right now?”

“No, I don’t think so. He doesn’t leave the library much, and even then he spends most of his time elsewhere.”

Tucker hummed but his attention was on his camcorder. Which he was panning around the room, and doing a decent job of tracking Jack. Naturally the sprite was making a game of it and jumping out of “shot”.

“Are you sure? Cause my ecto-corder is picking something up.”
“That’s not a ghost, that’s my older brother, Jack Frost,” stated Jamie. It was nice talking to someone already considering the supernatural. And an adult too.

“Yep, flying ice zombie reporting for duty,” piped Jack.

“Your older brother is invisible?”

“He’s cursed with the reverse of “seeing is believing”,’ explained Jamie, “I think you’ll be able to see him. You know someone’s there, you just don’t know who yet. So let me tell you about Jack Frost.

“Think back to the snow days that freed you from school. The pristine white that you piled high and threw far. Not always, but sometimes it would be just a little brighter, a little crisper – and those were the best days. Nothing but fun. Remember that laugh just out of sight when you landed a perfect shot on your best friend. That was Jack, even before he was recognised as the Guardian of Fun. Believe.”

Tucker’s eyes glazed a little at Jamie’s monologue. Half focused on where his tech told him the not-a-ghost was, half focused on dusty memories.

“He fought snowball wars with you, but you didn’t know to look. Look now and see. See hair as white as the snow he brings. Eyes blue as polar ice or clear winter’s sky. Graceful and birdlike, it wouldn’t surprise you if a strong wind blew him away. Believe.”

While Jamie described him, Jack was alternating between snarky commentary – Jamie better not mention exceeding his height – and flushing in embarrassment. The raw adoration on Jamie’s face warmed him in a way nothing else did. Jack resisted the temptation to hide, or to move at all. He didn’t dare break the spell Jamie was weaving.

He knew Jamie told stories about him to get new believers. But he’d only ever been around when the task was to convince elementary kids. They were happy with just “he’s right there, the guy with white hair and a blue hoodie on”. And some happy flakes. Jack contemplated that last thought, smirked, brought a palm up to his lips and blew.

“Jack doesn’t like shoes. Loathes them. He wields a shepherd’s crook, though now he herds storm clouds instead of sheep. But he’s not an old grump. He’s a teen in a blue hoodie with frost at the hems. He’s a kid with a smart phone making the most of unlimited data. Believe me.

“He’s trickster and protector, the Guardian of Fun, my best friend and brother, he is Jack Frost.”

Jack grinned and threw the impossible, glowing snowball. It hit the tech geek with a burst of blue sparkles. Tucker returned to the present with a full body flinch. Automatically his spare hand wiped the snow from his face. Then he almost dropped his camcorder-thing as he saw Jack. Who just winked and gave a little wave. Before making a show of preparing another snowball.

“Whoa!”

The conversation resumed with three willing participants. Tucker sharing stories about Amity Park, and its local superhero ghost. Jack talking about his second life. And Jamie mentioning some of the stuff he’d stumbled into – but not this latest thing with Cupid.

The task of scanning all the files took until the early hours of the morning. Tucker set up Jamie’s computer to combine them before leaving, asking to catch up some time. Jamie was bone tired but also to keyed up about his computer crashing that he couldn’t even contemplate going to bed.

“No. I know that look,” Jack said, poking Jamie’s furrowed brow. The spirit just kept talking over
Jamie’s token protests, “You are going to bed mister. I’ll keep watch. Staying up so late on a school night! Making me be the responsible one. The nerve.”

Jack maintained the irritated act, even threatening Jamie with some borrowed dreamsand, as he herded his mortal friend to take off his shoes and slip under the sheets. Jamie laughed when Jack extended the “disappointed guardian act” to tucking in the sheets and placing a kiss on the college boy’s forehead.

Jamie missed his first class in the morning and fell asleep during an afternoon lecture. But it was worth it to get Jack another Believer.

A: This is a weird question for me to answer, SUSS. Being an advocate of open communication and all. However I advise that as a means of forging trust within a relationship. I may be putting words in your mouth here, but I feel that these questions make you feel like she doesn’t trust you?

I’m not sure what advice to give you. This situation is one requiring a delicate adjustment to your relationship, and it’s hard to tell you how to go about that without knowing details of you and your girlfriend’s personalities.

You’re feelings are perfectly valid. People differ in how much they need to know, how much they value the past over the present, and how much they’re willing to share. While keeping quiet might be the polite thing to do, suppression now leads to blow ups later.

You’ll have to decide on your method of delivery – possibly with a mutual friend as a mediator idk – but you need to tell her your feelings about the questioning.

Chapter End Notes

Next: Cupid’s return: evaluation of the first labour, assignment of the second, and matchmaking. Also, updates from Apollo.

This chapter got long fast, and I ended up cutting it off half-way along. Tucker wasn’t my first choice but "tech support", but he ended up working the best. Plus, Danny will be handy later. I considered ANThony Stark to play closer to "Cupid and Psyche" but it didn't quite work.
Cupid's Return

Chapter Summary

Saturday arrives, and Cupid's return is nigh. Before that though, Jack and Jamie spend the afternoon together. Remember, it's not a date if neither even considers it might be.

Cupid sets Jamie's next task. Unsurprisingly, Jack is not pleased.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Q. Dear Uncle Jay,

My boyfriend and I recently went through a bit of an overhaul of our living situation. Moving in together and doing DIY renovations at the same time. 2/10 would not recommend.

We found ourselves using the promise of reward sex in the evening as motivation. Six months later, we’re done and the house is looks great. However we seem to have gotten trapped in the mindset. Not feeling we deserve sex without achieving something that day. I don’t want to start refusing sex – because withholding sex as punishment doesn’t seem like an improvement.

I’ve found plenty of advice about getting out of a “sexless relationship” rut, but what’s your advice for us?

Yours hoping,

Pavlov Is The Worst

Saturday dawned bright and clear. Or at least that’s what the weatherman had erroneously predicted. Jamie wasn’t surprised to find the sky heavy and grey. He knew his brother too well. Jack had decided that Cupid was a villain and not to be trusted. So the frost spirit was going to be making a nuisance of himself. Not that Jamie didn’t appreciate his help in sorting everything out.

Still, the not-quite-a-blizzard hanging overhead was a little… Jamie wasn’t sure. Patronising, over-protective, compensating, or plain childish. Whatever it was it made Jamie feel vaguely offended. Not that he could quite pinpoint how.

Surprisingly the spirit responsible for it hadn’t made an appearance yet. Jamie knew Jack was around – he always knew – but hadn’t caught a glimpse of him. Which was odd. Normally Jack took the first available chance to bug him. Jamie could only assume the winter spirit was laying some kind of trap. Though with Cupid apparently able to teleport, Jamie wasn’t sure how well that would work.

Jamie couldn’t let his life be ruled by matters of the spirit world, so he grabbed his shower kit and headed down the hall. Besides, he was pretty sure Cupid’s appearance wouldn’t be until after dark. A couple of years’ experience made for efficient use of the facilities, and nonchalance about heading back in just a towel.

It was one thing to ignore your dorm mates in the shower room – where an unspoken agreement
ensured the illusion of privacy – it was another thing entirely to return to your bedroom in a towel and find your best friend lying on your bed.

After a pausing in the doorway to process he had a visitor, Jamie released a sigh and continued his morning routine as if he was alone. Trust Jack to show up when Jamie wasn’t waiting for him. Jamie put his shower caddy away and selected his outfit for the day before turning to face his friend.

“Close your eyes or something,” Jamie ordered.

“But Jamie, it’s nothing I haven’t seen before,” weeded Jack, ever rebelling against being told what to do.

“Unless you’re also going for Guardian of Creepy, you don’t get to look at this,” Jamie said gesturing to himself, “without my say so. Besides, past viewing is not permission for future viewing. Things will be terribly wrong if Mom sees my skinny ass again.”

The boys shared a shudder at the thought. Jack’s in sympathy. He wouldn’t want to be caught naked by either his mother or Mrs Bennett. Things would be terribly wrong in either case.

“Fine,” huffed Jack, turning to face the wall and covering his eyes. Hoping to prevent an awkward silence, he said, “You’re not skinny. I mean I don’t think your fat! I just wouldn’t say you were skinny. You’ve got muscles and… I’m going to shut up now.”

It wasn’t fair but Jamie couldn’t help but chuckle. Just a bit. Hopefully the shirt he was pulling on would muffle it.

“Jack, thanks but it’s okay. Not all of us can be twigs like you. You can turn around now, by the way.”

Time had softened the memories of when a fifteen year old Jamie had attempted to stay light enough for the Wind to lift. A fear proven misplaced since the Wind could easily lift cars if it wanted to. Or if Jack asked nicely.

“So what were you up to this morning? The weather had sudden cool change about four hours ago,” added Jamie when Jack attempted to play innocent.

“Snow day prep?”

“Right,” drawled Jamie, checking his various emails and accounts.

“What is my favourite Believer up to today?”

Jamie let Jack have his subject change, it wasn’t like he could stop Jack doing what he thought were his duties as friend and Guardian. Also he resisted pointing out Guardians weren’t meant to play favourites. Even if they all did.

“I don’t think you’ll like it much. It’s mostly hard work today. A couple of assignments, perhaps get some buffer questions for my blog.”

Jack flopped over, so that his head hung off the side of the bed. Jamie just smiled faintly at the dramatics.

“You’re right, sounds boring. Where did I go wrong with you?”

“One of us had to be the responsible one,” pointed out Jamie.
“That!” exclaimed Jack, with an accusative finger point, “That’s what I’m talking about. Who gave you the idea someone had to be responsible?”

“Bunny,” Jamie answered succinctly. Though it was a lie. Jack might pretend otherwise, but he took his friends’ and wards’ safety very seriously. Idolising such a big brother figure had instilled a similar sense in Jamie. “But, I’m not too swamped for a picnic lunch.”

A “severe allergy to work” had Jack disappearing for the rest of the morning. Leaving Jamie in peace to beat his assignments into submission. An afternoon (since Jack wouldn’t let him get away after just a lunch hour) of fun with his best friend was the perfect carrot to motivate Jamie. When lunch time arrived, Jamie was more than half done with his planned weekend’s work. It had also started to snow, so he put out the signal for a snow war after lunch. Which no doubt had been Jack’s plan all along.

“…into a bathtub of whipped cream and sparkles.”

“That’s how you got the Groundhog to give you six extra weeks?”

“Yep,” answered Jack, popping the ‘p’. And stealing another of Jamie’s mini donuts.

They were seated out in one of the larger quads on campus. On the less travelled side, under an oak with nothing but snow on its branches. Jamie on a stone bench, edible offering spread out beside him. Meanwhile Jack had recently flopped on the ground at his feet. Deciding to test Jamie’s boots’ waterproofness by burying them in snow. Jamie refrained from mentioning a certain little charm he’d placed on them. For just this reason.

“You just live to frustrate weathermen, don’t you?” Jamie asked mostly rhetorically.

Jack’s snark was beaten to the punchline by an electronic chirp. Jamie held up a finger to shush his wintery friend. He already had his phone in hand since handsfree headphones made it socially acceptable to talk to “thin air”. Jamie grinned and read the message aloud.

[Today’s the day. Going to initiate first contact. Wish me luck!]

“You probably should stop reoffending.”

[Good luck, break a leg. PS. Let him talk] quickly typed Jamie. He looked down his nose at Jack – really easy with his target lying down already. “Now, level with me. Did you freeze a water main in Burgess, causing it to burst?”

“What! No!” yelped Jack, rolling to his feet to add arm and crook gesturing to his defence, “Where did you get such an idea!?”

Jamie merely levelled a deadpan gaze at Jack, while he packed up his lunch. Things were about to get messy.

“Okay, yes,” admitted Jack, shifting from defiant to what the unsympathetic might call sulky, “But it was an accident! There was a nightmare and it was freakishly nimble. A horse should not be able to walk on telephone lines.”

“That, that is a ver–”

BONG

Jamie’s voice was interrupted by the campus bell tower striking the hour. His ambush wasn’t. His
arm whipped up, threw and by the second

*BONG*

Jamie was knocked off the bench. His consolation prize was Jack was also on his butt wiping away a snowball to the face.

There were three outcomes when Jack and Jamie both entered a snowball war. If they fought one another: mutual destruction. At least until the fight ran longer than a couple of hours, then Jack’s magical endurance came into play.

“Did you think you could organise a flash snowball fight without me knowing?” mocked Jack as he formed another missile, with a careless roll of his wrist.

“Course not,” grinned Jamie, mimicking the cantrip. He couldn’t make happy flakes but he could make snowballs. “If I was, step one would probably be not inviting you.”

“You wouldn’t invite me?” Jack said, woeful puppy dog eyes undermined by his trickster smirk.

If they fought by proxy: unpredictable but likely ending in laughter. Children made terrible underlings. Far too likely to turn on each other or their “generals”.

“You’d gate crash anyway,” Jamie blithely replied. He sketched a very rough bow – more of a nod, couldn’t have the norms getting curious – before faking a British accent, “My good sir, could I invite you to a game of showing these sorry souls a real snowball fight?”

“Why, thank you,” said Jack, matching Jamie’s tone and raising an ice top hat and monocle, “That sounds marvellous.”

If they fought together: assured victory.

Jamie and Jack spent the first fifteen minutes building up the fight. Teasing people in, daring them, and dusting them with happy flakes. Once the quad was filled with carousing students, they set about herding them into groups. No reason for anyone to fight alone.

Soon enough Jamie seemed the odd one out, though truly he had a partner worth all of them by his side. Two if you included the Wind, but then things became really unfair.

Jamie laughed (along with Jack) as he spun and dodged. Always moving, always ready with another snowball. Honestly Jamie was surprised it took the crowd being whittled down to seven for them to ally against him. He might still have been victorious if Jack hadn’t been struck by a sudden bout of good sportsmanship and removed himself. Jamie managed to take out three before he was buried himself.

He was still grumbling to Jack when they returned to his dorm. Jack had taken to floating horizontal near the ceiling. Out of Jamie’s reach – and risk of being walked through. The mortal boy took the bottleneck imposed by the doorway to catch the spirit and yank him in by the scruff of his hoodie.

“The triumphant couple returns,” crooned a ‘loving’ voice.

The pair froze, noticing the pink clad archer sitting in Jamie’s chair. Cupid had one file open on his lap and a hand poised over it mid finger-walking. The back portion of Jamie’s mind – ever watching and ever cataloguing – noted the new rose-tinted glasses. Another which offered unhelpful observations was disappointed they weren’t heart shaped.
“You have to stop breaking into Jamie’s room!” yelped Jack.

“As I said before, still no threshold,” said Cupid dismissively, and reinforced his disdain by then speaking only to Jamie, “Acceptable work. I was curious about how you’d go about ‘solving’ it.”

Jamie was struck by both relief and annoyance. He’d passed the test, but he liked to get at least credit for his work. Armed with his new database, Jamie had been able to preview different sortings before he spent hours shuffling the actual papers. He’d tried a few ideas, ranging from Jack’s alphabetising to attempting to pair profiles. The latter had been a very short-lived plan. It was really difficult. In the end he’d simply grouped them by a simplified Klein Grid. Which was all data included early in the profiles.

“I had hoped you would attempt to pair them,” Cupid continued uncaring of Jamie’s inner thoughts, “I had an extra tricky task ready as reprimand. Perhaps I will have another chance to use it. No, your task for tonight is to collect some–”

Cupid was happy to monologue without Jamie’s input (and gleeful to ignore Jack’s attempts to interject), but he looked decidedly displeased with the interruption of a text notification. The love spirit released a gusty sigh and gestured loosely at the offending device.

“You might as well check that. If it’s what I think it is.”

Reaching slowly, in case Cupid mood shifted, Jamie unlocked his phone. It appeared that Cupid had returned to flicking through the files. Given Cupid’s mood, Jamie wasn’t surprised that it was another text from Apollo.

[Success! Numbers shared. Might have spent too much time talking about medicine. That’s not normal date conversation is it?  
[Also, don’t worry too much about Pearl’s punishment. Everything will work out. Besides the severance of ties, blinding, and death.]

“Now, I’m watching you,” said Jack, attempting to stand over Cupid. His attempts at intimidation were doomed to failure given that the other spirit hadn’t been fazed by a show of force. “I’m not going to let you do anything to my Believer.”

Cupid looked up from his auditing and his expression was pure, bland apathy to Jack’s implicit threat.

“He’s my Believer too.”

“He was mine first!”

“I understand you are a Guardian of Childhood, but that doesn’t require you to act like a child, does it?” Cupid turned back to Jamie, effectively ensuring he got the last word, and resumed speaking, “I forgot to mention it last week, but that little fling you’ve let happen is also your responsibility. God knows it’s going to end in flames.

“Since I can tell I’m not welcome here, I’ll leave you’re instructions for tonight’s task and take my leave. I need you to collect something and deliver it for me. Frost can help you, but he can’t speak during the time between you leaving this room and returning after completing the task.”

“Okay,” agreed Jamie, before Jack could derail the instructions with objections. Besides, Jack keeping his mouth shut for an evening would be a novel experience.

“I need you to fill a jar with glowing stardust, and deliver it to the Moon Witch of Devon.”
Jamie was pretty sure where to go for the first, but he didn’t recognise the title of the recipient. Not that Cupid gave him a chance for clarification.

“You cannot merely ask the Star for his Dust. It’s important that he not know who has stolen it. The jar is charmed to hide the sand from his sense so long as it’s closed. My plans require him to investigate its disappearance. Now dusk comes, and I shall depart.”

Once again, a flurry of rose petals obscured Jamie’s vision. When they drifted to the floor, Cupid and the files were gone, and a jar sat in his place. Ever curious, Jamie picked up the jar and turned it over in his hands. At base it was a solid-no-nonsense glass jar, reminiscent of those coffee was sold in, but on that simple surface intricate coloured lines and beads depicted fairy-tale creatures. On the bottom was a label with an address and name.

“So, Jack,” asked Jamie, the beginning of nerves in his voice, “Ready to steal from a Guardian?”

A: Well, PITW, I’m glad to hear your renovations turned out well. Less glad to hear about the side-effects. Reward-sex isn’t a problem in itself, and you don’t have to do away with it. Just break the constant connection between good behaviour = reward = sex. Being a good person doesn’t entitle you to sex, and it’s fine to have sex merely for sex’s sake.

I’m afraid there’s no fancy solution to your problem – though what I recommend is pretty simple. Pay attention to yourselves. Whenever you promise reward sex consider whether you actually want to do it. Similarly when you turn in for the night (or wake up, etc.) ask yourself if you want sex. If you both do, don’t worry if you’ve “earned” it, just go ahead.

It won’t resolve itself immediately. Breaking a habit is about as difficult as making one, and people tend say it takes about a month of constant action to do that. Still, starting thinking about sex in more ways and you should out of your rut soon.

Chapter End Notes

Next: The Second Trial: Stealing From the Sandman

Jack and Jamie blindsided me with their not-a-date. Totally absent from my plot outline, but no, that’s what they felt like doing.

Sorry about the delay. I think I’m going to have to fall back to a fortnightly schedule. Uni is slightly more important than fan fic (blasphemy!).
A Saturday Night Heist

Chapter Summary

Jack escorts Jamie to steal from the Sandman. He can't talk, can't use emoji, and he doesn't like it. However he learns something he didn't know.

Night flights, grand theft ammos, and an odd witch.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Q1. Dear Uncle Jay,

I know you prefer to answer questions from people about their own love lives, but I want a little advice about matchmaking. I have two friends, and each is the other’s type. I introduced them to one another and they clicked.

And pre-emptively-friend-zoned themselves. Just assumed the other wouldn’t ever want to date them, that they’d be better off as friends. They won’t listen to me.

I’m just about to break each’s confidence to tell them I sick of this mutual pining. Any advice to prevent me?

About To Lock Them In A Closet And Tell Them To Kiss Already

Q2. Dear Uncle Jay,

Is it okay to matchmake? Beyond helping a nervous pair actually talk to each other. I mean manipulating circumstance so that two who may have never met think that it’s destiny. Stealing something from the first and having it turn up in the second’s possession; or kidnapping the pair and leaving them in a tent in the middle of nowhere.

Instigating Criminal Erotica

[I don’t like this
[I don’t like this at all]

Tone was difficult to convey in texts but Jack thought he managed. What with the lack of emoji and the frown on his face. Cupid may have forbidden Jack to speak, but he hadn’t forbidden him to text. And Jack was very good at texting. However, texting while carrying a passenger was difficult.

“If you keep saying that,” Jamie yelled over the Wind, “I’m going to tell the kids you’re no longer the Guardian of Fun, but the Guardian of Disapproval.”

Jack was unhappy for a lot of reasons right now. Not least of which was how awkward is was just to maintain this conversation. Jamie might have the luxury of just being dragged along, but Jack had to juggle few concentration heavy things. Lest he or Jamie fall out of the sky. (Jack was conveniently forgetting Jamie was maintaining a feather-weight enchantment on himself.)
It was even distracting him from the beauty of the stars above and the racing countryside below. So yes, Jack didn’t like it.

Cruising on the Wind was difficult enough with an adult (bodied) passenger. Jamie was too big to ride piggyback on Jack anymore. Now they flew more like Peter and Wendy – hands holding around Jack’s crook and ankles hooked together. It gave the Wind more surface area to work with.

But it all meant that Jack had to text one handed with the undeniable risk of dropping his phone a thousand feet onto the hard ground.

[Don’t you Saar
[Dare
[Is say were half an hour from sandy now]

Texting made for terrible conversation because its “instantaneous-ness” was totally unreliable. Especially when they were flying high over normal cell tower coverage. The southern U. S. of A. passed streaked below them, pockets of lights from towns glittering. Luckily, Sandy was passing along the Gulf Coast tonight, far enough north Jack wouldn’t have to worry about dealing with the tropics.

“You know, I have no idea how I’m going to do this,” shouted Jamie, a touch of hysteria in his voice.

Looking at his mortal friend’s carefree, daredevil smile the winter spirit realised he’d been a terrible influence on his best friend.

“I’m not going to ask you to anything. The Oath is kinda broad and I don’t want you getting in trouble.” Jack had no choice but to let Jamie ramble, and listen to the boy’s voice even out and soften. “Maybe you could go not-talk with Sandy and I glide under his cloud? No, no using Jack. Illusion of a nightmare to distract Sandy? No, that’s evil-bad. A veil over both of us? That might work. Sandy’s attention is spread pretty wide.”

Jack nodded, but made no effort to hide his unease about stealing from a fellow Guardian. Especially his favourite. If it had been Bunny, or even North, he would be less worried.

[Okay going silent]

Jack wasn’t sure Jamie would be able to veil them from Sandy. His best friend was part-time wizard apprentice under North, and the others. The boy had plenty of talent, especially in manipulating light, just what was needed for an invisibility veil. Jack had lots of power which often washed out fine detail. Plus, he was so full of frost and fun, that he had difficulty with magic counter to them. Jack could light a fire. But only with snowstorm lightning.

It took a minute for the text to reach Jamie’s phone, but it earnt Jack a snort.

“Any last words?” asked Jamie. Upon receiving a negatory head shake, Jamie announced, “Stealth mode!”

Jack watched, ever amazed at his first believer, as Jamie reached out with his free hand. The mortal was biting his tongue in concentration, with just the tip sticking out. Fingers spread and caught on the air, on wisps of cloud, on the unlit gaps between the stars, on all that the eye passed over. Jamie gripped and pulled it around like a cloak. The action upset their balance and threw them into a tumble. The Wind rolling them in the veil Jamie pulled from thin air, wrapping them from sight.

It was kind of surreal inside the spell. Jack couldn’t see Jamie, only feel their hands gripping each
other. The winter spirit had difficulty seeing himself, relying on his sense of where his limbs were rather than his eyes. Nevertheless, Jack acquiesced to Jamie’s request and silently bid the Wind swoop them under the ribbons of Sandy’s work.

The duo had been passing streams of golden sand for hours, which now were coming together, like tributaries braiding towards the sea. Despite his joy in teasing the sand, Jack had refrained from running a hand through any, lest a dream dolphin alert Sandy of their approach.

From underneath the dream sand, the sky was filled with rich glowing clouds. Jack could only compare them to seeing the Milky Way in the Outback far from civilization, but multiplied, with massive branches reaching out over the horizon in every direction.

Jack and Jamie glided under the intercontinental branches of dream sand, but still had to roll and twist around the hundreds reaching down to the towns below. A tricky piece of work when you couldn’t see yourself or your passenger. Nevertheless, Jack pulled them up towards the base of Sandy’s cloud without apparent incident.

And spat out sand when he crashed into the upper shell of a giant turtle. Jack shook his head, hoping it would get the taste out of his mouth, and noticed he could see himself and Jamie. The crash must have broken his believer’s concentration. Jack looked up and sheepishly waved at Sandy.

The Guardian of Dreams was standing before them, arms crossed and foot tapping – the image of disapproval. He raised an eyebrow, demanding And what are you up to?

Jamie rolled to his feet – incidentally leaving his backpack on the sand shell – and pulled Jack upright. Jamie echoed Jack’s wave less sheepishly and more cheerfully, before crouching down to check the contents of his backpack.

“Hi Sandy,” said Jamie, unpacking his bag, and placing the items on the sand, “Jack can’t talk right now. He accepted a dare and you know how he is about dares.”

Sandy formed a sand-image of a dog (suspiciously puppy-like) with a bone, and underscored it by rolling his eyes. Jack huffed.

“Exactly,” Jamie agreed in a long-suffering tone, “but we won’t be staying long. Jack offered to take me for a night flight, so we’ll be going.”

Jack took offence to Jamie’s tone and huffed, crossing his arms. Jamie didn’t seem to care or even notice, more engrossed in repacking his bag neatly. That done he grabbed Jack’s free hand to haul himself to his feet.

Sandy tilted his head and new image formed. One of those thing-a-day desk calendars and a question mark.

“Hah, no. What gave you that idea?” Jamie sounded nervous, his wings closing tight around his shoulders.

Jack wondered if the jig was up. He hadn’t seen Jamie get the jar out when doing his little routine, but Sandy was perceptive. While Jack was happy that he was now only an accessory to attempted theft, he feared what Cupid might do to Jamie.

Sandy’s response was an accelerating barrage of images. A nearly spent candle, two hands holding, a snowflake, a bow and arrow, a figure eight maybe, and then it was too fast for Jack to track.

“That’s enough, Sandy, we’ve talked about this. It’s not happening.”
Jack frowned, even more confused. He felt he should know what they are talking about but he was missing something. The sunny sky above had clouded over, and the hair on Jack’s neck stood up in the building static. He couldn’t take control of it, so it couldn’t be a winter storm. Must be a tropical one.

Sandy was levelling yet another unimpressed look at them, though maybe mostly at Jamie.

“We can argue about this next dream class, right?”

Your fear is hypocritical and unfounded.

Sandy never talked, yet the whispered words couldn’t be anyone else. The susurration – a word Jack never had use for before, but doubted he’d ever find better use for now – skipped his ears and trickled the meaning straight down his mind.

“See you later, Sandy,” said Jamie, voice not quite impolite. He led Jack by the hand to the edge of the island and turned their backs to the ocean. “But we’ve got to wake up.”

Jamie spread his wings and fell backwards into the surf, dragging Jack down with him. However the expected splash didn’t happen. Instead the familiar feeling of freefall cradled Jack. He flinched and glanced around, noting the crisp night air he hadn’t even missed.

“Whenever you feel like calling the Wind, go ahead,” drawled Jamie.

Jack looked sideways to see the mortal still splayed out on his back. As casual as if he was lying on his bed, rather than falling to certain death. Okay, so basically certain not-death when falling with a flying ice zombie. Since they’d been made by Sandy, Jack felt safe laughing to the Wind. He didn’t have to say a word, the Wind knew where they were headed next. Back to Jamie’s.

As they headed north, they didn’t need to dodge Sandy’s streams. Instead the golden ribbons swayed and parted leaving them a clear path. Unburdened from trick flying, Jack took the chance to retrieve his phone.

[What was all that about]

“I don’t think it’s possible to sneak up on Sandy,” began Jamie, voice warm with mischief half-done, “Kind of expected to get caught in a dream. Good thing I’m used to lucid dreaming. I got the sand just before the sand got us. So head to Devon.”

[No your argument with sandy] texted Jack, silently nudging the Wind’s course northeast.

“Oh, don’t worry about it. He thinks I should do something stupid.”

[What]

Only the rush of the Wind met Jack’s ears for minutes, even after Jamie read his latest text. The grip of the warm hand encasing his chilled one tightened a couple of times.

“I won’t say it’s nothing or not important,” said Jamie, and without the Wind carrying the words to him Jack might have missed them, “But it is private. Please, Jack, let it be.”

[Okay]

Jack’s response was unhesitating. He couldn’t think of any real secrets ever kept between them, nothing more than what the next birthday present would be. Jack had no illusions that even an
unbreakable friendship like theirs entitled him to disrespect Jamie’s privacy.

“So wings?” prodded Jamie, and Jack let him change the subject, “I don’t dream myself wings. When I fly I copy you.”

Beneath them the lights of civilisation brightened as they approached the coast before cutting off dramatically at the Atlantic. With only the stars and moon above, they could only see the occasional white-tip or container ship below.

[idk]

“Eloquent.”

The long trip to Devon passed with comfortable ebbs and flows from Jamie. Long stretches of silence, then monologues and musings. Due to Cupid’s (stupid) edict, it was all one-sided, but Jack didn’t mind that much. Jamie spoke little about his life – mostly because the rest had been said before. He spoke more about random facts and news from all over the world. Jack had helplessly witnessed the Boston Molasses Disaster but he hadn’t heard about plasma force-fields actually perhaps being real.

Europe and the British-Irish Isles arrived on the horizon in a wash of light. The Wind took them over southwest England, where it rocked them in place, waiting for better directions. It hardly cared for human’s names for places – they changed so much and the same thing had so many different names.

“Oh, hi, a little,” stammered Jamie, waving his phone around as evidence, “I was given an address, but can’t find it on my phone. The Rookery, Old Willows Way. Have you heard of it?”

“Yes, and I’m not surprised. The Way is more of a track these days. I’m Luna, what are your names?”

The woman’s gaze shifted from surprised to distant, and from Jamie to Jack. It seemed to she could tell he should be there, but she was looking more at his crown than his face.

“I’m Jamie, and, wait. You can see him?”

“No,” came the absent denial, “but I can see you holding his hand, and looking at him. As well as the void in the snow,” said Luna, breaching Jack’s personal space to squint at him.
“Ah, Luna meet Jack Frost. Spirit of Winter Fun and Guardian of Childhood,” Jamie announced with a little hand roll, “Currently banned from talking.”

“Hello,” the woman said, her eyes focusing on Jack, but not bothering to step back. Instead, she spun on her heel and started marching out of the town, “Well then, follow me.”

The trek along Old Willow Way was surreal. If not for the pleasant banter between Jamie and Luna about cryptozoology, the dark forest would’ve been awfully spooky. The willows swayed contrary to the breeze, and sporadically reached out to them. Lights bobbed between the trees, never near enough to identify. The further in they walked the more forest freely sounded: snapping twigs, fluttering wings, and light footsteps.

Jack felt them entering a weird-spot. A place were the magic of the world had retreated and concentrated, like Big Root or that patch of desert in the southwest US. While Jamie took notes on how to identify Blibbering Humdingers, Jack wondered if Burgess would slip into a weird-spot. The home base of Jack Frost could hardly stay a normal town, could it?

Half an hour through the woods and they came out onto an area of fields and hills. Old Willow Way continued into the distance but they stopped beside a crooked gate. Beyond stood a house more like a squat tower, or maybe a castle chess piece.

“The Rookery,” said Luna with a careless wave, “ancestral home of the Lovegoods.”

Jamie took a moment to observe the Rookery before quirking an eyebrow and guessing, “Your home? Apologies if this is rude, but are you ever called the Moon Witch?”

Luna tilted her head and hummed. Not a contemplative tone, but instead the ice cream truck song. “My name means the Moon, and I am a witch. So I suppose you could call me that, but I’d rather you call me Luna.”

“Well then Luna,” chuckled Jamie, swing his backpack to his feet and extracting their cargo, “I believe this is for you.”

The witch made a little sound of surprise but accepted the jar readily. She turned it over in her hands, enraptured by the decorations. Jack had never heard the names she bestowed them before. What the Pitch was an Umgubular Slashkilter?

“Thank you, and who is this gift from?”

“The contents are from the Sandman,” explained Jamie, “but the delivery order was from Cupid. Who is probably matchmaking.”

Jack suspected the commentary was against orders, but he didn’t have a problem with it. Luna might be a full adult, and a witch, but she was mortal. Jack didn’t like it when immortals played games with mortals.

Satisfied with her external examination, Luna popped the lid of the jar. Half the contents soared into the sky westward, a golden comet seeking home. The other half curled around Luna’s hand before coalescing into a sand-image. Jack didn’t recognise it. It looked like the bastard offspring of a unicorn and a rabbit. Cute, in a freaky kind of way. Luna’s laugh was unrestrained, in fact if Jack couldn’t feel her joy he might have thought it mocking.

“Thank you,” Luna managed a couple minutes later, still a little breathless from laughter, “but I think you should be going before the Sandman comes back.”
Sure enough the sand comet was coming over the horizon, trailing a streamer far larger than it should rightly form. While Jack wanted to apologise and explain to Sandy, he didn’t want to be caught when Sandy visited Luna. One, he wasn’t allowed to talk until he returned Jamie home. Two, Cupid might be a dick, but he probably knew what he was doing, and Jack didn’t want to make a mess of it.

Giving Jamie just enough time to say farewell, Jack grabbed his hand and swept him up into the sky.

A1&2. I’m going to combine these two since they share a theme. Though the second question from ICE is more as an example of what not to do, ATLTIACATTTKA.

Like many things, there’s nothing wrong with a little bit of matchmaking. Especially in the case you’ve described. Historically there’s been plenty, and that’s what dating sites do these days. I’d say you shouldn’t have started without checking your friend’s wanted you to meddle. But that’s a bit late.

Have you told them what you were trying to achieve by introducing them? You don’t need to say that any pining is going on, but it will tell them you saw some potential.

A (incomplete) list of things not to do: what ICE suggested, fake romantic overtures from one party to another, breaking their confidence (well spotted), etc.

Beyond that I’m not sure how to advise you. You could try and coach each of them to go after the other. You could try and leave them alone together in romantic situations (though forewarn them to prevent awkwardness). Good luck.

A2 (in private email): Jack was ICE you? Sounds like you complaining about Cupid…

Chapter End Notes

Next: a normal week for Jamie, before the next task. Though he has things he needs to deal with.

The next chapter will be in a fortnight - uni and family will definitely prevent a week turnaround.

In the first draft the boys were holding hands the whole time. They could still be, but now there a moments where I’m pretty sure they’d have to let go.

Jamie apparently is more aware of what’s going on than I thought. Also he looked at the chapter outline and vetoed a choice I had him making. Which will make this a little shorter (and I get to do something evil earlier).

Text Translations

[Don’t you Saar / [Dare / [Is say were half an hour from sandy now] =]
Don't you dare / *dare / I'd say we're half an hour from Sandy
A Normal Week

Chapter Summary

A week in the life of totally (un-)ordinary college student Jamie Bennett. Classes, hanging out with friends, giving dating advice, not going on dates, and taking walks in the woods.

Jack is a bit of pest and tries Jamie's patience.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Dear Uncle Jay,

I have a question about angry sex. It seems all my enbyfriend and I have anymore. We’re not angry with each other (or at least I’m not with em), but life keeps heaping frustrations on us.

My enbyfriend and I seem to have less and less time for each other. Ey’s approaching the deadline of eir doctorate and I’m getting more shift hours. More and more I can only talk to em indirectly by text. Our face to face time is rushed and squeezed into our schedules.

When a date gets around to the sex part we’re tired and grumpy and it’s not fun anymore. What can I do to fix this?

Angry With Angry Sex

On Sunday, Jamie (quite understandably) slept in. The Wind hadn’t dropped them off at Jamie’s dorm until after six in the morning. If it hadn’t been the depths of winter the sun would’ve already been up. There was a quiet beauty to the frosted, sleeping campus. Not that Jamie was in the mood for it.

The moment they returned, Jack decided to catch up on all the talking he’d been forbidden. Mostly whining as far as Jamie could tell.

Jamie’s response was to shuck his winter wear and burrow into his underappreciated bed. Only once he had burrito’d himself in preparation against the sun trying to rouse him, did Jamie speak.

“Jack, shush. We can argue about this in a few hours, I need a nap.”

“…Fine.”

Jamie might be cocooned in flannelette darkness but he knew just what face Jack was making. Head tilted down, slightly to the right, face blank which was the worst given Jack should always be smiling. Perhaps he was even hiding behind his crook held before him. Hopefully his hoodie’s hood was still down.

“How can your puppy dog eyes work when I’ve blind folded myself?” wonder Jamie aloud, careful to avoid saying he couldn’t see Jack.
“I’m just that good,” Jack replied smugly, and Jamie knew he was hamming it up, pouting and squinting to make tears.

“Sure. Whatever. I’m going to sleep. Feel free to hang around, leech my wifi, prank my dormmates, just give me four hours’ peace.”

Mercifully Jack let him drift off. And Sandy didn’t barge into Jamie’s dreams to demand an explanation. Instead Jamie enjoyed a dream of flying with Jack, free of any worries about their future.

Jamie woke gently. His dorm was quiet as other students caught up on sleep, though the faint noise of sports drifted in through his window. He wormed out of his blankets slowly, giving himself time to adjust to the sunlight. He noticed, but didn’t comment on, the cold patch on the sheets parallel to where he’d napped. Jack was at the TV instead, amusing himself with BioShock Phasic.

“Morning sleepyhead,” teased Jack, without looking away from his retro-future lunar explorations.

“My apologies for enjoying Sandy’s handiwork,” snarked Jamie.

That set the tone for the rest of the day. Light-hearted banter between them as Jamie went about a normal Sunday. Catching up on homework, blogging, and almost-but-not-quite beating Jack in PvP. Jack left the whole Cupid thing alone and Jamie was happy not to argue about it.

Monday was terrible as usual. Jamie had lectures for all four of his classes, beginning at eight and not finishing until six. Worst of all his favourite coffee shop didn’t open until nine so he had to rely on inferior coffee to wake himself up. They didn’t even have syrups to make it okay! Jamie was conflicted on Jack’s absence. With Jack around he was less likely to fall asleep mid-lecture. But with Jack around he was more likely to be distracted.

Jamie loved his classes, don’t get him wrong. But six hours of lectures was a bit much. After two hours on developmental psychology from a professor whose accent Jamie still couldn’t always decipher, he really needed some coffee.

[Jack, despite what you might think college is not in fact a painful exercise in blood, sweat, and tears
[N wurs ◀( ͡° ͜ʖ ͡°) ] Its like Warren U= x •=U on Maundy Thurs al yr long ◀( ⊙ >... ⊙ ” ) ◀ ]

An hour of waffling about the intricacies of cell division later, and Jamie needed more coffee. His professor might know her stuff, and speak animatedly about it, but she chose heavy stuff.

[((•ω•)σ ( . Y . ) gues wat]

[What?]

[I got a believer n Dubai (★ ’ω ’★ ) ⊃ ]

[That’s great. But why were you in Dubai?] 

[Watts that over there ( ⊳ ’_] ⊃ ⊳ ) ⊃ ⊃ ]

At lunch Jamie hung out with the handful of his friends with matching lunch breaks. Conversation
wandered between the woes of assignments, gossip about weekend party shenanigans, and zombie apocalypse survival plans. Not that Jamie could waste time – his overloaded life needed him to multitask. So besides chatting he was also not-quite-randomly highlighting his readings and outlining his next article for the student paper.

Jamie’s next class was an intro to meteorology and climate science. It didn’t exactly fit with his planned majors but he liked to know what laws of nature Jack bent and broke. Not that today’s class had much to do with that, since they were discussing droughts.

[(☆🔗 fullfiled stressfulTask 🎉)" Who wood win n a fight (=O*_*=O Q(*_Q) peanut bitter ore jelly]

[How exactly do inanimate sandwich spreads fight? Also I notice you didn’t answer the question about Dubai]

[\ (~_o_\) J Ans me Dont ??? me ]

[I found an interesting video titled: “Mall of the Emirates Snowball Fight”
[Also it doesn’t matter. Vegemite would be final victor. Nothing can overcome it.]

Late afternoon found Jamie settling into his last class for the day, coffee in hand. He probably should cut back on the coffee. But he was just about sleep bankrupt. He’d hibernate over winter break. This class was his favourite: Mythology and Folklore in the Modern Age. What other class had Slenderman as a valid essay topic?

[U still a live buddy (˘•ω•˘)]

[Yes. Just.]

[Good 2 here (‘_‘) Wont b dropping in m(ˌœ̇ʒʒœ) Theres a storm head Moscow way I need 2 deal w ˌœ̇ʒʒœ Theres a storm head Moscow way I need 2 deal w ˌœ̇ʒʒœ
[U like my vid (˘̀¬) = ★]

[Yep. Nice break from readings.]

[\ (^_0^ ) / Sounds lie some 1 under att from dreaded hw ˈ* Dˈ]
[Good luck v(ˌœ̇ʒʒœ)v]

Tuesday was more reasonable. A later start and just a couple of small tute classes. It was nice having a chance to discuss what they were learning. Plus the more “free” time meant less rush to get things done.

[D00 u think I cod b a meme? (¬_¬)!?]

[According to Dawkins you already are]

[Really??? ✴*�(´`)✴*✴✴✴]]

Still Jamie’s life wasn’t allowed to be too quiet. After catching up on his homework, he’d settled into an evening of lazy pop culture consumption. It was approaching the witching hour (and the season finale of his binge) when his phone rang.

“Hello?” Jamie answered, attention still half on his laptop. Whoever the caller was, he hadn’t given
them a personalised ringtone.

“You have to help me!” came Apollo’s panicked voice, “I think I’ve screwed everything up! We were on a date and everything was going great. We’d had a nice dinner, followed by a walk in the park. We talking and then he said he had to go, and I told him to stay. He refused and ran off and I think he might never want to see me again.”

“Okay, okay, calm down,” said Jamie in an attempt to soothe the god’s nerves, “Tell me what happened. Slowly, with details.”

Apollo recounted the full story, still with an undertone of worry. He and Tadashi had gone a proper date – dinner and a street festival. They’d retreated to the park, Apollo planning to skirt public indecency, when an alarm went off on Tadashi’s phone. Tadashi had immediately offered apologies to Apollo and headed in the direction of where his moped was parked. Words had been exchanged, and Jamie was careful to get the exact words from Apollo.

“Well I think it’s salvageable,” Jamie offered, “There are two main things that went wrong. First off, you can’t order Tadashi around and expect him to simply obey. And you did order him – no please or anything. You might be a god, but he doesn’t know that. As far as he knows, you’re just another human that might be a good boyfriend. But a good boyfriend shouldn’t presume unquestionable authority.

“Second is,” Jamie continued, thankful Apollo hadn’t interrupted, “I think what happened was a family emergency. While Tadashi could’ve set up a fake alarm on his phone, from what you’ve told me about him I doubt it. So whatever called him away was a real emergency. You’ve gushed about his way with his little brother so I assume something happened at home. It could’ve been something in his lab, but most people panic more over family than objects.”

“Oh.”

“So, text him or better yet call him. Apologise and ask if he needs any help. Ask how his family is. And next time he panics ask how you can help rather order him around.”

“Yes, thank you. I’ll do that. Good night,” said Apollo and hung up.

Jamie frowned at his phone and tossed it aside. Immortals could be so bad at human interaction.

[Jamie help! ! ((\(^{\text{¬}}(\text{¬}; \overline{\text{¬}} = \overline{\text{¬}}; \overline{\text{¬}})\)/))
[I told a kid what “being sent to the farm” meant. "*(•▂•)*", now he won't stop crying]

Think of the devil’s faults… Jamie sighed, and hoped this would wrap up quickly so he could get back to his finale.

[Dammit Jack. You know better than that.
[You should know how to fix it though. Ice cream maybe?]

Wednesday should have been cancelled.

Long horror story short, wizard apprentices who have learnt to impose their beliefs on reality shouldn’t daydream in biology labs.

Jamie blamed nosy dreamweavers who wouldn’t leave well enough alone.
Thursday dawned bright and clear, though by lunch the sky was heavy and grey. Also Jamie gained a pain in the neck which did its best to distract him from his classes. Stealing pens, poking him, pulling faces behind the lecturers. But Jamie stayed strong. It helped to imagine Jack suddenly finding himself naked and visible to the class.

Still, Jamie only managed to get half what he hoped done before Jack pestered him into heading out for frozen yoghurt. Best case the clerk assumed he was buying a second serve for someone else. Worse case they thought he had a split personality. Since one cup was a medium with a restrained topping choice and the other a mountain of every sugary topping.

“Are you Jamie Bennett?”

“Hmm?” enquired Jamie, caught with a spoon of frozen yoghurt in his mouth. “Yep, that’s me. Who’s asking?”

Jamie was getting mixed impressions from the guy. From his poofy black hair, slouched shoulders, to his baggy jeans, he seemed the epitome of the useless twenty-something. However Jamie caught something in the guy’s blue eyes, something wary. Plus, Jamie’s sixth sense associated the stranger with cold and death, but also protection. Reminded him of Jack actually.

“Danny Fenton, friend of Tucker’s from Amity. He thought I should have a chat with you and your friend next time I visited.”

Jack squeaked in surprise at the acknowledgement and started choking. Seemed the shock had sent something down the wrong way. Jamie dropped his yoghurt, freeing his hands to land a solid thump onto Jack’s back. The frost spirit coughed and hacked, but stopped choking.

“I saved your frogurt.”

“Thanks,” said a bemused Jamie, and sheepishly took another scoop, before asking, “this is always an awkward question, but how are you left of average?”

“What gave it away? I haven’t done anything yet.”

“You talked to Jamie,” Jack helpfully pointed out, both metaphorically and literally with his spoon, “No one base normal talks him anymore.”

“Sixth sense,” corrected Jamie, “plus my neighbours noticed your arrival.”

“Okay,” drawled Danny, “Neither of those statements make sense. But Ghostwriter vouched for you, so I’ll spill. You know the ghost superhero in Amity?”

“Yeah, the one the press – I’m sure get the name wrong of and – call Inviso-Bill?”

“Gah, yes,” groaned Danny, complete with face-palm drag, “That’s me. But I call myself Danny Phantom.”

Jamie raised an eyebrow, recalling the newspaper articles he’d read about Amity. Invert Danny’s hair, through him in spandex and he’d look the part.

“I’d say lazy code name but my friend-of-a-friend the Easter Bunny’s real name is E Aster Bunnymund.”
“Colleague,” Jack objected, “frenemy at best.”

“So you’re human and a ghost?” asked Jamie, ignoring Jack’s commentary, “You’re going to have to tell me how that works. And show me.”

Friday was another long day, and afterwards Jamie agreed to follow his friends out to a party. He wanted to leave after forty-five minutes, but stayed for ninety. The music was too loud, the air too heavy with pot, and his friends scattered too soon. Plus, his obvious singleness was catnip or something, because he kept getting approached by tipsy fellow college-goers.

It wasn’t that Jamie didn’t like people. More that years of dealing with old gods had taught him to equate formalities with protection. He couldn’t just give away bits of himself to strangers as freely as the other partiers. So rather than grin and bear it, he slipped out and headed for the woods. Jamie said his hellos to the locals and wandered through to the clearing he’d claimed as his for practise.

Magic was easy. Being a wizard was hard.

The First Spell was deceptively simple: believe strongly enough and you can make the impossible true. But to paraphrase Uncle Ben with great power comes great ethical concerns. While there was no Dresden-esque White Council running around chopping off heads to enforce unforgiving Laws of Magic, Jamie was cautious about what magic he did. He didn’t want to go mad with power or anything.

Tonight Jamie just wanted to depressurise. Perhaps if he had learnt any destructive spells that would mean knocking down some trees. But that would be terribly rude to the forest’s residents.

Instead when wizard apprentice Bennett de-stressed light flooded the clearing. The moon brightened to noon, the stars danced around Jamie’s fingers, and the snow sparkled under it all.

After a moment, Jamie pulled his hands together in front of him and with them all the light he’d just thrown out. He examined the mini-star in the cup of his hands and wondered what he should do with it.

Part of him – suspiciously Jack-like – wanted to lob it high and detonate it like a flare. That would confuse people for sure. And it would satisfying to burn that stress away. The stress from class, from his extracurriculars, from the mess with Cupid, from Jack nagging him about it.

“Making a spekkie of – crikey!”

The artificial star turned baseball flew over Bunny’s shoulder to explode in a shower of harmless sparks on a tree. The six foot alien rolled to his feet and held up his empty hands in gesture of goodwill. Jamie mirrored him, though his expression was more chagrined.

“Strewth, mate. Bit touchie there. Was looking for the trouble to your strife, he around?”

“No,” snapped Jamie, annoyed at the rhyming slang. The friendly teasing hit a little close to home. He yanked his phone out to check, ignored nineteen unread messages, and offered, “last text, he was over Scandinavia tonight.”

Jack: [Almost Finnish ‘d ¯\_(ツ)_/¯…

“Righto, ah’ll be off,” said Bunny, raising an foot to open a tunnel. However rather than stomping, he lowered it softly. Bunny’s Jack-is-being-too-Jack glower shifted slightly to a concerned frown,
and voice softened, “You okay, nipper? You need any help with the poncy pom, let me know, kay?”

“I’m fine, thanks,” Jamie replied to the cadence of *Now fuck off.*

Bunny got the message, and was replaced with an aster in a blink.

Jamie’s phone buzzed in his hand, and habit made him glance at the notification before it disappeared from the screen. Jamie caught himself with his arm drawn back ready to throw and watch it shatter. After taking a long blink, he pocketed it instead. The bro code said should warn Jack of Bunny’s approach, but Jamie just wanted a break.

Jack: [Ill b rd 4 cupid ¯\_(ツ)_/¯...

Light flooded the clearing again. But Jamie didn’t want pure white light, right now. He didn’t want yellow, he didn’t want green, he didn’t want blue. The light shifted at Jamie’s urging, the white snow blushing pink then deep red.

Jamie didn’t want red either. He took a deep breath and released a heavy sigh; simultaneously forcing the red light even redder. The clearing plunged into the darkness of infrared.

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*A: AWAS, this might be an unorthodox suggestion what about you take a break from sex? Forcing yourselves to have sex (which is what this expectation of dates ending it seems to be doing) is in no way good. Instead wrap your dates up with some pampering, or just quiet time together.

You need to talk with your enbyfriend about this. Double check whether you’re doing what’s best for your relationship, or sticking to old patterns. Life changes, and a healthy relationship has to change too.

If the time crush doesn’t seem temporary, at some point you’re going to have to decide between your work lives and your dating lives. Society can make you over-value monetary reward. Is a couple extra shifts’ pay worth not having time to enjoy life?*

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**Chapter End Notes**

I’m not very good at this punctuality thing am I? And I was doing so well on Thursday. The last bits (section, Jack’s texts, and the Uncle Jay stuff) were really uncooperative.

I find Bunny really hard to write - probably because I’m Australian and the Aussie accent is really just liberal swearing. Not quite right for our Pooka Guardian.

Anyway, text chapter: Visit to Cupid's castle in the clouds, and Jamie does something bad.

**Jack-speak Translations**

Note, not every text has been translated. Some weren’t too mangled this time.

```plaintext
((wav"
|)wav Dis is ya coach Q~Q Work thru the pain <( •‿• )> Give me 1200% { {1 〈(o<)‐1} Second place is first loser! ( p'¬'。 )}
```
= This is your coach. Work through the pain. Give me 1200%. Second place is first loser.

[N wurs \( ('D')/\) Its like Warren U\(=\bullet x \cdot =U\) on Maundy Thurs al yr long \( \prec (\heartsuit > \sim \ominus \mu )/\) ]
= No worse. It's like the Warren (with Bunny) on Maundy Thursday all year long

\([\(\star \bigcirc \cup , \bigcirc \bigstar \)/\) Who wood win n a fight (=O*_*_)=O Q(*)_Q peanut bitter ore jelly]\]
= Who would win in a fight? Peanut butter or jelly?

[ \( \angle (\angle \_\_\_) /\) Ans me Dont ?? me \( \bigstar \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_/\) ] = Answer me, Don't question me!

[\(\approx \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_/\) no Bunny tar spread (\(\sim \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_/\) ewww] = Ugh. No Bunny tar spread (Vegemite). Ewww (faint retching sound)

[U still a live buddy (\(\bigstar \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_/\)] = Are you still alive my true love?

[Good 2 here (\(\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_/\) Wont b dropping in \(\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_/\) m Theres a storm headed Moscow way I need 2 deal w\(\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_/\) = Good to hear. Sorry, won't be dropping in. Really sorry. There's a storm headed towards Moscow, I need to deal with.

[U like my vid (\(\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_/\) ] = (Did) you like my video?

[\(\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_/\) Sounds lie some 1 under att from dreaded hw \(\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_/\) = Sound's like someone's under attack from the dreaded homework

[Ill b rd 4 cupid \(\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_/\) ] = I'll be ready for Cupid
Castle in the Clouds

Chapter Summary

After a distracted day, Jamie (and Jack) are taken to Cupid's castle. Jamie gets to see some of the magic behind the scenes.

And he makes poor choices.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

<a sample of 197 similar submissions>

Dear Uncle Jay,
I've been bad. I got my priorities mixed up and I…

Dear Uncle Jay,
I cheated on my girlfriend. It was only once but…

Dear Uncle Jay,
My girlfriend is accusing me of emotional cheating. Is that even a…

…but it doesn’t count if we didn’t really have sex…

How do I get him to forgive me?

My boyfriends don’t like that I spend time flirting…

<See more>

Jamie’s first sighting of Jack on Saturday morning didn’t involve towels or beds for either of them. Instead he caught the frost spirit setting up traps around his dorm building. The light glinted off thin strands, taut between trees and buildings, and possibly pinned to the sky itself. Judging by how the other students were freely walking through them, bar the occasional fruitless swipe (with visible confusion when nothing was there), Jamie suspected Jack had bartered for some of Anansi’s spider silk.

If he hadn’t let out some of his frustration last night, Jamie might have been angry with Jack rather than amused. He did wonder though what Jack had traded for the webbing. Probably happy flakes.

[I don’t think a massive spider web is going to stop a guy who can appear in my room]

Jamie really doubted Jack’s assertion, but decided not to text back. You don’t feed the trolls and the mischief maker would drop in soon enough. Instead he chipped away the mountain of work he’d
foolishly set himself up for. Though he maintained his sanity by flip-flopping to less scholarly parts of the internet every ten minutes.

He’d found himself distracted by a couple of fronts. His much neglected folkloric blog had recently received a lot more traffic. Jamie spent an hour trying to find the source to no avail. He supposed it might be because his blog had information on it that wasn’t copied from a hundred other sites. Still he caved and updated it with a little something about where the old gods were today – focusing on Apollo of course. Who knows, maybe Tadashi would stumble upon it.

Jack had sent him down a rabbit hole of adorable baby animal videos and ridiculous X most Y articles. Though Jamie’s will was strong. He only lost an hour.

The blessing of Jack’s attention being focused on his prank didn’t save Jamie from being disturbed the whole morning long. When the interruption came just a little after eleven, Jamie couldn’t ignore it. It was his mom on Skype.

“Hi Mom, what’s up?” greeted Jamie, taking a moment to adjust his chair and webcam.

“Does anything have to be ‘up’ for me to call my college boy?” she teased, wagging an admonishing finger.

“No,” Jamie answered in a long semi questioning tone, “but you don’t normally Skype out of the blue.”

“True,” she said, and paused visibly gathering her thoughts, “I guess I just got a little lonely. My boy’s across the country and my girl’s out camping again.”

Jamie’s gaze skipped sideways to his calendar and he considered what the date might mean to his mother. And realised in focusing on his own appointments and due dates he’d forgotten something important. He groaned in self-disappointment and dropped his head onto his crossed arms.

“Sorry Mom, I completely forgot about your anniversary.”

The laughter that met Jamie’s ears had a rueful edge. Which he recognised from when his mom would get nostalgic about his dad.

“It’s okay dear,” she soothed, once her laughter had subsided to giggling and then fully abated, “Just then you reminded me of him so much. Your father was a great man, but he was useless at remembering dates.”

“Yeah, that was my job,” answered Jamie, lifting his head to look at his mother. And it had been, his dad had entrusted Jamie with the task of reminding his father of birthdays and anniversaries since he was three.

“And you did it well,” she said, still smiling. Even with tears in the corners of her eyes and more grey than brown in her hair, it made her look young again.

The moment was broken by the voice of Nat King Cole singing about chestnuts and frost. “Sorry,” Jamie said to his mother, before answering his phone with an irritated, “What now Jack?”

“Oh, funny story. Master prankster that I am, I was–”

“You caught yourself in your own prank, didn’t you?”

Two beats of silence and Jack sulkily responded “yes.”
“I’ll save you from yourself in a bit,” Jamie easily promised, “but right now I’m on vid-call with my mom.”

“Oh, oh, put me on speaker!”

“Okay,” Jamie agreed, though he made no effort to hide his reservations.

Despite the fact she didn’t believe in Jack Frost, Jamie’s mother got along with his best friend Jack like a house on fire. She was ever disappointed that Jack wouldn’t come over to visit, but enjoyed tag-team-teasing Jamie when she had the chance. It was a weird situation really, she still couldn’t see Jack in real life, but she would if Jamie ushered him into a vid-call from offscreen.

“Hello Missus B!”

“Hello Jack, how are you?”

“Not bad, just hanging around.”

“I’m guessing literally,” Jamie’s mom said dryly.

“Yes” answered Jack and Jamie together. Jack unashamed and Jamie resigned.

Just when it seemed Jack might be the target of friendly teasing for once, the voice on speaker turned frantic, “No! Go away! Bad birds! Bad! No touchy!” there was a woosh and a thud, and the call disconnected.

“Sounds like Jack’s having fun,” observed Jamie’s mom, voice so heavy with sarcasm it folded in on itself to become honest again.

“Serves him right,” huffed Jamie, “he was trying to lay a trap for a guy I’m doing some work with.”

“Oh? What kind of work?”

Thankfully years of practise with bullshitting explanations for his adventures with Jack meant Jamie was able to pull together a cover story.

“I may have mucked up a postgrad’s psychology work, and as penance I do some basic stuff for him each week. Data entry, errands, that kind of thing.”

His mom made a thoughtful sound and asked, “What area of research?”

“Uh, romance.”

Another thoughtful hum, then, “I see. And segueing gracefully, when are you going to get a more-than-friend-friend?”

“Mom,” groaned Jamie, so amazingly glad Jack wasn’t part of this conversation anymore, “how many times do I have to say I don’t have time for that.”

“You work far too much honey.” A pause and a grin that triggered Jamie’s flight-or-fight response which took a third option for freeze. “Plus, if you and Jack are seeing each other it’s more than fine.”

“No, mom, no. That’s not happening and it’s not going to happen.”

“Why not?”
Jamie had perfectly good reasons why not. It's just most of them sounded crazy to anyone how didn’t understand Jack was in fact immortal and semi-invisible. The strongest defence Jamie could muster was one he doubted the truth of.

“He’s straight, in fact I think he has his eye on a girl over in dentistry.”

Well, maybe, maybe not. Tooth certainly couldn’t keep her hands off Jack(’s teeth). Honestly, Jamie thought Jack might be ace or aro, or at least very very grey.

“Oh honey,” his mom said, her voice heavy with sympathy.

Apparently that was enough to get her to drop the subject, and conversation moved onto Christmas plans. December was just round the corner and with it finals. Jamie was going to miss Thanksgiving which was rudely used as a study week before exams. He’d said he’d booked flights, but in truth was hitching a ride with Jack. After reassuring his mother that she didn’t need to pick him up from the airport two towns over, and wishing Sophie the best on her return, Jamie was able to wrap up the call.

Then he set out to find his best friend. Perhaps he should install one of those child locator apps on Jack’s phone?

Jamie would normally peg Jack as The Fool or maybe The Sun (though The Hermit and The Magician also kind of worked), but right now he was the image of The Hanged Man. Upside-down, caught by an ankle, his other leg crossed behind his knee, his expression distant. Well, staring a distance of approximately six meters down and forward where two ravens pecked at his phone.

The first thing Jamie did was snap a photo of Jack. The second was rescue his phone. The third would be to rescue his best friend but there wasn’t a dangerous amount of Anansi’s webbing around.

“Jack, if I try to rescue you am I going to get caught too?”

“If?” squawked Jack, “You better get me down or! Or, or I’ll tell Missus B who destroyed her roses last year!”

“Jack,” countered Jamie, speaking slowly and clearly, “that was you.”

“Right. Get me down anyway.”

“How?”

“Anansi said he charmed the webs against everything but high quality alcohol.”

“You are so lucky I have a good fake ID,” grumbled Jamie before heading off to procure Jack’s freedom.

Getting the alcohol had been the easy bit. Applying it to semi-invisible, mid-air spider silk was considerably harder. Jamie’s only lucky break was that he was invulnerable to the webbing. He could feel it trying to stick but his mundane body prevented it. He couldn’t reach the strands around Jack’s legs, so Jamie had to break threads closer to ground level. A few educated guesses were rewarded by the soft thump of Jack hitting the ground.

“Oh, said Jack reviewing his work with an air of satisfaction, “that should do it. Let’s go wait for our foe.”

“Cupid isn’t evil,” Jamie said for the unknown-hundredth time, as they headed back to Jamie’s dorm.
“Fine, but he’s a jerk.”

The walk back was half irritating with Jack’s persistent complaints about Cupid, half amusing since Jack had to re-enact a dodging security lasers movie cliché. Not that he let even somersaults interrupt his griping.

All Jamie felt was the sense that he really should’ve expected it when they returned to his room to find Cupid reclining on his bed again. The pink clad spirit wasn’t looking through the results of Jamie’s work for him. Instead he was flipping through one of Jamie’s books of Arthurian lore.

“You really need to stop doing this,” Jack ground out, levelling his crook at the other spirit.

“Ah, there you are,” said Cupid, carelessly dropping the book and rolling to his feet, “time to get going. This week’s task isn’t difficult but more than a little time consuming. We should be going.”

Cupid snapped his fingers and rose petals whirled around them. Thicker and thicker until Jamie could barely see the two spirits let alone his room. Red, white and pink petals blocked his vision, and their perfume assaulted his nose. Accompanying this was the disconcerting feeling of both free-fall and standing still. After twenty seconds of this confusion the whirlwind burst scattering petals all around them.

They weren’t in Kansas anymore. Well, Jamie’s college wasn’t there anyway but it was a figure of speech.

It was a garden, well-tended but not pruned to geometric perfection. Instead flowers bloomed everywhere, a riot of colours overflowing from their beds and trellises. Mostly roses of all colours, but also lilies and every other flower ever seen in a romantic bouquet.

Beyond that rose a castle, best summed up with the word “fairytale”. Nothing about it was suitable to a real defensive structure. It was delicate, with dozens of towers and bridges between. The walls were whitewashed and each opening was surrounded in pink and green detailing.

“Welcome,” boasted Cupid, making a sweeping gesture encompassing their new location, “to The Castle in the Clouds”

A quick head check over Jamie’s shoulder showed the name was apt. A few steps behind them the ground just ended, replaced with (faintly pink) clouds. The moat of clouds extended a couple of dozen yards before thinning. The view was spectacular, though Jamie couldn’t place where the castle was hovering above he could tell it was flying high.

“Don’t worry, I’ll catch you,” promised Jack, prodding the clouds with his crook.

“I know.”

“Just stay away from the edge, please. I don’t want to find out if I can have a heart attack,” said Jack in a joking tone, which turned more worried when he muttered, “this place really should have railings.”

“Well I’d offer to give you a tour, but time’s a wastin’.”

Not waiting for any response, Cupid turned and sauntered up the steps into the castle. Jack and Jamie shared a look, one apprehensive the other resigned, before following up the stairs.

Cupid soon led them away from the grand halls of the castle, and down to some more utilitarian areas. Cupid was walking fast and not saying a thing, not even to explain what they passed or to
pester Jack. Jamie and Jack didn’t break the silence either. The atmosphere of the castle was quiet. Too quiet. It wasn’t comfortable, more like a tomb, and made Jamie pity Cupid. All this space and no one else in evidence. Even Bunny had his sentinels and googlies.

“And here we are, the arsenal.”

The room didn’t match a modern or medieval image of an armoury. The base was the same: thick windowless walls, safe-like reinforced door. However the contents weren’t rows of swords or firearms. One wall had the something of the expected – a series of increasingly complex bows on the wall and workbench worn smooth with time. In the corner were a couple of mannequins with outfits on them. The right-most was similar to Cupid’s current attire, and heading to the left the outfits changed. The pink receded for normal colours, the outfits became more like medieval armour. Left-most was simple leather and chainmail with a green sash.

Another bench ran the length of the hall, equally polished. Along the walls parallel were countless arrows, standing bundled in tubes. It looked like they were labelled, but Jamie couldn’t read them with the nearer ones facing the wrong way. The central workbench seemed divided into different stages of an assembly line. The end closest to them had finished arrows with waiting to be stored, and further back up the tables the arrows started losing pieces until they were just arrowheads.

“Holy crap! Is that blood?” asked Jack pointing at the far wall.

Jamie’s gaze turned to the red wall he hadn’t properly examined yet. The red turned out to be a liquid cloud banked up against it. It was very disconcerting as it looked too heavy, too solid to be mere gas, yet moved too freely to be liquid. Vents along the far ceiling poured something reminiscent of dry ice into the cloud. It was held back not by glass but magic, as the cloud would occasionally billow before retreating.

“Not really, that’s Love, distilled from all around the world.”

Curiosity piqued, Jamie took a step towards it. Was it like Sandy’s dreamsand then? He only managed one step before a pink clad arm blocked his way. Cupid looked concerned but Jamie didn’t have the background to guess exactly why.

“Don’t,” curtly ordered Cupid, “the Love is dangerous, especially to mortals.”

“Are you putting my Believer in danger?” growled Jack, yanking Jamie back by his jacket. And ignoring Jamie’s objecting yelp.

Cupid similarly ignored Jack’s objection.

“Busybody, how much emotive magic have you been taught?”

“Quite a bit. My teachers do a lot of their work with it,” Jamie answered, avoiding crassly mentioning them by name. “But I’m better at detection and negation. I can heighten emotions but it’s all at once. I can’t incite any specific one on command.”

Not like how Jack could make even the worst grump crack and join in the fun for a little while. Or how Pitch could terrorise a brave heart with nothing.

“Hmm, that will do,” allowed Cupid sounding just shy of disappointed, “today I will be crafting arrows. You shall be putting them away.”

“In these tubes?”
“Yes, however each tube contains arrows for a specific kind of love. You need to put them away correctly, unless you want me to hit someone with domineering passion when it should be quiet faithfulness. You may start with those,” said Cupid pointing at the dozen already finished arrows. Then he turned to face Jack, “And you. You can stand in the corner and be quiet.”

Jack opened his mouth but Cupid spoke over him, “Or I can eject you from my castle.”

Jamie might’ve doubted Jack’s ability to stay quiet if the frost spirit hadn’t already demonstrated it on the heist. Though he’d been able to communicate with Jamie and hadn’t had a target of his ire present. So actually, Jamie did worry about Jack wearing out his welcome.

Figuring the sooner started the sooner finished, Jamie approached the waiting arrows. They were all exactly the same. The fletching was red, and the shafts unmarked. The arrowheads were rose gold, and spread from a sharp point to a broad base that curled back. Jamie snorted when he realised they were elongated heart shapes.

Since visually he nothing to go on, Jamie guessed he had to use magic. He closed his eyes and reached out his hand, trying to feel the emotions attached to each arrow.

“Careful,” came Cupid’s warning interrupting Jamie’s concentration, “You don’t want to prick yourself, you might fall in love with the first thing you see.”

“He better not look at you then,” sniped Jack.

“Strike one.”

Jamie paused long enough to be sure Jack wasn’t going to push his luck before focusing on the arrows again. It was difficult. They shared the overall feeling of desire. The differences were subtle, one had a tang of possessiveness, another heavy with lust. After he had a sense of each of the arrows, Jamie grabbed one and walked over to the tubes. He took a moment to send a commiserating look to Jack.

Finding the right tube was even worse. Jamie was looking for a matching needle in a dozen haystacks. It took him fifteen minutes to find the correct tube for his first arrow. Even by the twelfth arrow it still took him a few minutes to find where it belonged.

Slipping out of his task induced concentration, Jamie looked back over the room. Jack had followed him, but it seemed Cupid was willing to allow it. Jamie cocked an eyebrow at Jack and the winter spirit just pulled a face back at him.

Cupid was at the cloud, hands plunged inside. He removed his hands and they were cupped around some of the cloud. Cupid folded his hands over one another like he was working plasticine and golden light escaped from between his fingers. The spirit opened his hands and in them lay a still glowing arrowhead.

“So how does this all work?” Jamie couldn’t help but ask. Starting on his next batch of arrow filing.

“The Love there is condensed from the air. All the traces of love expressed in the world. I then take it and recycle it to make more love,” Cupid punctuated this by taking another scoop and pressing another arrowhead, “I like almost all spirits work using reinforcement. We use our power to nurture more of our power in the world and so on. What’s the term, right, positive feedback.”

Cupid didn’t pause his working for this explanation. Though he did tap an arrowhead to his lips when he was searching for the right words. He then moved down the workbench with his tray of freshly minted barbs to where a massive pile of unused rods waited.
“Some spirits are more obvious about this than others. The Sandman sends out his dreamsand which children’s dreams crystallise around. So if all goes well he makes a ‘profit’. I’m not sure about the Easter Bunny but I suspect he’s less direct, probably uses whatever he fosters to water his garden or something.

“Then you get spirits who don’t seem to anything productive at all.”

Jamie shot a pleading look at Jack, along with their hand signal for quiet-I-know-they’re-wrong. Jack huffed but refrained from earning a second strike. Cupid seemed to miss the by-play, moving along to fletch his new arrows.

“So the Love is drawn from the air, by magic I guess,” Jamie mused, “Is that why the castle flies?”

“No,” Cupid corrected, “It flies because my wife wanted a flying castle.”

“Oh, who is your wife?” Jamie prompted, making shushing motions at Jack.

“My wife was of the fair folk. She was a beauty, a minor queen and mostly forgotten. We had an affair, but I didn’t learn I was a father until my son came to court wishing to be knighted.”

“So roman–,” faux-sighed Jack, chin in his hands.

“Strike two,” snapped Cupid.

“Please Jack, behave,” Jamie hissed, before prompting Cupid to continue. Hopefully it would distract their host from Jack.

“It was a more than a little. She was the love of my youth. I sent her messages and promises and competed for her favour. Then I went to war and we fell out of touch. Upon my son’s arrival we had to navigate an adult’s romance.”

“Is that how you became Cupid?” asked Jamie, trying to keep Cupid’s attention on him. Rather than Jack who was pantomiming swooning and hip thrusting. It was very distracting.

“It was the first step. How I caught my predecessor’s attention.”

Cupid added his newly finished arrows to the pile waiting for Jamie to sort. Which was steadily decreasing in size, even with the additions. Jamie did his best to ignore Cupid’s judging gaze and simply put the arrows he had in hand away. He felt out the arrow and vaguely remembered something like it at the far end, near where the lead arrows were kept. Jamie had a theory they were what held the Love back from flooding the room. He was proud to say that at this point he was slowed more by simple movement than sorting the arrows.

“Bravo,” kindly said Cupid, with a soft almost proud smile, “You’re really one of a kind aren’t you?”

“Thanks,” Jamie replied by reflex. Cupid hadn’t shown himself to be one to throw out compliments freely. Jamie then scowled when he saw Jack fake retching behind Cupid. “Jack, if you’re going to act like a child you can go away!”

“Fine,” agreed Jack, and never had Jamie had that icy tone directed at him. The winter spirit turned on his heel and strode out the door.

Jamie dropped the arrows he was holding and ran after Jack. He shouted apologies and pleas for his friend to return but the hall beyond the arsenal was empty. Jamie wanted to chase but an imperious
voice stopped him.

“James Bennett, tonight’s task is not yet finished.”

“I don’t care,” ground out Jamie, too little too late.

“So you want two immortals angry with you then?” prodded Cupid, pressing arrowheads as casually as when Jamie first broached conversation, “Because if you renege on your penance to me, next week’s will be much worse than merely practising empathy. Let Frost’s anger blow out, I’m sure he’ll be waiting when you get back.”

Jamie closed his eyes, inhaled and leant forward to take a step. But he didn’t. Cupid was right. Jack’s anger was proportional, and even then he forgave before any grudge matched the crime. They’d had spats before. Jack would probably give him the cold shoulder for a day but then things would be back to normal.

The mortal boy turned back to Cupid and returned to work. Hours later, he fell asleep staring at a silent phone, eyes burning with unshed angry tears.

I didn’t start this blog to give advice to idiots who knew they’d something stupid and not even interesting. Yeah, so you broke your significant other(s)’s trust. You’re all horrible human beings. And I’m not going to help you.

It’s a simple concept. When you are in a relationship with someone you enter an agreement to consider the effects of your actions on them. Most of the time it is (at least tacitly) assumed this means you’ll be faithful and monogamous. You all are aware of what you’ve done and how it hurt them. So I don’t know what you expect me to say.

I’m not going to tell you whether flowers are better than chocolate. Or what words to use. Frankly, you shouldn’t be surprised that I consider cheating one of the vilest acts you can commit. You betrayed their trust? Why should they forgive you? Edit: 23:45

My apologies. I let personal troubles negatively effect my blogging. I won’t go into details, just that I was the one to emotionally cheat on my best friend. And yes that is a thing.

I still don’t have any real advice for you. It all depends on the nature of your relationship, and how exactly you betrayed. I can only give you generic advice. You need to communicate and re-establish things. You better not reoffend.

Chapter End Notes

Next: Let’s check in with Jack. See how he responds to being told off.

Jack-speak Translations

[*•* o ° ⁹(■■■■○●■■■■)♀*♀ ° ◦ G M 2 u 2 \ \ \ 9(■●♀■)g // //]
[n 1 no. ρ(¬¬(font)) But if I annoi enuff (♀♀) hekk chase me in2 it!]
Good morning to you too
No I know. But if I annoy (him) enough, he'll chase me into it!
[My plan is fool proof]
Angry Jacks make bad choices, but at least this Jack has people he can talk to. Even if he doesn't like some of them or what they have to say.

Also warning: mild amounts of Pitch.

Dear Uncle Jay,

How should you handle a large age gap in a friendship? Like he’s in college and we’re not going to pass the half-plus-seven rule for a while yet. Wait. That makes it sound like I’m a creep. No, no, no. I babysat the kid for gods sake, we’re just friends.

Here’s the problem though. The gap between our ages is shrinking yet there’s a growing gap in our friendship. More and more the things he’s dealing with are foreign to me. Maybe I’m showing my age or just too set in my ways, but I feel less and less relevant. I mean I’m proud of the man he’s grown into but I miss being a “font of wisdom” (if he ever heard me called that he’d be on the ground laughing).

Sometimes I feel like I’m frozen and he’s still moving. It seems the time has come for me to let him go.

Possibly Oldest Parental Substitute

Jack hurtled through the air, pretending the Wind could leave his hurt behind. What it couldn’t he’d lance and expel on some poor ice floe.

He’d been dismissed. Jamie had told him to leave. Jamie never told him to leave. Not really. His believer might suggest it, might say he should go, but Jamie had never wanted Jack gone before. There’d always been hesitation, always been external forces at work. Always been a (not always subtle) dulling of the mortal’s joy when Jack’s departure was imminent. Not this time.

Jack’s phone chirped, distracting him from his inner tirade. He halted his mad rush, pausing above a choppy sea to extract it. Maybe Jamie was asking him to come back.

[I’m sorry, Jack]
[I shouldn’t said that. I prefer you be yourself than have a stick up you ass]
[*your]
[Cupid’s keeping me here, but I’ll see you back at base.]  
[I’m sorry. Love you bro.]

Jack read the empty apologies and excuses. Jamie didn’t want him now. He wasn’t even trying to stand up to Cupid.
[Frost.
[I have confiscated the Busybody’s phone, since it was distracting him from his work. I will return it when he is done.
[Cupid.]

Jack’s anger flared. Now Cupid was sticking his nose in again! Jack pulled his arm back, just like that fateful time atop an Antarctic cliff. Unlike that time, he didn’t abort the movement, following through and throwing. His eyes tracked the glowing screen as it sailed into the night. Until it was a minuscule star crashing into the sea.

Suddenly venting himself on inanimate scenery lost its appeal. The frost spirit didn’t want to deal with this on his own, like he’d had to do so for centuries. The thought of going to North occurred and was immediately dismissed. He wasn’t a child running to daddy. He’d love to have a go at Cupid, but Jamie didn’t want to see him. But there was another involved in this mess.

“Wind! Take me to Olympus!”

Jack’s previous flight had been a scramble to get away. He’d been more focused on what he was escaping than where he might be going. In fact, he didn’t know whether he’d stopped over the North Sea or the North Atlantic. Now he had a target. He flew south, streamlined like a diving falcon, dragging polar winds behind.

He rose over the Alps, but didn’t sacrifice any altitude after. He’d need that for his entrance. The ghost lights of Mt Olympus came into view and he dived. Thunder burst as Jack smashed the sound barrier on his descent. His target was lounging, asleep and defenceless. Jack raised his crook in both hands above his head, arching his spine for extra force. He whipped his hands over and snap-curled on himself, channelling all the momentum of his fall into an overhead axe-like chop. The stone next to Apollo cleaved in two.

“You had me worried there for a sec,” said the Greek, though Jack didn’t hear any nerves in his voice.

Jack tore his gaze from where his crook disappeared into the rock to look at the god. Apollo hadn’t moved, merely opened an eye to give Jack a lazy stink eye. Jack wrenched his crook up and spun it to level it at the old god.

“It’s all your fault!”

“Huh, what is?”

“Cupid punishing Jamie. Thinking he can just steal him away!”

A cold wind blustered around the pair, tossing light hail around. Jack may have refrained at the last microsecond but all his icy fury still writhed above them.

“Hardly,” Apollo scoffed, “the Godspeaker knows well the danger of his dealings. Besides, Cupid has no interest in, like, trapping your first believer in a tower.”

“But you did demand Jamie’s presence for no good reason,” retorted Jack, feigning prodding Apollo with the crook, “You didn’t really need any dating advice, did you?”

“You caught me,” Apollo said, raising his hands in mock surrender, “I thought I’d do him a favour.”

“A favour?” spat Jack, his disgust echoed by a barrage of hail, “You call getting him temporarily enslaved a favour?”
“So young, so short-sighted.”

Jack’s temper surged again, “Young? I’m over three hundred years old!”

“And I’m over three thousand,” countered Apollo, voice like a kid declaring nah-huh-my-shield-is-infinity-plus-one-laser-proof.

The old god lowered a hand to sweep Jack’s crook away from his face. Making Jack’s attempts to stop him look as inconsequential as a spider web stopping a landslide. When Jack attempted to push back, he found himself being spun on his heels. Apollo swung his legs off the sun lounge and stood. He only had an inch on Jack but the air hummed with his power.

“You are young,” continued Apollo, donning a more refined and condescending tone, “and I am surprised at your ignorance. You really should learn how we of the spirit world function. I’m sure your Believer or the Wondersmith would teach you. These are not lessons to be learnt from an enemy.

“Not I think of us as enemies. Otherwise I might do something truly horrible. I’m a god of many talents. It would be terrible if children weren’t allowed to play in the snow because their parents knew they’d get sick.”

“Don’t you dare,” ground out Jack. The stylistic frost on his crook glowing with barely contained power. The cloud above bruised a dark green and the tang of ozone tinged the air. Instigating this mess with Jamie and Cupid was one thing, threatening the children was another crime entirely.

“Oh, don’t be silly, I wouldn’t do that,” said Apollo. His demeanour returned to his earlier air-headedness, and the show of power receded. “Now, I can’t tell you everything. Because, like, ignorance is an important part of this. Like the third son who helps the old crone not knowing she’s a goddess. If he’d known, then…”

Jack found himself lowering his crook in bemusement as Apollo continued to prattle. It didn’t seem the old god needed to breathe between sentences, if there were any actual periods rather than commas. Plus it was difficult to level a weapon at someone whose hands moved so much while they talked.

“…but anyway, even if I was safe from Pitch’s Easter Scare ‘cause, like, I have a primordial mantle like you, I’m still totally thankful for what you and Jamie did. So I wanted to like reward both of you. Plus, the reward also solves a problem no one’s dealing with, so win-win-win!”

“What the hell are you talking about?”

Apollo winked exaggeratedly and chirped, “Spoilers! I mean you could ask me to prophesise but I don’t recommend it. It doesn’t like change the end result any, just confuses the path to it. Anyway, now that you’re not all stormy anymore, what got you all riled up?”

It took a moment for Jack to realise how effectively Apollo’s antics had distracted him from his initial anger. Without Jack actively maintaining it, the storm of his rage had blown itself out. And while he still wasn’t happy with Cupid, Apollo, or Jamie right now, the thought of whipping up that fury again felt like too much effort. In his anger’s absence, Jack felt mostly just fed up with it all. Since there was no point trying to intimidate Apollo anymore, Jack swept the fallen hail together with his staff and flopped into an improv beanbag.

“Jamie sided with Cupid, told me to go away.”

“Go on,” urged Apollo, mirroring Jack and collapsing back onto his sun lounge, “it sounds like you
need to vent. And well, Freud was wrong about a lot of things, but talking about things can help.”

Perhaps Apollo was right. He wouldn’t be the first to tell Jack to talk out his problems rather than throwing glaciers around. The two spirits were even arranged like a psychiatrist with his patient on the chaise longue. Well reversed, since Apollo was on the recliner.

“I’m sorry doctor,” Jack said, using his crook as a crutch to escape his hailbag’s clutches, “but I think I’d rather discuss it with someone else.”

“Fair enough.”

Jack looked over the mess he’d made of Apollo’s terrace and cringed. Here he was, still making a mess of things. The frost sprite twirled his crook vertically and dragged all the fallen hail into the air on the upswing. He tossed it back up into the weakened storm above, he’d herd that over some mountains when he left.

“Jack.”

The winter spirit paused, both at the use of his name and Apollo’s tone. It wasn’t vapid like normal, nor the superior presumption of earlier, but rather quite frank and openly sympathetic.

“Some free advice. You need to ask yourself: who are you most angry with, and why?”

Jack gave a perfunctory nod of thanks for that oh so helpful starting point, and let the wind whip him up into the sky. Jack mused on the irritation known as Cupid while he herded his impulsive snowstorm north (he thought these were the Balkans, maybe). The prick was totally the root of all this. If he hadn’t taken unjust offence at Jamie’s talks then Jamie wouldn’t have been put in a place to reject Jack.

The snowstorm safely dispersed in a more appropriate area, Jack took a moment to consider his options. Apollo was right, he should talk to someone. Which really meant one of the Guardians. He may have made some friends in the spirit world since becoming a Guardian, but Jack didn’t trust them. Not for something like this. In fact, he wouldn’t trust some of the Guardians with personal info. As if he was going to bear his heart to Bunny. North was okay with more “job” related stuff, but this seemed more a talk for Sandy or Tooth.

Jack had wasted Sandy’s time enough recently. Apologising for the heist and hoping to collect clues about what Jamie had been so annoyed by. Without directly asking of course. Jack had promised not to bother Jamie about it but well, if he could work out what it was, then he could help right? Sandy had been terribly unhelpful, though Jack had to respect the guy for keeping Jamie’s secret. The most Jack had been able to get was a very patronising message that boiled down to “I’ll tell you when you’re older”.

So he’d drop by the Tooth Palace instead. The girls were always happy to see him. In fact, Tooth had told off both Jack and the Baby Teeth in the past, repeatedly. Jack for distracting them, and the girls for being distracted.

The trip to Tooth’s took didn’t take too long. There was no need to cross the tropics and the wind swept Jack higher and higher. Over mountains and ranges until he was cruising over the roof of the world. The Himalayas were one of Jack’s favourite places. Not top five ever since he became a Guardian, but still starkly pretty.

It seemed the Tooth Palace of Punjam Hy Loo was closer to India today. Jack swore it moved despite being inside a mountain. Tooth had seemed ignorant of the palace’s geographical uncertainty.
One thing was certain. It was beautiful. The intricate detailing on the spires, the glitter of gold and gems, the little spots of tropical greenery. It wasn’t quiet beauty either, with the whistle of wind through the lattice-work, the ever present flutter of tiny wings, and the high-pitched twittering of many bird-like voices.

Voices that jumped in pitch and volume when they noticed Jack’s arrival. The Wind gently swept him along with the incoming stream of Baby Teeth. A little slower relatively so Jack could say hello to them as they passed him by. Ever since Baby Tooth got her name, the other fairies had been petitioning for names as well. Most went to their “mother” for them, or decided themselves, but a few still came to Jack. Most of them went away after he kept giving them terrible tooth pun names. Still he made a point to learn all their names.

“…Hi Jewel. Ooh nice incisor Melody. Aditi, rocking the bangles. Did you steal a mouse sword, Michael? No, Two-One-Two-by-Four, don’t do that…”

Jack kept up his prattle until he was approaching Tooth’s command centre. Wouldn’t want to interrupt her directions. Okay, Jack totally did, but Tooth was scary when surprised. Better to wait until she was done with her work.

As per usual, Jack drifted over to the little parlour Tooth had set up for her fellow Guardian’s visits. Half cave, half balcony it was liberally furnished with an array of pillows around a low table. Fliers could easily get to it, but for North and Bunny there was a door in the back wall. Leading down to a landing area for the sleigh and solid ground for Bunny’s tunnels. The walls were decorated with hangings commemorating the Guardian’s stories. Jack didn’t think it was much of a likeness of him, but it was nice to be included.

A couple of Baby Teeth flittered around, setting an ornate tea pot to boil and serving a platter of fruit skewers. Jack wasn’t one to turn up free food, and fresh fruit was a nice change from modern processed foods. Jack had just settled in – selecting cushions was an important task – when Tooth fluttered in.

“Jack! It’s so good to see you,” she gushed, her hands completing the tea ritual with the ease of long experience, “I wasn’t expecting you for a couple of weeks, so were around so recently. Oh, your teeth are looking as good as ever. Anyway, things have been busy for me. As usual. I hear you’ve been up to your usual hijinks. Bringing snow and joy and Jack. Why haven’t you interrupted me?”

Jack shrugged and nibbled on his fruit-kebab (shish-fruit? Who knew?). He might have come here to talk but he didn’t really want to spoil the mood.

“Jack, honey, what’s wrong?” asked Tooth, her exuberance falling into a concerned frown.

All the Guardians were pretty good at reading Jack. None were perfect, but each saw some aspects of him clearly. There was some overlap in their perspectives and all together Jack couldn’t hide much. It was a curse and a blessing. Sometimes he wanted to keep things to himself. Bunny especially had a knack for digging those up. Tooth had a knack for looking under whatever mask he had to see any personal troubles.

“Oh right! I found this for you!” Jack said after frantically digging through his hoodie pouch. The enlargement charm was useful but also sometimes a pain.

He pulled out a small piece of metal and flicked it across to Tooth. The coin flipped a couple times before the fairy queen snatched it from the air. It shouldn’t be a surprise that Tooth was a coin collector. She had to be for her job, but she liked to collect coins that were out of circulation or otherwise special. And people thought getting her toothpaste was a smart move. Well Jack knew she
collected a couple of other things – swords, artwork – but coins were easiest for him to acquire.

“A 1943 USA bronze penny, where did you find this?” asked Tooth face lighting up before she frowned, “Wait. Don’t change the subject. Did Cupid do something?”

Jack groaned, flopped backwards and dragged his hands down his face. And yelped because he stabbed himself in the cheek with a skewer. Of course North had shared the news he had decided to play one-man referee to Jamie’s punishment detail. After a beat of silent frustration he sat himself back up.

“It’s stupid,” bit out Jack, then took an aggressive bite of paw paw for emphasis, “Cupid didn’t do anything. Jamie did.”

Tooth made a little sound of understanding and then a little “go on” hand wave.

That was enough. After years of friendship, of Tooth acting as a big sister (which was weird for Jack having been either an only child or the big brother his whole life), of her listening to him and gently helping him understand, it was easy. So Jack told her about Cupid and Jamie, about how his best friend had so easily complied, and how he had sent Jack away.

Tooth didn’t reply immediately, instead taking a moment to pour them each another cup of tea. Jack took his, blew over it to take the edge off and mirrored her sipping. Tooth placed her cup gently on the table and folded her hands in her lap.

“Jack, I’m not sure you need my help. Your friendship with Jamie is your own business. Perhaps it’s time you stepped back a little? It seems that you might be causing more harm than good by supervising Jamie’s meetings with Cupid.”

“I don’t trust him, he’s up to something.”

“Probably yes,” agreed Tooth, not helping Jack’s mood, “Most spirits have agendas, and wouldn’t think Cupid’s would be harmful.”

“He introduced himself by holding a lead arrow to Jamie’s throat,” Jack dryly replied.

“You could get one of the others to go in your stead? Bunny, maybe? He likes Jamie and he’s not too busy right now.”

“Do you think I could really convince Cottontail to do me a favour?”

“For this? Of course he would.”

“Yes, he probably would,” Jack conceded ungracefully, “but next Easter’s gonna be an early one – believe me Bunny has reminded me enough. So he’s already doing prep.”

Tooth listened to Jack’s argument sending a wry look of oh-really over her cup of tea, before saying, “I’m sure he could take a night off. In fact, it probably would do him some good.”

Jack huffed and took an obnoxious slurp of his tea. Sounded like he wasn’t getting out of this.

“Fine. I’ll go ask the Kangaroo to stand in for me.”

Tooth hummed. Jack didn’t like that hum. That was the sound of someone considering a tricky topic. And it probably involved Jack. He saw it pool in Tooth’s amethyst eyes before she set it mentally aside.
“Any other serious business we need to discuss?” prompted Tooth.

Jack passed on what he knew Tooth wanted to discuss. Their few fights had been about the ethics of Jack holding onto his friendship with Jamie, and whether it would impede his believer. Last time had been when Jamie turned eighteen, and Jack knew that Jamie’s graduation marked possibly the final milestone ending childhood. Jack couldn’t even fault Tooth for her concerns. Her parents had had a few beautiful years together but their story was a tragedy.

So instead their discussion moved to more comfortable topics. Interesting tales from their respective good works. What mischief the Baby Teeth had been up too. How many insulting snow-boogie-men Jack’s believers had built. Baby Tooth returned from her shift and added her two cents. Quite literally, with a couple of coins from South America.

Jack departed the Tooth Palace a burden lifted and another recalled. It was selfish really. Jack knew he should loosen his grip on his first light but he just didn’t want too. Jamie probably came the closest to seeing all of him, and what he didn’t was because he understood Jack’s instinct to hide his wounds.

His emotional equilibrium closer to level, Jack set course back to Burgess. He released his worries for the moment and focused on just enjoying the feel on the Wind embracing him. Perhaps he should schedule more Jack time?

Jack fell from the stratosphere into Burgess laughing, just like that fateful Good Friday. Well it was closest to dusk than dawn, and early winter not late, but still. When Jack yelled “Snow day!” high above the town he was struck by déjà vu. The nostalgia made him simply seed the snow storm and retreat to his lake without making his presence further known. He perched in a tree checking the coast was clear before floating down to his lake-side.

Long shadows reached over the ice, striping it dark and rose in the sunset. Jack knew the ice was strong and firm, he ensured it. The frost sprite smiled at the tell-tale scratches left by blades. Sweeping lines spoke of grace while other gouges testified to tricks and mishaps.

Jack was enjoying the quiet of his home when the atmosphere soured. The hairs on the nape of his neck stiffened and Jack whirled staff at the ready. He was rewarded by an unwelcome voice drifting out of the shadows.

“I’m surprised to see you here Frost,” said Pitch, as casual as if he’d been on an evening stroll, “I thought you were a college boy now. You’ve certainly been absent from these parts. It’s enough to make a poor spirit fear he’s been ignored.”

“Are you actually up to anything Pitch? Or just being annoying?”

Jack relaxed a fraction, not fully, keeping his crook ready without running the risk of tiring his arms out. Pitch made move towards attack, though Jack knew from experience the boogieman could strike in a blink.

“Those are hardly mutually exclusive,” observed Pitch, whose gaze was directed at the just rising moon, “But no, overthrowing world order takes quite a lot of preparation. I’m just checking in on the one that got away.” His eyes flicked to Jack but his head didn’t turn, “Though if you want to defect the offer still stands.”

“And my answer is still no.”

“It’s just…” continued Pitch, turning to face Jack, hands behind his back. His voice was soft,
calculated to slip under people’s defences, “movies, books, everything is still about the Big Four not the Big Five. I doubt anyone would notice.”

“I do have believers now, they would.”

“Ah yes, your believers. Tell me, how many of the Burgess Brats still recognise you? Three, I think. The troll ballerina, the fairy menace, and the Last Light.”

Jack contained the urge to flinch at the venom in Pitch’s voice. Growing harsher with each remaining Believer. The words cut twice, but Jack had dealt with them before.

“Not sure where you’re going with this,” Jack said hoping he seemed less affected than he was, “None of that’s news. Yes it hurt but not afraid or angry about it.”

“No,” agreed Pitch, his tone implying the opposite, “Instead you follow your little boy saviour around like a love-sick puppy. It’s really quite nauseating.”

“Sounding more like a creepy lurker than normal there, Pitch.” Snark and insults, they were always useful.

“That’s your fault isn’t it? Trying to shove me back under the bed.”

“Well, this has been lovely. Not. So would you go back to your dank hole of ergh?”

“I’ll leave you to your brooding, since you asked so nicely, Jack,” said Pitch, sketching a maybe tenth of a bow and wandering away from the shore. He paused and turned to say over his shoulder, “But a parting thought, how long do you think the Bennett boy can keep a foot in both worlds before reality costs him a leg?”

The bastard that he was, Pitch disappeared into a shadow before Jack could answer. Not that he had one, not even a witty retort. By now Jack was assured Jamie’s belief wouldn’t falter. It had survived the vagaries of adolescence and the transition to adulthood. But that didn’t make Jamie immune to the dangers. Just made them all the more interested in the mortal. Jack wasn’t afraid of Jamie’s belief fading, but he did fear it might be snuffed out.

Don’t let go just yet. Sorry, POPS, but your friendship is going to need a re-evaluation. My prognosis is optimistic, though. I have some experience in the area, though on the other end. My oldest friend is decades older than me and we’re never going to let that get in our way.

You need to take the step from pseudo-parent/aunt/uncle/authority-figure to partner and equal. Your friend is an adult now, he’s going to need different things from you. Less guidance and more walking hand in hand.

If the things he’s dealing with seem “foreign” then you’ll have to educate yourself. Either from him or with him or elsewhere. Just because you might be older doesn’t mean you have to give up on developing yourself. Yes the world changes, but that’s a problem everyone faces, isn’t it?

Chapter End Notes

Next chapter: Jack's acting squirrelly, and Jamie's next task will be supervised by Bunny instead. His task: to steal something from a dragon. (Cupid may be a kleptomaniac)
The end of semester has come to my university in bizarro world, so next chapter will be in three weeks. After that though I'll be on break so should get back to weekly updates (though I might alternate between this and other things).

In other news, that AU chapter I mentioned in the comments to rockisland1911 has ascended to main plot. Though there will be consequences.
Crouching Taiga, Forgotten Dragon

Chapter Summary

Jamie hasn't been able to speak with Jack for almost a week, the frost spirit has been acting very odd. Who knows what Jack's up to. And Cupid's next task involves a dragon...

Amnesiac soulmates, fire breathing dragons and treasure, fun times for all.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Dear Uncle Jay,

You know ever-present-bro problem? Where it’s really hard to get alone time with your boyfriend because his heterosexual life partner just can’t take a hint? That’s not my problem (I’ve dealt with that in the past, I know what to do (punch the “bro”)).

It’s my boyfriend’s cat.

It’s always with him. And I mean always. We go out, the cat follows. We stay in, the cat joins us on the couch. We go to the bedroom, the cat judges me from atop the wardrobe. If I shut the door on it, it meows and scratches until boyfriend lets it in or just sneaks in some other way. And there’s a decent chance of it interrupting.

I’ve tried just about everything, Positive reinforcement, spritz bottles, bribery, talking with my boyfriend, even talking with it (I’m sure it understands everything I say). Pet blogs haven’t been any help. I’m desperate enough to now be asking relationship bloggers.

Yours hopefully (oh so hopefully),

Pussy Blocked By A Cat

Jamie held his left arm down and a little out in front, bow parallel to the ground. His feet properly placed, toes on his shooting line. There were two arrows left of this set: one in a cone by his foot, the other in hand. He laid his arrow in the rest before nocking it on the string.

The mortal set his sights on the paper target, raised his bow and drew taut against his cheek. His vision narrowed, setting aside the noise of the football practise southeast or scent of some fundraising barbeque. Even the lawn between him and the target only existed to show the wind invisible. In that instant there was only the black, blue, and red rings drawing his focus to the gold.

A beat, an exhale, and release.

“Boo!”

Jamie flinched and messed up the follow-through. His elbow jarred and there was a sting on his cheek. He waited for the thunk as the arrow embedded in the top corner – outside even the white
rings – before lowering his bow and turning one-eighty to face his surprise visitor.

Jack stood there, defensive and uncomfortable, wrapped around and behind his crook. It hurt Jamie to be the target of it. At least the hood wasn’t up.

“Hello Jack, how’s things?”

Reunions had never been awkward when Jack returned in the fall after summer kept them apart. Jamie no longer knew what to do post communication blackout. He now was used to being able to contact Jack whenever (and used to Jack contacting him all the time). It had only been a five days since Jamie mucked things up between them. Five days with no contact. He hadn’t even seen Jack until the day before yesterday. From the way the spirit had rabbited at the prospect of being caught lurking, Jamie wasn’t meant to.

“Pretty good–Scorch! Jamie! You’re bleeding!”

Jack’s tense posture shattered as he sprung forward, letting his crook fall to the ground. One cuff-covered thumb came up to the mortal’s face and the other hand rifled around in his hoodie pouch. The cold touch of well-worn fabric was familiar to Jamie from many a tumble, numbing the small sting of the cut.

“Scorch?” chuckled Jamie.

“Shut it. You want a band-aid? I’ve got dinosaurs or princesses.”

“Dinosaurs,” Jamie decided after a beat, and after another asked again, “But really, scorch?”

“Well I can’t swear for real around the kids,” said Jack, while he unwrapped and placed the plaster, “Gotta censor it. Like with Roo-language or Russian composers.”

Jamie levelled a deadpan look, “So you decided on fire words?”

“It seemed thematically appropriate,” Jack huffed, pocketing the wrappings.

“Gotta say, don’t think it works.”

Jack stepped back from Jamie. He put his right hand on his hip and poked Jamie firmly in the sternum.

“What do you suggest then smarty-pants?”

“Taking the Nightmare Lord’s name in vain?” suggested Jamie, drawing the last arrow and turning away from Jack to reset his stance.

“Probably shouldn’t. That’d go against preventing the kids learning the deets about Pitch.”

“Deets?” taunted Jamie, attempting to look over his left shoulder.

Jack chuckled and sauntered around, kicking up his crook on his way. Jamie rolled his head around to follow. The youngest guardian’s stance before him was closer to his carefree, cocky baseline.

“Retro is radical, dawg.”

Jamie snorted then turned to face the target again and nocked an arrow. He lifted his bow, and drew taut. The twinge from his draw hand pressing the cut on his cheek was a mild surprise, but Jamie didn’t let it phase him. Catching Jack’s sympathetic flinch in the corner of his eye, Jamie put on a
reassuring smile.

“Don’t worry. It’s just a little cut, I’ve had worse.”

He focused on the gold and repeated his beat, exhale, release. The arrow flew true and imbedded itself in the gold on the outer edge of the innermost ring. Jack kept quiet this time, so nothing disturbed his follow-through. Jamie lowered his bow and turned back to Jack. His offer to wrap up and head off to lunch died unspoken.

Jack was gone again.

Jack had reverted to his “look but don’t get caught” policy ever since the brief visit during Jamie’s archery practice. Back to only glimpses and trace evidence. That had been Thursday.

Now it was Saturday night and Cupid would be arriving soon. Jamie was sure Jack would turn up for that. So he was sitting in the courtyard near his dorms. Something closer to neutral territory. No need to trap Jack inside his boxy room. Or wait for Cupid to invade it again.

“G’day nipper. Or evening ah s’pose.”

A six foot, grey furred, anthromorphic rabbit-shaped alien was standing in a snow-cleared circle in front of Jamie. It took the boy a moment to respond. Jamie’s surprise compounded when Jack failed to appear and pester his fellow Guardian.

“Good evening Aster,” said Jamie, “Wasn’t expecting you.”

“Frostbite didn’t say?” Aster’s green eyes skipping through mild surprise to curious frown. The bunny had a catalogue frowns. “Larrikin asked me to sub for this shindig.”

“What?”

“Surprised me too. Wouldn’t think him one tah pass up a chance to make a nuisance of himself.”

“Well he’s been,” began Jamie before cutting himself off. Admitting to friendship issues would be embarrassing. So he corrected himself, “he always thinks himself responsibility. A lot more than you give him credit for.”

“The galah doesn’t need me boosting his ego with saying the obvious,” retorted Bunny, before quirked an eyebrow and asking, “Why d’you think he changed his tune without telling yah?”

“I don’t know,” Jamie said, feigning sarcasm, “maybe he doesn’t want to get into a fight with Cupid again?”

“Speaking of, where’s the pommy bastard?”

A stun grenade answered bunny’s question. Or at least something like that went off beside them. A blinding flash of light, accompanied by an explosion of rose petals and glitter.

“You wound me Bunny!” cried Cupid with more melodrama than even Jack could ham up.

“Doubt it,” replied Bunny dry as the outback, “and yah’d deserve it.”

“And this,” Cupid stage-whispered at Jamie, “from a guy whose Mantle needs mine.”
“Yah’ve got cause and effect mixed up there, y’know.”

“What’s my task for the evening?” Jamie prompted-slash-interrupted. No need to let Cupid rile up a second Guardian.

“Eager are we?” cooed Cupid, slipping away from the Pooka to invade Jamie’s personal space. “Well I can appreciate that kind of attitude. Tonight you’re going to help me fix up a pair of soulmates.”

“Soulmates are real?” half-asked Jamie, tensing in discomfort but refusing to step away. Jamie had some theories about soulmates, and when would he get a better chance for some answers?

“As real as anything,” said Cupid with a shrug, and thankfully stepped away from Jamie. “Time’s a wastin’ so I’ll brief you or whatever. The pair is here on campus, one mortal boy and one immortal dragon.”

“Hitski the Dragon Rider?” interjected Bunny, “I thought he was Nordic?”

“That he is. He’s here on study abroad,” Cupid explained, “So it normally goes something like this. Whenever the mortal dies his soul reincarnates. Then as a child he re-befriends his dragon soulmate, recalls everything, has a fifty-fifty chance of having his life saved at the cost of losing a leg, and they stick together the rest of his life.”

“So what’s wrong?” asked Jamie.

“Hitski’s forgotten Tannlaus,” moaned Cupid failing to his knees in distress, “and now can’t even see his soulmate!”

“I’m guessing my task tonight is to get Hiccup to see the big black dragon that follows him around everywhere?”

“Yes!” joyously shouted Cupid, bouncing to his feet and clapping his hands. “I know you’ve probably tried it before, so you’re going to do it my way this time!”

Cupid’s plan was ridiculous and immoral, but Jamie’s objections were ignored. Even Bunny couldn’t convince the spirit of love the plan was stupid – he was merely the chaperone. The Guardian had at least gained permission to protect Jamie from the inevitable repercussions of this foolhardy venture. In the privacy of his own mind Jamie mused whether this task mapped to Psyche’s third task. He hoped Cupid wouldn’t send him to the Underworld next.

“Best get goin’,” said Bunny, once Cupid disappeared in another burst of light and rose petals.

“Guess so. I have an idea where Hiccup and Toothless will be.”

Jamie started walking towards the edge of campus, and the forest where he liked to practise magic. Jamie flicked his hand and wasn’t surprised at all that most of the dreaded craft-herpes stubbornly stuck to his hand. The sight of a glittery Bunny in Jamie’s peripheral vision kept amusing him a little too much. Not for his own amusement but from imagining Jack’s reaction.

“Ah don’t know why you’re the one laughing,” said Bunny, disturbing their walk’s silence. “Ah know just how to get rid of this. From what ah’ve heard you humans don’t.”

Jamie didn’t respond. He’d already planned to resort to magic before he went to bed anyway.
Hopefully it’d work.

They found Hiccup a stone’s throw from the forest, sitting on the ground leaning against a boulder. The lanky brunet was engrossed in reading something on his tablet and didn’t look up at Jamie’s approach. Curled up beside him like a massive cat was a black lump. Who uncurled their neck to give Jamie a meaningful look and nod towards Bunny as if to say: *And who is this?*

In answer Jamie mouthed, “A friend.”

Jamie had something of a rapport with Toothless. He had approached at first thinking that Hiccup could also see the supernatural. He’d been disappointed that wasn’t the case. So Jamie had added the task getting Hiccup to see the dragon to his laundry list of self-inflicted responsibilities. A long standing piece of unfinished business since Hiccup was amazingly hard-headed.

“Evening Hiccup.”

“Hello Madame Foster,” drawled Hiccup, “No I don’t need to adopt an imaginary friend tonight.”

Said not-so-imaginary friend tucked his head back down and covered his head with his paws.

“You misunderstand, you’ve already been adopted. The big black dragon won’t let you out of his sight,” said Jamie. He crouched down a couple yards from Hiccup and reached out to scratch the dragon’s forehead. Earning a faint purr.

“We’ve been over this before,” said Hiccup, gaze returning to his tablet, “Just because you have creepily complete knowledge of my imaginary childhood friend doesn’t make Toothless real. Just makes me suspect you’re involved in a long running prank with the Thorstons.”

“As I’ve said before believing is seeing,” said Jamie as per their normal conversation. He tried for a self-assured grin but it probably was more of a grimace, “I’ve got a different plan this time. I’m going to play fetch.”

“Okay I’ll bite,” said Hiccup, blanking his tablet’s screen and letting lay in his lap, “Let me find a stick to throw for you.”

“Ha ha, I know just were to get a chewtoy.”

Jamie couldn’t believe what he was actually about to do. Jack was right: Cupid was a kleptomaniac. And he enjoyed making Jamie a thief. First the dreamsand, now an amputee’s prosthetic.

Hiccup’s fake leg made no effort to hide its fakeness. It was a futuristic looking hybrid of a metal peg leg and a Paralympic runner’s blade. It was quite beautiful.

“I’m really sorry about this next bit,” Jamie said with complete sincerity.

Jamie focused his attention on the straps holding the prosthetic on. He couldn’t manually release them without Hiccup stopping him. He’d have to use magic. Jamie didn’t try to hide the glow that appeared around his hand (and eyes if Jack was to be trusted). A split second after Jamie had apologised the golden light surrounded Hiccup’s prosthetic and dragged it into Jamie’s hand.

“Hlandbrenndu!” swore Hiccup (Jamie didn’t speak Icelandic but he recognised a swearword when he heard one).

Hiccup’s angry flailing and ranting in Icelandic was nothing compared to the acidic glare from Toothless, who was making a lie of his name. Especially when accompanied by the hiss of a long
inhale and the blue glow building in his throat. The playful giant kitten was gone, replaced with an angry apex predator. Jamie’s only chance was to give back Hiccup’s leg.

Instead Jamie tossed it over his shoulder. Amplified by his magic it went much further than his casual throw would suggest, landing a hundred yards away near the forest’s edge.

“Éttu það sem úti frýs!”

As Jamie’s arm was lifting, Toothless was pouncing. A decent fraction of a ton of death machine bowled Jamie over. The mortal found himself spreadeagled with a dinner plate sized paw pressing down on his sternum and a glowing maw in front of his face.

“Wait! I’m trying to help!” yelled Jamie at Toothless.

“Megi tröll hafa þína vini!” yelled Hiccup at Jamie.

Toothless inhaled again, and opened his jaws. There was a high pitched whine and sparks in his throat. Jamie had a spare instant to mentally bemoan dying so young, but mostly he was concentrating on conjuring some kind of shield.

There was a neon blue flash and an explosion of fire and dirt.

“Helvíðis brundþró!”

Jamie blinked and ignored the ringing in his ears. He wasn’t dead.

“You’ve made yah point lizard. Go fetch yah master’s leg.”

Jamie looked up to see Bunny deftly aiming Toothless’ fire off to the side. The grey Guardian merely had a paw pinching one of the dragon’s head flaps and the other holding a boomerang under his jaw. Jamie rolled his head to the side to see the two foot wide crater just a foot away. The relieved look Jamie sent Bunny was tempered by disbelief at the casual dragon wrangling.

“Do you have a death wish? You’ve been spending far too much time around Jack,” chided Bunny before turning his attention to the dragon, “If ah let go are you going to collect yah master’s leg, or do something ah won’t like?”

Toothless gave a baleful glare even with his eyes rolled heavenward. But seemed to deflate and hum some kind of acquiescence. After a moment to gauge the dragon’s honesty, Bunny let go. Toothless hissed but charged off to collect the leg nonetheless.

“What the hell was that?” Hiccup demanded.

Toothless returned before Jamie could answer. He dropped the prosthetic in his master’s lap then settled into a ready crouch.

“The Easter Bunny saving my life from your dragon,” deadpanned Jamie, sitting up and rubbing his definitely bruised chest.

“I’ll work out the glowing trick later,” said Hiccup his voice tight, hands frantically accompanying his words, “but you set off a landmine next to your head!”

“No I didn’t.”

“You are crazy. I’m reporting you to campus police and getting a restraining order in the morning. I’m going to put my leg back on and just walk away. Don’t follow me, just,” Hiccup’s rant stopped
abruptly and his expression became disgusted, “Why is my leg slimy?”

“Dragon slobber,” answered Jamie flatly, before sarcastically asking, “Am I going to have ask Toothless to blow something else up for you believe he’s really there?”

A hiss-flash-boom a dozen yards away was Toothless’ affirmative response.

“Djöulsins náriðill!” swore Hiccup, quickly strapping his prosthetic back on while demanding, “Where the hell did you get so many explosives?”

Jamie thought that was rather unfair. Toothless was the one making all the explosions, and Bunny was standing there with a bandolier of grenades. Jamie didn’t have any explosives, he was just friends with some.

“As I said, your dragon. Toothless, remember? Why don’t you tell him where to blow something up? So you know I didn't plant it?”

“Fine! Maybe I will!” huffed Hiccup, pointing into the night, calling Jamie’s bluff, “There, there and there!”

The dragon obliged. Firing three blasts off. One at the still smoking crater, one near where the leg had landed by the forest, and one straight up. The first two more of the same. The third blue bolt streaked upwards and detonated in a ball of orange flame.

“Fireworks?” Hiccup whispered, his eyes focused on the fading light above.

“No, still Toothless. You know your dragon.” Jamie had a hunch, built on Hiccup’s past reticence and Cupid’s earlier briefing. “Who saved your life, even if he didn’t save your leg?”

Both dragon and amnesiac rider flinched at the question. Toothless whined and retreated to curl protectively around his rider. Hiccup looked like he’d been gut punched. His gaze distant and he would’ve fallen backward if Toothless hadn’t been right behind him to lean on.

“Tannlaus,” whispered Hiccup, his hand unconsciously drifting to rest on his dragon’s forehead. Hiccup’s gaze snapped to where his hand rested on black scales. The Icelander threw his arms around Toothless’ neck and started babbling in Icelandic or something. His expression one of wonder as he petted the dragon. Jamie couldn’t tell whether Hiccup was proving the dragon was real to himself, or proving he was there to the dragon.

While they were distracted with their reunion, Jamie climbed to his feet. He looked askance at Bunny and saw a fond expression in the rabbit’s eyes.

“Jamie!” cried Hiccup, dashing over and grabbing Jamie’s forearm in both hands, “Þakka þér! Ég er því miður fyrir allt sem ég sagði við þig.”

“Hiccup, English please.”

“Hvað? Oh right, English. Thank you so much. I’m really sorry about calling you crazy.”

“Apology accepted,” Jamie said, almost laughing now things were as they should be.

“And I’ll even forgive you for stealing my leg,” added Hiccup, his voice similarly light, “but really. What part of stealing a dragon rider’s peg leg seemed like a good idea?”

“Oh it wasn’t my idea…”
I don’t think I’ve answered a relationship question about an animal before, PBBAC. I’m not sure what advice to give you. It might be a weird question but did you talk to both the cat and your boyfriend at the same time? He might be able to “translate” for you.

Have you actually tried to befriend your boyfriend’s cat? You called he or she it throughout your letter.

If that doesn’t work, it sounds like you need to take extreme measures. And I don’t mean drugging the cat, or locking it up in the basement. I mean getting the cat its own friend to play with.

Perhaps your fellow readers will have suggestions in the comments?

Chapter End Notes

Next: Field trip with Cupid.

And we return you to your irregularly scheduled programming. Took me a couple days to get back into the flow of this story. Good news though! Only a couple of chapters and we'll reach The Letter, The Confession, and The Fallout (I can't wait!).

Also I'm running low on inspiration, so if anyone has ridiculous questions for Uncle Jay please put them in the comments. The crazier the better!

**Hiccup's Swearing and Icelandic**

Courtesy of ["May Your Urine Burn!"](https://www.reykjavikgrapvine.com/2015/08/may-your-urine-burn/) an article from The Reykjavík Grapvine. And some Google translate.

“Hlandbrenndu!” - May you burn from your own urine

“Éttu það sem úti frýs!” - You can eat that which freezes outside

“Megi tröll hafa þína vini!” - May trolls steal your friends

“Helvítis brundþró!” - Damned (by hell) cum recepticle

“Djöfülsins náriðill!” - Satanic (by satan) necrophiliac

“Þakka þér! Ég er því miður fyrir allt sem ég sagði við þig.” - Thank you! I'm sorry for everything I said to you.

"Hvað?" - What?
This week it's Thanksgiving. Jamie has studying to do. But also a frost spirit who refuses to let him out of sight due to dragons. Which is problematic when he has a secret that proximity threatens.

Jack isn't happy with Cupid's field trip or his teaching methods.

Dear Uncle Jay,

My boyfriend flips between way too clingy and way too distant. For about a week he won’t be more than a foot from me if he can help it. And if he has his way he’s be constantly holding me. It’s nice. At least for a few days.

Then at some point something in him flips and suddenly I can’t seem to find him. He doesn’t reply to direct contact. So he’ll like things on Facebook but not answer any messages. After a week of that he suddenly reappears – generally by hugging me out of nowhere.

I don’t know what to do. Bringing it up only ever seems to trigger a premature distancing. I don’t want him to disappear on me, and I do my best not to push him away. That also leads to him disappearing on me.

Feeling Like I’m Polarity-Fluctuating Lure Or Pusher

“–never leaving you again! A dragon, Jamie! A dragon! Once I’ve got you bubble wrapped for your own safety I’m going to give Bunny another piece–”

Jamie blinked groggily at the spirit straddling him. He’d been having a nice dream. There’d been ice but it had been nice and warm. And a crimson… dragon? Maybe. Something dangerous but not a danger. The details were slipping through his metaphorical fingers.

Once his brain had booted enough to realise Jack had barged in just to yell at him, Jamie grumbled and rolled over burying his face into his pillow. The noise he made was incomprehensible but conveyed his annoyance perfectly.

“–you almost died! Hey! Look at me when I’m talking to you young man!”

“Wanna sleep,” whined Jamie keeping his face hidden.

“Wanna sleep,” whined Jamie keeping his face hidden.

“Nope,” said Jack, emphasising himself by shaking Jamie with every incredulous syllable, “You gotta tell me why you thought stealing from a dragon was a good idea. I thought you were meant to be the sensible one?”

Jamie squirmed and rolled back over, squinting one eye open to look at Jack. The frost sprite was
still sitting on Jamie, his knees by Jamie’s ribs. It seemed that now Jack wasn’t attempting to shake some sense into his friend, he was now trying to pull out his hair.

“Jack,” Jamie said, his voice mostly cogent even if his face was still mostly asleep, “it’s okay. One, I trusted Bunny to keep me safe, and he did. Two, I know Toothless and Toothless knows me. He wouldn’t hurt me, and he didn’t. Three, it was Cupid’s idea anyway.”

Jack frowned at Jamie’s reasoning. The furrow between his blazing eyes only deepening at points two and three. Jamie hoped Cupid wasn’t following the story of Cupid and Psyche because that would make a trip to the Underworld the next task. And Jack would definitely not like that. Jamie thought perhaps Jack was going to fly off and attempt to slay a dragon or the other feared dragon-like creature. Maybe then Jamie could get some sleep. But no, Jack just crossed his arms defiantly instead.

“I’m definitely not letting you out of my sight again.”

“Fine, whatever. Can I go back to sleep?” Jamie asked even as he started rolling over again between Jack’s legs. Bad line of thought. “Use my ‘puter or something.”

Jack was silent for a moment, then with a simple “No” flopped forward so he was draped over Jamie’s back. Glacier-strong arms braced beside the mortal and icicle fingers gripped his shoulders through the sheets once more. Similarly Jamie had his legs pinned together, preventing their customary sprawl.

“Jack,” said Jamie, drawing the name out into a question itself, “What are you doing?”

“If I’m holding on to you, you can’t go do something reckless,” explained Jack as if this was an eminently sensible course of action.

Jamie couldn’t turn his head to see clearly, but from his peripheral vision and the feel of it, Jack had laid himself so his head rested between Jamie’s shoulder blades.

It was more than kind of intimate. If there wasn’t a couple of blankets between them this would be downright indecent. Jamie was unbelievably grateful he was lying on his stomach, lest Jack notice something amiss. His favourite Guardian just loved making things difficult for him, didn’t he?

“Jack, I’m not going to do anything reckless in my sleep.”

“You jumped off a flying turtle.”

“…Fine,” Jamie conceded, buttfuck AM was not a time he wanted to get into an argument with Jack. “I had wings at the time though.”

Jamie’s sleep was surprisingly peaceful. In a luxurious instant his alarm was jolting him awake, scrambling his dream’s line of thought. Jamie wasn’t able to reach his alarm like normal, he’d knotted himself up in his sheets again. Jamie heard an irritated grumble, and felt his bed shift as someone whacked the snooze button before hugging him again.

Jack. The realisation shocked Jamie to full alertness to find himself still trapped in Jack’s vice-like grip. The frost sprite wouldn’t let him get up, but bit by bit Jamie was able to roll over onto his back. Lifting up his head, Jamie saw that Jack was asleep and grumbling at his cuddle-toy’s movement, though the spirit’s face quickly smoothed into a contented smile. From the tell-tale frozen drool patch on the sheets, Jack had slept most of the night.

Some more wriggling and Jamie was able to free one arm. He reached over and made sure his alarm
was actually off, rather than just snoozing. He didn’t have to be anywhere. It was Sunday morning before Thanksgiving reading week. Still, Jamie had set the alarm with intent of actually getting up when it went off.

“Jack, wake up,” ordered Jamie, poking his acquired bed mate.

“No,” grouched Jack, curling himself tighter and away from Jamie’s poking.

The result was Jack’s head ending up more on Jamie’s belly than his sternum. Well, at least Jamie’s arms were now both free. Resigned to an overly possessive Jack, the mortal fished around for his phone and started browsing.

“A dragon Jamie.”

Jamie lowered his phone and levelled a deadpan scowl at Jack, who returned it from his position propped on Jamie’s belly.

“Can I go to the toilet before we resume this argument?”

After a moment Jack huffed, “Permission granted,” and all but threw himself off Jamie’s bed.

Jamie might have permission from Jack – whether he needed it or not – but the frost spirit wasn’t leaving him alone. Jamie was going to be accompanied on his walk through his dorm by a brooding snow cloud. Which he might be about to set off.

“I didn’t get to say it the other day,” said Jamie, just before he opened the door to leave his room, “but I’m really sorry about this mess with Cupid. Especially for snapping at you in his armoury.”

“I know you are,” Jack replied, his tone and body language conveying a confusing mix of emotions – hurt, relief, anger, joy, and more. “I got your texts before Cupid stole your phone. I’m not exactly furious about it anymore. Still angry but it’s more…” Jack trailed off and scrunched his nose in thought, “miffed? Yeah, miffed. Hey weren’t we going somewhere?”

Jamie frowned slightly at the easy topic change, but went along with it. He hadn’t been lying about needing to postpone that argument. The corridors of his dorm were deserted allowing Jack walk beside him. Jamie doubted his dorm mates had been waylaid by folkloric spirits though. Their walk side by side was quiet only for a little while before Jack resumed talking.

“Just let me vent for a moment. I was hurt when you sent me away. Not because you did – sometimes I need to be told to go do my job. I probably hang around you too much. But it was the first time you weren’t unhappy to see me go. No. Shush, no talkie,” said Jack, pressing a finger to Jamie’s lips. “You wouldn’t want to look crazy if someone comes by. But yeah, spooky fun-Guardian joy-senses tell me when something makes you unhappy.

“I’m angry about the dragon stuff too. I still can’t believe you’d risk yourself like that. Jamie I shouldn’t have to say this: the threat of my retribution doesn’t actually give you magical protection. I know you’re never going to stop believing but I also know how easily you could be taken from me. So please don’t make it easier.”

Jamie grabbed Jack’s hand and pulled him out of the hall and into the bathroom. Not the most private place but at least a little bit less public. He nudged the door shut with a foot as he pulled Jack into a hug. Jamie was sure the frost sprite needed it. Judging by the crushing return squeeze he was right.

“I promise to play it safe,” Jamie said earnestly, simply holding for a minute before teasing, “Mister Let’s-go-for-a-sled-ride-through-traffic.”
“Don’t judge me by my pre-Guardian self.”

“I don’t know. It wasn’t a Guardian who shored up my belief.”

With that Jamie slipped out of the hug and retreated to a stall to get on with the whole purpose of this little walk. Not Jack was going to let a piece of plywood or societal niceties stop him getting the last word.

“It totally was. I’d been summoned by Manny, fought Pitch, got my memories, and everything by then.”

“So what happened to your phone anyway?” asked Jamie as he washed his hands. The question had been bugging him the whole communication blackout.

Jack’s reflection in the mirror was sheepish as he replied, “I threw it in the North Atlantic.”

“Sorry, what?”

“I got your texts, and then Cupid’s, and I threw it in the ocean.”

Jamie didn’t answer immediately, just quirking an eyebrow. The old hand driers were phenomenally loud. Once the miniature jet engine had half dried his hands, Jamie spoke, “It’s been a week, I’m surprised you haven’t gotten a new phone yet. Your followers have been very worried about you. I may have had to log in and put them at ease.”

“Jamie you didn’t! Didn’t you read the terms and conditions? The penalty for that is your first born son!”

That Sunday morning set the tone for the week. Jack didn’t leave Jamie alone – barely let him out of his sight. He refused to collect a new phone from North. Instead he called in a favour of Baby Tooth to deliver it. Their conversations mostly frivolous joking but Sunday morning’s arguments did recur. Even worse, Jamie was still shedding glitter on Thursday morning.

It was lucky it was dead week, since Jack wasn’t disrupting any of Jamie’s classes. However the mortal had couple of essays to finish and exams to prep for. Putting the frost sprite between the rock of refusing to leave and the hard place of being bored out of his mind. Even with the world wide web and a dozen games in his hand, Jack eventually would crack. Suffice to say, his coping methods always ruined Jamie’s revision momentum.

Jamie celebrated Thanksgiving – as much as you could when you were stuck at college – in the dorm cafeteria with his fellow detainees. And a mostly-invisible guest. The decorations were cheerfully dodgy streamers and paper cut-outs, evidence of everyone’s end of term crunch. The kitchen had outdone themselves in consolation for being trapped, filling the air with the heady aromas of turkey and pumpkin.

“I’m thankful for friends and family near and far,” Jamie offered when it was his turn. The sentiment was sincere as it was cliché. His gaze was directed up and to the left, apparently distant but in reality pointed at Jack. Jamie then grinned the mischievous smirk he learnt from Jack and said, “And for the snowball fights of course!”

Jamie spent most of the evening hanging around Tucker. The techwiz could see Jack and was still trying to understand how the spirit differed from the ghosts he’d grown up with. Jamie ended up having to referee an eating competition between the pair. Tucker could put away a scary amount of turkey. Jack was forever the child of a lean winter so Jamie wasn’t surprised he lost. Though the mortal wasn’t sure where all the food Jack ate went.
Before turning in, he Skyped back home, wishing his mom and Sophie the best. As well as complaining about not making home, and smiling at the thought of being home for Christmas soon. Jack was easily dragged into the call, to which Jamie’s mom gushed that Jamie wasn’t alone for such an important night. Jamie managed to divert his embarrassment (he knew his mom meant more than what she said) to a cough.

“Thank you Jamie.”

Jamie tugged his head through his pj top to look curiously at Jack, “For what?” He hadn’t done anything special.

“For everything. It’s nice to have somewhere to go for Thanksgiving. The others…”

Jamie understood what Jack meant. None of the other Guardians were American, and all were older than Thanksgiving itself. North might be more aware of it, but it was also the approximately T-minus one month mark for Christmas. As a kid Jamie had been selfishly glad, because it meant Jack could visit for every Thanksgiving. He stepped over and pulled Jack into a hug.

“You heard mom, you’re family now. If she could get away with it she’d adopt you,” lied Jamie. About the adoption that is, he was pretty sure his mom wanted Jack as a son-in-law at this point. “Thank you for sticking around.”

Jack laughed before pushing their hug till they were arms’ length apart, hands on each other’s shoulders.

“I did say I wasn’t letting you out of my sight.”

Jamie was honestly surprised on Saturday afternoon when Cupid appeared in a flash of rose petals. He’d somehow, for just a moment, forgotten about this mess. Jack immediately took up a defensive position in front of Jamie and got the first word out.

“There better not be any dragons this time,” growled Jack.

Cupid laughed, shook his red-and-pink head, and raised his hands in a placating gesture. A move undermined by the red lacquered and shiny golden detailed bow in his left hand. Fortunately all his arrows were in the quiver at his hip.

“No, no,” said Cupid for once not blatantly ignoring Jack, “Today I’m taking Busybody on the road. Are you joining us? The Rabbit was much more agreeable.”

“Yes I will be,” Jack answered voice cold and harsh, “Since the Rabbit let you order Jamie to steal from a dragon.”

“Bunny called you a bastard and worse multiple times,” Jamie dryly added.

“Pah, he’s Australian, their insults are compliments,” said Cupid, visibly waving away the concern. The spirit of love glanced around Jamie’s room, a smile breaking out when he spotted Jamie’s bow in the corner. He bounced over to it, grabbed it, and back to hand it to Jamie. “You’re going to need that tonight.”

Jamie accepted his bow with only a questioning hum, noting it had been braced, with what looked like a red laser between the tips. A curious poke with a pinky revealed it was merely warm to the touch and thrummed like a normal string.

“And why does my Believer need a weapon?” demanded Jack, “Are you putting him in danger
again?"

“Of course not! I just thought I’d reward him with something a little more fun.”

Jamie didn’t get to question why or how his punishment task was going to be a reward, because Cupid snapped his fingers. Dragging Jamie and Jack back into the rose petal whirlwind of nausea.


They had been dumped in a very well-loved looking urban park. A small patch of free space with a battered playground in one corner and a half-basketball court in the other. Winter hadn’t yet left more than a thin coating of grey snow on the ground, with bits of green sticking up here and there.

“Minion,” snapped Cupid, slapping a rose gold tipped arrow into Jamie’s hand, “Be careful with this. See that man with the three little girls pestering him?”

“Wearing a lab coat in public?” Jack asked, “Who does that?”

“The Professor does, obviously,” snarked Cupid before equipping himself with his own bow and arrow. “Now I need to you to pin the professor. I’ll get the love interest when she comes round the corner in a minute.”

“Do you normally have to get both of a pair at once?” asked Jamie, while he placed his feet correctly. The Professor was sitting on a bench, just watching his daughters – dressed in pink, blue, and green – play.

“No. But it does make the arrows more effective. Get ready, here she comes.”

Jamie mentally shelved his curiosity and placed the arrow on the rest. He could feel the magic of the arrow as an urge to share troubles and solve them together. He nocked the red-fletched butt to the string, and waited for Cupid’s order.

“Draw!” commanded Cupid, as if he had an army at his command rather than one civilian.

Nevertheless Jamie raised his bow and drew in one fluid motion. The magic-laser-string hummed under his fingers, warming them with anticipation. Draw hand by his cheek he sighted his target. He’d never shot a person before. Jamie had to keep reminding himself the arrow was magic. The man wouldn’t even know he’d been hit.

“Loose!”

Cupid’s order came just as Jamie went to take a breath. He didn’t dare delay to exhale so he had to hitch his inhale. Luckily the deviation from his training didn’t cause him injury like Jack’s surprise visit.

The arrow streaked towards its target, and Jamie caught the movement of a second red and gold blur before rose petals drowned out his vision. They cleared to reveal abundant green foliage and a muggy atmosphere. Jamie took a wild guess and figured they were somewhere in the South. Probably edging to the south-west since the sun had jumped back an hour.

“I was afraid of this,” moaned Cupid, “You shoot like an unblooded lord!”

Jamie wasn’t quite sure how to take that. Cupid obviously meant it as an insult, but Jamie had no wish to be a lord let alone blooded. He already knew he was going to call in some favours to learn
what happened to the Professor. Plus dream therapy about firing on a fellow mortal. Cupid took his bemused silence for leave to speak.

“You take soooo looonnng,” whined Cupid, “You practise that formal style. It’s not archery, it’s play-acting.”

Jamie didn’t argue. It was true, his style of archery was as far from the real thing as Olympic fencing was from real swordplay.

“Jamie’s a state champion!”

“I’m sure,” Cupid patronised Jack, before lecturing Jamie, “Now let me show you how it’s done. What you should be doing is resting the arrow on the same side of the bow as your draw hand. That way you don’t have fumble with crossing over. Plus with a little practise you can hold your arrows in your bow hand or even your draw hand.”

While Cupid was talking he’d hung his bow in midair and sidled around behind Jamie. Not directly, more so the love spirit’s midline followed down the mortal’s right side. A fact Jamie was uncomfortably aware of as the Cupid pressed closer to reach around. He felt heat against his back, a hand on his left elbow and another grasping his right wrist.

“You don’t need to turn your bow so far,” said Cupid, his breath tickling Jamie’s ear, “just a little to the left, like so. You nock the same, only on the right.”

“What,” interrupted Jack’s choked voice, “Are you doing?”

“Giving a lesson, what does it look like? Now our target will be here in just a second,” said Cupid, stepping away and plucking his bow from its skyhook. “You’ve got the dopey looking deputy. While I’ll duck inside and shoot the vampire.”

“Vampire?” yelped Jack.

“Yes, dangerous creature of the night,” reassured Cupid with copious sarcasm and an eye roll, “See the boy will be perfectly safe out here in the sun. Busybody, draw, and when the arrow thrums release. That’ll time things nicely.”

With that self-assured instruction Cupid waltzed off to a nearby house. On the porch he turned back, frowned and pointedly drew his bow. Jamie quickly mimicked him and looked for the target. Cupid gave a cheeky wave and stepped backwards through the wooden door. Jamie spotted a young blond police officer and dopey described him pretty well.

“I can’t believe the Pink Peacock did that,” grumbled Jack, “He didn’t need to invade your personal space like that!”

Before Jamie could reply the arrow vibrated under his fingers. He hoped he’d properly adjusted for placing the arrow on the reverse side. He loosed the arrow and watched it sail through the air. The red streak lodged itself in the officer’s left shoulder rather than middle where Jamie had aimed. He’d need to practise this new archery style.

“Jack, I can’t make a fuss about everything Cupid does,” apologised Jamie, “Or he’ll never consider my ‘punishment’ complete.”

The officer rubbed the metaphorical wound absently, and his hand passed through the shaft. He frowned and starting walking towards the house Cupid had entered. Just as the blond stepped up on to the porch, the spirit ghosted through the door and flounced over to his accomplices.
“Gotta keep moving, darlings!”

So continued the field trip. Cupid whisked them from place to place, all over the world. Jamie got to practise the new form, with Cupid eagerly giving hands-on advice. Turned out the first was beginner’s luck because Jamie did miss a several of the next dozen. He steadily improved until he wasn’t missing outright, just rarely getting where on the target he intended. Jamie tried to keep things civil by distracting Cupid with technical questions.

“The myths say these arrows cause uncontrollable lust. Does pairing them stop that?”

“The raw material – The Love – causes that, but when I press the arrowheads I temper them. The more golden an arrow the more defined the emotion.”

It worked pretty well. Cupid was delighted to expound on his speciality. Jack was delighted since the explanations didn’t involve Cupid infringing Jamie’s personal space.

“And the lead arrows. Do they turn all attraction to disgust, or are the stories wrong about that too?”

“I don’t think I could do that. It’d be like the Sandman only giving someone nightmares,” Cupid actually laughed at the idea. His response was a little rambling and broken over several stops along their way. The question seemed to weigh on Cupid’s mind because a couple of times he returned to it unprompted.

“A lead arrow wounds deeply, but it works on attraction felt from within or without at the time. It doesn’t actually break someone’s heart.

“Daphne would’ve been fine if she’d waited for her pursuer to get bored and look for a new conquest. A little her time and she’d recover.

“I suppose multiple lead arrows might suffice. But what would the second have to work on if the first poisons all the desire?

“Or do lead arrows reverse the polarity? One arrow for hate, two arrows love again…”

Jack seemed torn with all of this. Jamie guessed since on one hand Cupid was distracted from manhandling his Believer, but on the other the recurring subject was the initial threat levelled at his Believer.

Fortunately there weren’t any more supernatural targets to worry Jack. The rest of Cupid’s hit list were all mere mortals, from preteen to nonagenarian. Soon enough (though maybe not for Jack) Cupid whirled them back to Jamie’s dorm.

“That was fun! We should do it again sometime,” gushed Cupid. He paused with hand raised to snap of his fingers. The love spirit winked and blew a kiss at Jamie, snapping his fingers and disappearing before either boy could react.

“Gah,” gagged Jack, “he’s such a dick.”

Sounds like you’re in a bit of bind, FLIP-FLOP. The direct approach does seem to work, so we’re going to have to get indirect-romantic. Seems even when he’s away he’s listening to you. You need to talk to him, even when he’s “away”.

I can only guess what has him doing this, but it sounds like someone hurt him in the past. Don’t pry, just let him know you’re there to listen. This is only speculation on very sparse information, but oh use
a food metaphor, it sounds like he gorges himself on you, fearing that it’s going to be taken away from him. At the first sign he’s overstepped the line, he flees possibly fearing some punishment. I don’t think any negative tactic will work here, and he might read more neutral acts as negative.

My advice is to try treating it like he has gone a business trip or something. Don’t try to charm him into returning early, just make it obvious you’ll be there waiting for him when he does. I would however privately message him your relationship concerns as clearly as possible. Not with any questions, just your side of the story.

Lastly, do you hold him as tightly when he returns? He might not be so clingy if he feels he’s not the only one physically trying to reach out. If you have a chance, reach out first, and direct him to a more tenably comfortable closeness.

PS. I’m impressed by the name. Nicely done.

Chapter End Notes

Next: Jack unloads on an unexpected sounding board, has an epiphany, and sends a letter.

Not entirely happy with this. Especially the pacing at the end. The boys decided to pull a chapter 5 on me again, leaving little room to include some necessary world-building. Pushing the appearance of another Nordic back a couple of chapters. Oh well. Two TV shows referenced in this, but I’m not going to tag them since they won’t be coming back.

Still looking for questions for "Uncle Jay". The more ridiculous the better actually. I don't need them just yet, though. If you don't want to attach your name to them here, you can ask anon on my tumblr: Luthen, Fanboy.
Jack is finally ordered to get back to his Guardian duties: shepherding blizzards, bringing joy, being confronted by girls. Really, what’s with all the questions? He doesn’t know the answers, but he knows who to ask.

Dear Uncle Jay,

First off. Don’t laugh. But I think I might be in a long distance relationship. It’s with my best friend since childhood. We were thick as thieves, and ours was the only friendship that survived through to high school graduation. He went to college (he’s a hunky genius), and I went straight to work (I’m not hard work and deadlines).

The job I got is great but I travel a lot. So he’s my main human contact besides my coworkers (who work separate routes). We text and call pretty much every day, and I’ve only just realised* what he means to me. I’m not going to settle down any time soon, so what should I do? Leave things be, or make a move?

There’s a couple of further complications. I don’t know if he wants something more, or if any advance on my part would be unwelcome. Mutual friends (and his sister) say yes, but I’m unsure. If he wanted something more, he would’ve said something right?

And to make things worse, I have a (justified) reputation as a prankster. So if I do ask, he might think I’m joking. And the situation is silly enough I wouldn’t blame him.

So, Uncle Jay, what do you suggest?

Over Longing And Needing Direction

*I did have some help, both good (mutual friends) and bad (a jerk who were getting too touchie).

“Jack, two things.”

The frost spirit lifted his gaze from his new time-sink app and over to his first light. Jamie was studying again, this time lying on his belly along his bed, knees bent and shins up the wall for space, books and tablet spread around his head. Jack was sitting crossways, his back against the other wall and his legs resting on the back of Jamie’s thighs.

Jamie had to awkwardly twist his torso and neck to look back at Jack, but he was smiling nonetheless. Not a broad grin of pure delight, but something softer, tinged with resigned annoyance. Jack knew what was coming, he could feel the mortal’s joy souring in a familiar way.

“One, I can’t feel my legs anymore. Two, it’s been ten days. You really need to get back to your job.”
Jack huffed but pushed off the bed. He severed gravity’s tie to float over Jamie, then dropped to the floor at the foot of the bed. No need to give Jamie neck cramp.

“No I don’t.”

“Jack, there haven’t been any snowdays for a week, there’s a storm in Russia that is getting a little strong, and Bunny’s threatened you with The Sack. Again.”

Jack was ready for the first two but not the third. He’d been meditating occasionally to exert what little long distance control he had, so things weren’t as bad as Jamie might think. But Bunny and The Sack. They were threats Jack couldn’t ignore.

“How did he manage that?” asked Jack, playing for time. If he iced the floor Bunny couldn’t burrow in right?

“He got Sophie to text me, since you weren’t answering your phone,” answered Jamie, before reading off his phone in a decent mimicry of Bunny’s accent, “Quote ‘You tell that bludger if he doesn’t stop,’ Jamie paused, frowning at the screen and clearing his throat, ‘shacking up and do his job, I’m going to come round, shove him in a tuckerbag, and feed him to the sharks’.”

Jack sighed. He hated it when Jamie had to bring him back to reality. And yes the folkloric spirit was aware how stupid that sounded. Still, he did have a calling to answer – not a job, he was the Spirit of Fun, he didn’t work.

With another more forceful and dramatic sigh, Jack stood. He bent over and booped Jamie on the nose. Earning a very unimpressed look. Jack ignored it to saunter over to the door to collect his crook from the coat hook. No longer pinned down, Jamie rolled off the bed to stand himself.

“Forty-eight hours,” said Jamie, “then it’ll be Friday night and I’ll be done with my exams. That should be enough time for you to catch up right?”

“I guess.”

“Oh don’t be such a grump,” the boy ordered, pulling the toggles of Jack’s hoodie even, laughter colouring the edge of his words, providing the sweet to his bittersweet mood, “I might start thinking you’re Bunny.”

“I would never!” gasped Jack, pressing his free hand to his chest in mock outrage.

“I know,” Jamie said pulling Jack into a hug. “Have fun. For me while I’m trapped here cramming biology and meteorology.”

Jack could only return the hug one-armed, since Jamie had pinned the other between them. The spirit spent the moment soaking in the mortal’s not-quite-joy. Turning it over, feeling the joy of friendship and the sadness at parting. And something under that, like an imagined happiness. Jack frowned, he’d have to work out how to make that happen. Jamie deserved to be happy. The spirit gave the mortal a squeeze before reluctantly extracting himself. He shuffled over to the window and unlocked it – Jack had locked it himself when he decided to stick around. He hopped up to sit on the sill.

“I promise to keep you in the loop,” said Jack. He snapped a salute and tipped backwards out the window. There was only one place he’d start his ‘return to work’ if he had any choice. “Wind, take me to Burgess!”

The Wind yanked Jack skywards, shrieking its glee in his ears. Their reunion was a little rough after over a week of Jack refusing to travel more than few minutes from Jamie’s campus. Still in the
tumbling, Jack did manage to wave at a certain brunette leaning out his window.

Once the buildings had shrunk into a single blob of light, Jack pulled out his phone. He braced himself for the task of wading through his notifications. He’d completely ignored them for days now. Jack did grin at the first message though.

[Have fun! Miss you already.]

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The cross-country trip took no time at all. Barely enough to scan the messages from the few people who had his number – the Guardians and his best Believers. Nothing unexpected, just a bunch wondering what he was up to. Okay, and one or two worried that he was in trouble. He sent off mass text before diving into Burgess. Even going easy on the emoji – by his standards.

[\( \backslash \left( ^{\lower 2pt \bigwedge} \div ^{\bigwedge} \right) \backslash ^{\big/} \text{ Fear not friends! Frost is bringing the Fun!} \backslash \left( ^{\big\wedge} \bigwedge \wedge \big\wedge \right) \backslash \)]

Jack landed at his lake and was pleasantly surprised to have a welcoming committee. It was a little rough though. No sooner had Jack touched down than a small body bowled him over.

“Jack! Where have you been!?” yelled the little girl. She slugged him in the arm, hitting him far harder than her size belied, “You promised a snowday for Monday!”

“Sorry Fairycake. I was hanging out with Jamie.”

The girl stopped hitting him, but didn’t get off him. Instead crossing her arms and huffing. Her face was an irritated mix of a pout and a scowl. If it weren’t for the expression (or the punch) you wouldn’t guess she was Cupcake’s younger sister. Fairycake had a much slighter build and long red hair poured out from under her tiara-accessorised beanie. Her wardrobe was much less mix-and-match than Cupcake’s had been at the same age. Same combat boots though.

“Is Jamie your girlfriend?” came a third, quiet voice.

“No,” snapped Fairycake over her shoulder, “Jamie is a boy.”

“Is Jamie your boyfriend then?” the voice asked a little confidently.

Jack sat up, pulling Fairycake into a hug as he looked over the girl’s shoulder at what must be a new Believer. The boy had a similar nervous energy to Monty, though his colouring was such a blend Jack wouldn’t dare guess his family’s background.

“No, he’s my best friend. You’ve heard about the Nightmare of Easter?” asked Jack, thankful his hug was protecting him from Fairycake’s squirming, at the boy’s nod Jack continued, “Jamie is the Last Light from that story. I’m Jack, what’s your name?”

“Jamal.”

“Hey! Another J!” said Jack, holding out his hand for a high five, “Nice to meet a new friend.”

Jamal hesitated for a moment – a common enough thing when a kid first meets a spirit – but stepped forward and completed the high five. Jack grinned and jumped to his feet, spooking Fairycake into a koala bear grip.

“So what do you guys want to do?” Jack asked Jamal mostly.

The boy looked down at his interlaced fingers and spoke to them, “Can we make snowmen like
Calvin does?"

“And make them move!” Fairycake added, releasing her grip on Jack to go and start collecting snow.

“Snowmen it is!” agreed Jack, sweeping his crook to multiply the snow on the ground. “Did you know, Calvin’s a real guy? An adult now, but he doesn’t let that stop him.”

After some lively debate they settled on a scene with poor half-sized snowpeople beach goers caught in a three-way monster mash. Sharknado swirling in over the pond (Jack even reworked the ice for effect), Meka-Drakula summoning zombies from the snow, and an eight-foot tall Grizzly-antula pouncing from the forest. It was truly a work of art.

Jack started snapping photos, ready for posting to his various accounts. Well not the ones with the kids faces, of course. And he’d wait until he’d got them home before drafting his post. While Fairycake and Jamal started tossing civilian heads at one another, he flicked through his haul and sent half a dozen to Jamie.

[✧٩•̀̀(๑̀◡́๑)و✧]

[Good to see you’re up to your old tricks.
[10/10 would admire as study break again.]
[行政部门！！((・ω・))ノ☆τ₀’°☆’°)/ Get bk 2 werk!]
[…]
[I didn’t think the Guardian of Fun was capable of saying that]

“So, this is why you’re late for dinner.”

Jack looked up from his phone, surprised at the sudden guilt he felt. A feeling mirrored by the expressions and accusatory fingers of the kids.

Casually leaning on shoulder-to-shoulder with Meka-Drakula, her arms crossed and wearing a sardonic expression was Cupcake. Even if all the snow monsters were real, she’d still be the scarier in Jack’s opinion. The girl he’d once known had grown up and up, into a statuesque woman. She didn’t run around in a tutu anymore, but instead the hoodie of her dance company. Jack’s knowledge that she understood how to wring ever last iota of performance out of her body made her all the more intimidating.

“Hiya Cupcake! My bad I meant to get them home earlier, I lost track of time,” Jack attempted to placate her, gesturing at the scene around them, “Pretty impressive though, right?”

Cupcake said nothing for a moment, before her disapproving mask cracked. She doubled over laughing, and Jack thought he heard “your face!” in between laughs. Cupcake regained her composure after a minute. She grabbed Fairycake’s hand and started walking back to town. Jamal and Jack exchanged a bemused look and scurried after her.

[Cupcake is beta and in too scared to text
[*here *Im *too]

[Jack, whatever you did you probably deserve it.
[I asked her to go easy on you.]

Judging by the smirk Cupcake threw over her shoulder after her phone pinged, she wasn’t going to comply.
Fairycake recounted – in detail – her day, focusing on introducing Jamal to Jack. Cupcake nodded along, though she barked a laugh when she heard about Jamal’s initial questions. When they reached the apartment block, Cupcake shooed the kids in and turned to Jack.


“Yes ma’am,” answered Jack with a salute.

With his playmates confiscated and the sun setting on his home town, Jack took to the skies again.  

[ Cupcake’s making m w8 (‘ ■ _ ■ ’) ]

[ That’s rough buddy. ]

He whiled away the time with some winter-fun-meditation, laying some groundwork for snowdays across North America, and dropping in on a couple of west coast towns.

[ (●●● ● ●● ) Tims up ]

[ Stay strong. Good luck. ]

When he returned to Burgess he might have been away closer to several hours than just a few. Cupcake was still waiting with her window unlocked though. She ushered him silently and gestured him to sit on the bed. Jack imagined a table with a spotlight would be more appropriate to Cupcake’s mood for interrogation.

“Jack, you promised my sister a snowday Monday for a five-day weekend. What happened?”

“I was with Jamie,” offered Jack, feeling that wasn’t going to cut it.

It was unfair that Cupcake had mastered Sandy’s vast arsenal of meaningful looks. Not that she limited her response to a mere silent Not good enough private.

“And you couldn’t escape for a couple of hours? You almost ruined your chances of her getting Jamal to believe in you.”

Jack smothered a flinch, he didn’t have Believers to spare. Not that he would ever take his Believers for granted.

“I’ll make it up to her and Jamal. But has Jamie told you about this fiasco with Cupid? And how he baited a dragon the week before last? He needs someone watching over him.”

Jack could see Cupcake marshalling her argument, pursing her lips and frowning slightly. Before she relaxed into a brilliant poker-face. Jack did not like this, that non-expression never meant anything good.

“Can we not?” pleaded Jack, flopping backwards to stare at the ceiling, “Jamie’s argued me to death about it all week. We worked it out.”

“Fine.”

Jack was enjoying a moment of silence before heading back out to complete his duties. Then Cupcake ruined it by teasing:

“Jamie isn’t your boyfriend?”
“No.”

“You don’t send your Jim-Jam-Benne-Boy lovey-dovey messages morning and night?”

“Cupcake!” yelped Jack, catapulting into an upright sitting position. What right did she have to critique his nicknaming when she refused to acknowledge her real name?

“I mean, he texted me on your behalf pretty soon after I arrived,” she continued heedless of his attempt to interrupt, “And you’ve never had a spontaneous picnic lunch with him?”

By now Jack was looming over the smug mortal girl. He would bring his crook to bear but the confines of room prevented that. Cupcake just slouched, radiating indifference. Though her eye twitched when Jack dared use a forbidden name.

“Sascha, stop!”

“Don’t call me that,” she snapped, before poking him, “You deny sleeping in his bed for the last week and a half?

“I have work to do,” ground out Jack, stomping to the window and throwing himself through it.

Jack didn’t get straight to work. It might be a revelation, but Guardian of Fun duties were hard to complete with your feathers ruffled. So instead he soared over to his lake, for some old fashioned Ranting-At-The-Moon. The B-movie tableau was an unusual background, but the top of Sharknado made for a good enough thinking spot.

“I still don’t know if you can hear me when I talk to you, and right now I kinda hope you can’t,” said Jack, dropping to recline against a great white and stare at the Moon, “Cupcake seems to think Jamie and I are boyfriends. Which is ridiculous.

“I mean sure, I do all of that stuff she said, but that doesn’t mean we’re dating. Sure I text Jamie a lot but that’s cause he replies more than anyone else. No one else sends me good morning messages. What’s the point in bugging Bunny if he’s not gonna reply?

“And nicknames? I like nicknaming. I’m pretty sure I have more nicknames for Bunny anyway. Like,” Jack mused, finger counting along, “Cottontail, Peter, Roo, Bouncer, Thumper, Kanga, Convict, Grumpy-puss, Ass-ter, that’s ten. And there’s more where that came from. What do I call Jamie? Jay, Jim-Jam, Jim Jim, Bro, Apprentice, Buddy, Kiddo, that’s seven.” And the one he never said aloud: his first light. “I don’t call him Benne-boy. Sounds good though, maybe I could add it to the list?

“Gah, stop it brain!” groaned Jack, pulling his hair, “I can’t be Jamie’s boyfriend. He’s mortal and I’m not, and friendship’s hard enough already.

“Like okay, yes, we go have ’spontaneous picnics’ or froghurt or whatever, but it’s always awkward because everyone else thinks Jamie’s on his own. Besides, Jamie’s dated properly in past. They were just jerks who dumped him. For what? Being busy? He’s a busy guy, he does a lot of stuff. What did they expect? I’d be better anyhow.”

Jack paced a circle around the top rim of the Sharknado, swinging his crook as he spoke. He took a golfing drive to one of the sharks at the thought of Jamie’s hurt each time the boy had been told he wasn’t good enough.

“Honestly I’m surprised he still makes as much time for me as he does. I guess it’s ‘cause I understand how to work with his schedule, and when he needs to be pulled away from it.
“What was the last thing Cupcake accused me of? Oh right, sleeping in his bed. I only did that because he’s getting stupid reckless. It wasn’t sexual or anything. Plus it’s nice to cuddle. Jamie’s like a free hug dispenser – not that he hugs me all the time but he doesn’t care if I when I hug him. So infinite hug collector? He’s basically given me a free pass into his personal space.

“Jamie hasn’t asked me to stop, and I totally would if he did. And if we were boyfriends, wouldn’t he ask for more? Like kissing and stuff? I think he liked kissing his boyfriends. Well, he’s not one to kiss and tell, so I don’t know. But I figure he did. So obviously we’re not boyfriends,” concluded Jack with a nod.

Having rationalised answers for Cupcake’s questions, Jack tried to relax. It was nice and quiet, just him and the Moon. Except he couldn’t, it just didn’t sit quite right. Like he’d come to the wrong conclusion. Jack frowned and looked at the Moon, hoping maybe this time he’d get an answer. He could do with one. Instead golden streams arrived spreading across the Burgess skyline. The familiar sight sparked a question Jack voiced before really considering it.

“What if whatever Sandy was bugging Jamie about has something to do with this? Sandy won’t tell me, but it’s pretty obvious that Jamie is dreaming of something that he wants but doesn’t think can happen. But Sandy thinks should happen, so it can’t be too bad. What does Jamie fear anyway?” the question filled Jack with a nervous energy. He jumped down to walk through the monster mash, “Not Pitch. Something happening to Sophie – but why would Sandy want that? Growing up maybe? But he’s a wizard now, he’s not going to forget. And he was so worried about losing me on his twenty-first. I guess that would be a reason not to be my boyfriend.”

Jack paused, and shared a questioning look with the Grizzly-antula. Why did that almost hurt to hear? Jack had already established he and Jamie weren’t boyfriends. Even if they went on dates and didn’t care about personal space. He felt like he was sinking in frozen water again.

“Oh Manny,” he gasped, resurfacing, “I want Jamie to be my boyfriend.”

“Really? Jamie will like that.”

“What is it with girls sneaking up on me tonight?” Jack asked the Moon, throwing his arms up.

He turned to face the falsely innocent Sophie Bennett. She grinned brightly, rocking on her toes, hands clasped behind her back. The sixteen year old was blossoming into a beauty. She’d embraced an eco-warrior neo-hippie aesthetic. All natural and free-flowing, flowers (and rabbit claws) in her hair. If she weren’t perfectly capable of bringing a grown man to his knees crying all on her lonesome Jack might think he had to start defending her honour soon.

“I guess you’re too cute when you jump in surprise.”

“I miss the time before you had the vocabulary to be sarcastic. You know that?”

“If you’re trying to distract me from your little admission,” sing-songed Sophie, “it’s not working.”

“Why are you so interested anyway?”

Sophie giggled, before continuing to lilt and bounce with every syllable, “Be-cause I’m the little sis-ter, and getting into big bro’s bus’-ness is my job.”

“Well, what do you suggest, oh wise one?”

“Hmm, stop talking to me, go to him, confess your love and kiss already.”
“Can’t do that. He needs no distractions for forty-eight, well thirty-six hours now.”

Sophie stopped bouncing, to stare at him. “Unbelievable. You choose to be responsible now?”

“I spent the last week and half not letting him out of my sight,” said Jack, crossing his arms and matching her stare, “If I turn up now he’s more likely to curse me than kiss me. And asking him out via text sounds like bad way to start anything.”

“I’ll give you that.”

“Besides I don’t have any proof he wants anything more than friendship.”

Sophie continued to stare, seemingly struck dumb, before throwing her hands up and stomping over to kick a leg off the Grizzly-antula.

“Why are both of my brothers idiots!”

“Hey! I resemble that remark!” gasped Jack, touched by the implication.

“But really,” Sophie prodded, “what do you plan on doing?”

“I don’t know. I guess I’ll catch up on my Guardian stuff, let Jamie do his exams, and once we’re both done I’ll go ask him.”

“Sounds like a plan.”

“You don’t have to sound like a proud mother whose toddler took his first steps,” Jack grumbled, “Besides how do ask him and not have him think it’s a prank?”

“If only,” drawled Sophie in her most sarcastic voice, “there were some way of anonymously asking Jamie for relationship advice?”

“Sophie, you’re a genius!” crowed Jack.

“I know right!”

Jack lifted his sister up and spun her around. His laughter was contagious. Soon the spinning slowed until they were just hugging and chuckling.

“Hey. You want a lift home?”

“Yes, yes, yes!”

“As milady commands.”

Jack bowed before slinging Sophie up into a bridal carry. With a whistle the Wind picked them up and sent them sailing back to the Bennett household. Sophie whooped the whole way. When he set her down, warm nostalgia filled Jack. He might say his pond was home but really he considered this old house his home, ever since he received an open invitation in the form of an ever-open window.

“Thank you, good sir,” said Sophie with a perfect curtsey, “But Jack. If I don’t hear from Jamie that you’ve asked him out within the week, I’m going to tell him you were too chicken.”

“…Fair enough. Consider me warned. Stay safe!”

Jack called up the Wind to whisk him away before Sophie made further threats. He lay back on his
crook, and sunk into his trance. It was kind of difficult, since his mind kept wandering over to the prospect of boyfriend Jamie. Or how he was going to ask. Or how he could write for advice.

“Fine,” shouted Jack, throwing his arms out in defeat, “Maybe if I send the letter I can actually get some work done.”

Jack fell into a controlled drop and landed on the civic centre of some tiny no-name Midwest town. He settled into a cross-legged posture with his crook across his lap. Jack didn’t go straight to the J’aime Bien page like he normally would when submitting a fake letter. This was important, he had to get it right.

Dear Uncle Jay,

“Hey, I just got clue’d, and this is crazy, but here’s my news sir, I’ll call you Baby!”

Jack looked at his phone in horror. Where the blazes had that come from? This would easier if he didn’t suddenly have writer’s block. He couldn’t write like an idiot, or smatter it with emoji. Jamie wouldn’t take those seriously. But also he had to make not sound too much like himself lest Jamie work it out too soon.

Dear Uncle Jay,

I’ve just learnt my best friend is actually my boyfriend.

No wait. That was too sure of himself. He was asking for advice, not bragging.

Dear Uncle Jay,

First off. Don’t laugh. But I think I might be in a long distance relationship…

Fifteen minutes later, Jack blinked at the suddenly submitted letter. Once he’d started writing it had just flowed. His fingers had copy-pasted it before he’d had a chance to second-think.

It was a weight off his chest though, and after a moment praying he hadn’t made a mess of things, Jack returned to the skies. Having made a move – of sorts – he did find it much easier to concentrate on his actual duties. He still spent the next thirty-something hours counting down until he could see his first light again.

[ヾ(´ε´*) u betta B sleeping. [ ( - - ) ] zzz Cant hav u nappin n ur xams ( -=-)>c[_] ]

Well at least he could text. Even if Jamie was responding much less than normal.

[It’s over! Hallelujah! I’m free!]

[(★´ω´★)ゞ Ill c u soon!]

All the uncertainty came crashing back the moment it came time to return to Jamie. Did he really need to risk the close friendship he had with his believer? What if Sophie was wrong, and Jamie didn’t want anything more? But what if he did?

Hope was dangerous. Jack knew this. He’d lived on unfounded hope for three hundred years. So Jack would hope for the best, and trust Jamie to fix whatever mess he might make.
Jack opened Jamie’s window carefully, slipping under the sash and closing it silently. He leant against the inside glass and surveyed his friend’s room. It was a mess, notes everywhere and a figure face-down on the bed.

“Jaaaack,” came a muffled whine, “I need some fun stat. Exams broke my brain.”

“A little birdie told me you have a boyfriend,” teased Jack, nerves making him arrive at the point sideways.

Jamie rolled over – and nearly off the bed – to frown questioningly at Jack, “What? When? How would I have acquired a boyfriend in the last two days while I was freaking out about exams?”

“No, no, no. Before that.”

Jack scooted over and nudged Jamie so they were sitting on the edge of the bed, knees touching but still facing one another. More than ever he wanted to grab the brunet and not let go. But he had ask the question first.

“Apparently you’ve been an item for a while.” Jack’s traitorous hands had reached the short distance to trace frost designs on the back of Jamie’s. “You text a lot and occasionally go out for unplanned food together.”

“Wait, Jack, the only one I–”

“Jamie. Will you be my boyfriend?”

Jamie tensed and for a moment Jack feared he’d screwed everything up. Then his first light looked down at their hands and back up at Jack’s eyes.

“Are you being serious?” Jamie asked, leaning just a touch forward to gauge the spirit’s reaction.

“Yes,” answered Jack, mirroring the mortal’s movement to show his sincerity.

“I’m a mortal.”

“And a wizard.”

“I’m still going to grow old.”

“Then I’ll be your boy toy.”

“This isn’t going to get you in trouble with the Guardians?”

“I’m pretty sure Sandy’s all for it. North will probably side with me.”

“The others?”

“I’ll convince them.”

“I’m not going to get less busy.”

“Neither am I. We’ll keep managing.”

“You’re not under any outside influence?”

“Just Cupcake’s interrogation and a threat from Sophie.”
“You’ll need to tell me what they said.”

“I will, later, promise.”

Jamie stared at Jack, his chocolate eyes darting around looking for any dishonesty. Jack meanwhile was looking at the rays of Jamie’s irises trying to decide what they looked like.

“Yes, I’ll be your boyfriend,” said Jamie, and Jack could feel the mortal’s breath on his lips.

It was for the best that Jamie didn’t ask anything else. Since they’d been leaning closer to one another with each question and answer. They were close enough for Jack to touch foreheads when he ventured a question of his own.

“Kiss me?”

There wasn’t much to kiss physically. It was soft and gentle. Just skin on skin, breath mixing with breath. From all he’d heard about them, Jack expected electricity and fireworks. He wasn’t sure who was being so hesitant, but he wasn’t complaining.

Especially when he could feel Jamie’s joy building. It flowed into Jack, warming him with its energy. There was no bittersweet tang right now. Just pure happiness, which – cliché as it was – tasted of hot chocolate and marshmallows. Maybe mortals liked kissing so much because it was the only way they could get close enough to share this?

Further musing was derailed when Jamie sucked on Jack’s lower lip, gently worrying it with his teeth. A shiver cascaded down Jack and his breath hitched. His brain stuttered again when Jamie took the opportunity to slip his tongue between Jack’s lips.

Jack could feel Jamie’s lips twitching with a smile as he pushed their tongues into a game. Jamie would run along everything he could reach and Jack would counter trying to give as good as he got. At some point he found himself following Jamie’s retreat and being rewarded with the chance to explore his boyfriend’s mouth.

All too soon, Jamie was pushing them apart. Bracing them hands on each other’s shoulders (and when had they moved from their laps?).

“How do you end up in a long distance relationship by accident? But that’s not really what happened to you O’LAND, is it? It’s more that not uncommon case of close friendship slipping into something deeper without a clear conscious change. The long distance stuff is just flavour. So I’ll give you the advice I would in that case:

Talk it out.

You can’t be a prankster all the time. If he can’t tell when you’re being serious and when you’re not, then perhaps he’s just not the one.* But seriously. You two need to work out where you stand. Maybe whatever boundaries you’ve crossed don’t matter, maybe a reality check is needed. You can only know if you discuss it.
Don’t make your friend’s decision for him. That’s a lousy move to take in regards to mere acquaintances. And a criminal one in regards to friends or romantic partners.

I wish you the best of luck.

*See previous musings on whether The One™ exists.

Chapter End Notes

Next: Jamie has a boyfriend now and mortal-relationship-advice to catch up on. Could Cupid just back off?

This was another uncooperative chapter. Had to make sure Jack didn't run back to Jamie too soon. Would you believe originally I thought I could get him to wait until Jamie replied to the Uncle Jay letter? For the record timewise he doesn't until the morning after this chapter's final scene.

Bonus deleted line: “Wait. Does that mean that warm spot was morning wood?!”

Jack-speak Translations

[ \(^{(°o° ; )} \) U cant doo tat \(^{(*´Д `*)}\)/ n xpt me 2 du m job ん( 。www)]
= You can’t do that, and expect me to do my job!

[✧٩(•̀ weekdays)۶✧ / Luck wat wee maid! _(_)( ߗ`)>] 
= Look what we made! (It was nothing)

[ !!(蛤_ _)θ☆+°)/ Get bk 2 werk!]
= Get back to work!

[Cupcake is beta and in too scared to text
[*here *I'm *too]
= Cupcake is here and I'm too scared to text.

[Cupcake’s making m w8 (’= gameObject’)] 
= Cupcake’s making me wait...

[ ]] Tims up]
= Times up

[ ✳(ε ` *) u betta B sleeping. [ ( - - ) ] zzz Cant hav u nappin n ur xams ( __>c[_] ]
= You better be sleeping (in a bed). Can’t have you napping in your exams. (Maybe coffee?)

[((★ω ` ★) X Ill c u soon!]
= I’ll see you soon!
Love Hurts

Chapter Summary

Jamie wakes up in bed with a snowy boyfriend. They go on a date. Everything is wonderful.

But it's Saturday, so Cupid third wheels hard

Trigger Warnings (from "that went better than expected" until end of chapter): attempted non-con and violence

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Dear Uncle Jay,

There’s a boy I like. But he has a girlfriend. But’s that okay, she’s cute too.

My question is how do I get his attention? And her I guess. Should I work on them separately or both at the same time?

Plenty Of Loving Impatience

PS. Don’t worry, all our orientations are compatible.

The bed was cold when Jamie woke. And not because he’d been abandoned in the night. No, it was cold because there was the snoring snowstorm wrapped around him. It was nice. If Jamie hadn’t trained in dream-magics, he might have dismissed it. Rather than realise it was a dream come true. Jamie was shivering, but he blamed that on the breath ghosting over the side of his neck. Jack was spooned behind Jamie, arms around him and legs tangled together. It was almost perfect.

It wasn’t first time Jamie had woken with Jack in his bed (an eleven year old him had been very forthright on how sleepovers were meant to go), or the first time he’d woken up with a boyfriend in his bed. But it was the first time those had simultaneously been true.

The only kink – bad word choice Jamie when you’re trapped in bed with a long-term-crush-now-boyfriend – was the ever problematic underlying arm. Jack’s hands were linked around Jamie’s belly, meaning that the mortal was lying on an arm. It evidently hadn’t been a problem while he slept but now he was uncomfortably aware of it. He didn’t want to think about the pins-and-needles Jack would get when he woke up.

Jamie started fidgeting. He didn’t want to get up but he did need to find a new position. Jack’s grip was too tight though. The spirit just squeezed him and murmured some sort of refusal.

“At least let me roll over.”

The response was another squeeze and the shock of a cold nose against the nape of his neck.
“Jack!” squeaked Jamie.

Jamie could feel his boyfriend’s barely restrained laughter – both in the stuttered breath against his neck and the shaking grip around him. The spirit did loosen his arms enough that Jamie could roll around within the embrace.

Jack still had his eyes closed. Which was a shame, they were one of his best features. Jamie took a moment to unabashedly stare, even if he almost had to cross his eyes a little. Jack wasn’t porcelain, not this close. His cheeks were marred by the touch of wind burn and the ghosts of freckles. Jamie wanted to touch them, to brush his fingertips across those cheekbones, to feel his solidified dream.

Jamie wondered how long it would take for him to acclimatise to idea of being free to do that. To no longer smother the urge to reach out over the line separating platonic closeness from something more. He could do it right now, he had arm free, just wrapped around Jack, fists in the spirit’s undershirt. But he had a better idea.

Jamie leant forward for a kiss. He wasn’t going to let the opportunity go by. Last night he’d confirmed kissing Jack was delightful. The spirit’s lips were less chapped than expected, but Jamie wouldn’t have cared either way. They might be more than a touch cold, but the college boy took warming them up as a challenge. Jamie didn’t succeed this time because awkwardly straining his neck to prevent nose collisions made things difficult. So after teasing an appreciative hum out of his boyfriend, Jamie disengaged and dropped his head back onto the pillow.

Jack’s eyes were definitely open now. The spirit was directing his weaponised puppy-dog-eyes-and-pout at Jamie. The mortal had built up a decent immunity to them, but not enough to deny something he wanted too.

“Well, I’m not going to do all the heavy lifting. You can get neck cramp this time.”

The pout was quickly replaced with a grin, and Jamie knew Jack was planning mischief. The winter spirit shifted his grip to Jamie’s biceps and rolled them both over. The college boy found himself pinned beneath Jack, hands and legs bracketed. A flash of Jack’s tongue across his lips drew Jamie’s gaze back to their smirk. The sprite leaned down to press another kiss, a proper one this time.

Or Jack would have, had his arm not given way. Fortunately, for both their skulls, Jack fell sideways a little rather than straight down. The sudden weight forced an “oof” out of Jamie, even as Jack started grouching into the pillow. He held his previously trapped arm out and started waving it around.

Jamie tried not to, he really did, but he cracked up.

“Stop laughing,” whined Jack, “Are you going to laugh every time we kiss?!”

Jamie kept laughing, but toned it down to a quiet giggle. Jack gingerly put his hand back down and propped himself up over Jamie again. The spirit frowned and then, with only marginally less force than his earlier collapse, kissed Jamie.

Jamie stopped laughing. You try laughing when your boyfriend is trying to lick your soft palate. Jack seemed to be attempting to chastise him for his laughter, through dominating the kiss. Jamie went with it, sneaking in a couple of nibbles on Jack’s lower lip. He was happy that Jack was taking control. Jamie honestly got bored if he was always leading. Jamie’s thoughts did go to his arms trapped between their chests. If he twisted his wrists just right he could probably play with Jack’s nipples. After a moment’s consideration, Jamie mentally shelved the idea. He better ask first.
Jamie got his chance when Jack pulled away, to sit looking down on the breathless mortal. Jamie grinned back up at his observer. White hair messy from sleep rather than the wind (Jamie needed to keep his hands free to run through it next time). Lips, normally thin and only a shade darker than the rest of him, were now noticeably fuller and darker.

“Jack,” said Jamie, lazily finger-walking up his boyfriend’s front, “what are your thoughts on hickeys or taking our shirts off?”

“Waffles.”

“…Sorry?”

Jack vigorously shook his head, before answering, “Breakfast, we should have waffles. But shirts, yes, I mean no, I mean off, definitely off. And hickeys, maybe? I don’t know. Never had one.”

“Some people like ‘em, some don’t,” Jamie reassured with a shrug, “Don’t know until you try. But I’d be quite happy with an extra souvenir for when we’re both out and about again. Now do you need some help with that shirt, boyfriend?”

The lightly teasing tone seemed to return Jack’s equilibrium because the look levelled at Jamie wasn’t flustered but calculating.

“I suppose you’ll want me to help you out of yours then?” the spirit asked, his hands drifting down the mortal’s sides to his shirt’s bottom hem.

Jamie nodded, eighty-percent focused on not reacting to the cool, tickling fingers. “I’m a big fan of reciprocation.”

“Well then, I think we have an agreement.”

In the process of getting Jamie’s shirt off, the mortal sat himself up and scooted backwards, pulling Jack along with him. Jack had to shift from sitting to kneeling to pull Jamie’s shirt all the way up his arms extended over his head. Once Jamie was topless and supported from behind, Jamie returned the favour. Jack was busy, engrossed in touching what had been newly uncovered. Jamie hooked his fingers under Jack’s top and trailed them up the slight wave of his ribs. Jack’s hands refused to stop their exploration of Jamie’s chest. So Jamie had to pull the shirt over the spirit’s head and down his arms towards himself, before throwing it across the room.

Now they were sitting facing one another, Jamie brushed noses in an Eskimo kiss. The fact his boyfriend was sitting in his lap was really distracting and Jamie had to remind himself that below the belt was off limits.

“So, hickeys,” said Jamie after another round of kissing, “Do you want to go first?”

“You first. Show me how it’s done.”

Jamie rolled his eyes at Jack’s taunting bravado. The mortal was tempted to call the implicit bluff and use his teeth just where jaw and neck met. Leave a messy bruise that Jack couldn’t hide. But well, no need to go that far. Instead Jamie nuzzled his way down Jack’s neck and half way out to his shoulder. Jamie swirled his tongue around his chosen spot. He sealed his lips over it, and paused in case Jack changed his mind. Jamie gave a light test suck and was rewarded by cold arms tightening around him. A stronger draw earned an equally stronger squeeze. Jack tasted delicious, something like ice and sugar and maybe fizzing sherbet. When Jamie reached half a full suck, Jack moaned. And that was obscene sound for a Guardian of Childhood to make. Jamie skipped to full suction – getting Jack to swear – before pulling away with an audible smack.
“How was that?” asked Jamie.

“How was that?”

Jack mimicked Jamie, trailing down his neck and shoulder. He got to the mirror of where Jamie had stopped, hummed and started nuzzling back. When the cold returned to the crook of his neck, Jamie shivered. Jack must have felt it, because he made a victorious noise. More shivers followed when Jamie was licked and Jack began to suck. The winter spirit didn’t build things slowly, jumping immediately to hard suction. Which pleasantly surprised Jamie.

“You can use your teeth,” Jamie managed to stutter out, while his hands groped Jack’s back.

Jack did, and Jamie swore. The sprite nibbled a couple of times during the long process. Because right, opt-in breathing. Long enough that Jamie was sure it would only take him rolling his hips a couple times to push him over the edge. He sighed in both relief and disappointment when Jack released his lip-lock.

“How was that?”

“Pretty good. For a first time,” answered Jamie, his casual dismissal betrayed by his blush.

Jack darted in for a peck, before grinning wide enough to incapacitate the whole of Punjam Hy Loo.

“Waffles?”

“Waffles,” agreed Jamie. If that’s what Jack wanted. Even if that wasn’t what he wanted to eat just then.

So they went to IHOP.

It was quiet, but Jamie chalked that up to it being a Sunday in the holidays between Thanksgiving and Christmas. The college town’s population was plummeting as people headed home. But that just meant they were able to snag a booth in a corner away from the family with three kids (who waved at Jack) and the retired couple still sharing each other’s pancakes.

“What date do you think we’re up to?” Jack asked when Jamie returned after placing their order, “Since the girls think we’ve been dating forever.”

“Twenty one picnics, thirty six movie nights, seven frozen yoghurt runs, and one trip to the aquarium,” answered Jamie blithely.

“We’ve never been to an aquarium.”

“Fine, I made up those numbers, happy? If you want I can go through my phone and work it out, or we can just start the official count at one.”

“Actually now I’m kinda curious.”

Their date wasn’t really any different from previous of their ‘spontaneous paired outings’ (as Jack retro-actively titled them). Jamie unloaded about his exams and Jack shared everything he’d done in the forty-eight hours apart to avoid rushing back early. Including the submission to J’aime Bien.

Jamie ignored Jack’s pleas (he had to, their waffles were being delivered) and read the letter. This time he was able to keep from laughing.

“OLAND. OverLAND huh? Subtle.”
“I can be subtle!”

“Jack, correct me if I’m wrong,” said Jamie, pouring a generous himself helping of syrup, “Plan A was to send this, wait for Uncle Jay’s response and use my own advice to ask me out. But you got impatient and skipped straight to asking.”

“…Yeah.”

“The direct approach did work for you,” Jamie pointed out with a fork of waffle, and took a bite. “Honestly, I probably wouldn’t have got it immediately. I mean I’m not – what was it? – hunky.”

“Compared to me you are. And you don’t doubt your genius?”

There were no gratuitous displays of affection – no feeding one another or wiping maple syrup off with a thumb. There were both kids watching and adults not seeing. Plus, Jamie wasn’t sure how Jack would react. The Guardian still had understandable issues with wanting/dreading attention.

Just an epic game of footsie played out under the table.

The kids did scramble over at one point to say hello to Jack and ask who Jamie was. He didn’t blush (no matter what Jack might say) when he was introduced as the Last Light, and now Jack’s boyfriend. Jamie wasn’t sure which part qualified him to autograph the kids’ drawing of Jack at play.

The restaurant staff were giving them askance looks. Well, Jamie at least, since they couldn’t see Jack. The frost spirit was bummed a little before then made a game of it. Eating his waffles staring them in the eye all the while. Jamie wondered if some reverse Emperor’s New Clothes effect was going to come into play. Between Jamie and the kids talking to ‘thin air’, and the food vanishing ‘untouched’.

Jamie’s college town didn’t have an aquarium, so they went wandering. Just hanging out really. Jamie hadn’t really worked out how you went about dating Jack Frost. Give him time.

Despite their hopes, Cupid did make an appearance that afternoon. Jamie had avoided voicing it, but he thought the new relationship might earn him a day off. Seemed merely thinking it was enough to trigger Murphy’s Law.

As usual a whirlwind of rose petals signalled the god’s arrival. Jack pulled his hand free of Jamie’s to take up his crook in both hands. Jamie understood but wasn’t happy.

Cupid appeared with his normal flare, but his expression upon seeing Jack and Jamie wasn’t haughty for once. In fact, the god was frowning slightly at the space where their hands had been linked between them. He had a bow in hand which Jamie realised was his.

“There you are! Dropped in on Busybody’s room and it was empty, so I grabbed this,” prattled Cupid, tossing Jamie’s bow when he mentioned it, “since we’re going on a field trip again!”

“Why are you repeating yourself?”/“There better not be any vampires,” said Jamie and Jack simultaneously.

“You seemed to like it last time,” answered Cupid in a mish-mash of manipulative tones – part childish whine, part flirtatious purr, part taunting challenge. However, his answer to Jack was a curt, business-like, “I promise there will be no vampires.”

Cupid wasn’t even lying. The task passed pretty much like the week before. Except Cupid didn’t restrict their stops to the US. Jamie found himself accomplice to pairing a white-haired boy and an
orange-haired boy in Japan. Then loosing an arrow at an Irish boy genius. And helping Cupid in a half a dozen other countries. Jack tagged along, providing commentary under his breath.

The field trip reached its climax in a weird-spot town in Oregon. Jamie’s target was the brunette girl with braces and a ridiculous sweater. It had a freaking target on it. Jamie couldn’t help but feel mocked. Especially when the arrow he’d been given was lead tipped and black fletched. A tentative scan imparted a sense of loathing and fatigue. Jamie definitely didn’t want to prick his finger on it. He was holding ready, waiting for the thrum.

It came and he released. The black bolt landed a little in the smallest ring – and why was she wearing a target anyway? But Jamie’s aim was improving. The girl didn’t react like she’d been shot. Instead her expression, which had been eagerly focused on the black haired boy running towards her, clouded over and she turned away in disgust.

“No!” the boy shouted, then pointed at Jamie, “You!"

Jamie gulped. Whoever this was, they could see through his Cupid-strengthened invisibility spell. Before he could really start to worry, a dozen black bolts struck from the side. The boy changed direction without any mortal concerns for gravity, momentum, or even solid surfaces. He danced as Cupid continued to rain down black arrows. It felt longer, but after probably two seconds one made contact.

“Fine Cupid. You win.”

Seemingly unconcerned with the arrow piercing his side, the boy spread his hands in a show of surrender. Then he changed. Stretching into a lanky adult, while his clothes shifted into something medieval.

“I will get my retribution,” warned the spirit, words directed at Cupid but his glare directed at Jamie.

“Loki. She’s twelve,” deadpanned Cupid.

The Norse god’s glare broke into a grin.

“Oh don’t worry, Baldr-Boy. I recognise a patsy when I see one. Besides, destroying a person’s tools is only satisfactory revenge if they’re irreplaceable.”

Loki vanished. No special effects, no fade. Just a blink and he’s gone.

“That went better than expected,” said Cupid with a clap.

Cupid walked over and clasped Jamie’s shoulder, in what he supposed was meant to be a gesture of pride. But it just felt weird. Cupid grinned, and Jamie felt the precursors to his disturbing form of travel.

“That was the last one, so time to go!"

The flurry dispersed to reveal Jamie and Cupid were back in his dorm. Sans Jack. Yet again rose petals made a mess, and yet again the winged figure of Cupid stood proudly out of place.

“You shouldn’t have done that,” said Jamie, wrenching himself out of Cupid’s grip.

“And you should stop telling gods what to do,” Cupid replied, tone dark and commanding, “He’ll catch up. But first, I need to speak to you alone.”
Cupid gently (in appearance only) pushed Jamie, so that his bed caught him behind the knees. Sending him sprawling back, propped up on his elbows. The god looked down his nose at the mortal, his wings as open as the confines of the room allowed, his eyes and hair closer to fire than ever. The heavy heat of Cupid’s allure smothered Jamie, skipping his consciousness to stimulate his baser instincts directly.

“Now then mortal. You’ve risen to the challenge of my punishment far better than expected. It was a test.”

“Did I pass?”

Jamie asked the question thoughtlessly, stalling really. His attention directed towards breaking the allure’s grip on him. But every time he slipped free, Cupid reapplied it stronger.

“It’s only halfway done, remember? But I think I’ve chosen well.”

Jamie doubted he imagined how Cupid’s gaze wandered down and up his form. It was electrifying being the focus of that naked desire. Jamie closed his eyes and frowned, shoving the allure away again.

“But now you need to make your choice. And there is a correct answer.”

Jamie’s eyes snapped open to find Cupid closer than before, his hand withdrawing from attempting to touch the mortal’s face. The fiery haired god stood almost straddling him. The heat from where their knees brushed was terribly distracting.

“What choice?” asked Jamie, voice monotone from the battle against foreign emotions.

“Will you be my lover?”

Jamie blinked as several responses piled up, preventing him from giving a real answer. A flat what of disbelief, hysterical laughter, a lust filled yes. But none of those were the right answer. Instead he clearly announced one word:

“No.”

“No? You do realise I am the god of sex?”

“So? I have a boyfriend,” returned Jamie, baring the hickey he’d received that morning, “Who you know I’ve been in love with this whole time. You all but admitted that’s how you keep breaking in here.”

“I know how to be discreet. I wouldn’t leave any marks.” Cupid spread a hand over Jamie’s heart, forcing another spike of lust through him. “I ask a second time: will you be my lover?”

“Again: no.”

“If you’re worried about going behind his back… Frost is a menace, but I wouldn’t say no to a threesome.” Cupid cocked his head, starting to look irritated with Jamie’s continued refusals. The god curled the thumb on the mortal’s chest under his palm and flicked it out over the boy’s nipple. “I ask a third and final time: will you be my lover?”

Jamie closed his eyes, pretending to consider the demand. He’d stalled with words as much as he could. He had a snowglobe on the shelf above his desk – which might as well be safe and unreachable in Burgess right now. He needed to get out of Cupid’s grasp. It wasn’t difficult for
Jamie to appear thoughtful, when he was weaving one spell and unravelling another. And preventing any glowing.

Cupid probably expected the “NO!” but he didn’t expect Jamie’s body to snap closed like a beartrap. Achieving a synchronised head bashing and knee to Cupid’s balls. Immortal or not, that was going to hurt.

His own head ringing, Jamie shoved the dazed god aside and staggered upright. Judging by his headache, had he not magically reinforced himself, he would’ve broken his mortal self instead. Jamie stumbled to the shelf, fumbled with the globe and managed to toss it at the wall.

“The North Pole!” yelled Jamie, running for it.

Instead a portal to freedom, all Jamie got was the shattering of glass and a black-fetched arrow imbedded in the wall.

“I was only asking to be polite. Now we do things the hard way.”

Jamie did not like the sound of that, and had no interest in finding out what Cupid meant. Jamie cast the first spell he’d mastered. With a thought the room flooded with light. H darted out, he needed to get outside. Plan A was a bust. Plan B was the Wind.

His frantic steps took him up to the roof access. Jamie couldn’t hear footsteps or wingbeats following him over his heart thundering in his ears. He could only hope that meant Cupid thought he was headed down to the front door. Jamie crashed out into the winter night, a summoning for the Wind on his lips.

“Erk,” Jamie gasped instead, as he was spun around and onto his back, an arrow blossoming in his chest.

“That’s that pesky cryophilia dealt with.”

Lead was seeping through Jamie’s veins. With each heartbeat it spread, weighing him down both physically and emotionally. Even when he felt the air cool and the pressure drop, Jamie had trouble mustering relief at Jack’s imminent arrival. He tried marshalling his will against the arrow’s curse but it was magnitudes stronger than the allures he’d been negating. Besides the metaphysical attack, Jamie still had an arrow sticking out of his chest, making merely breathing painful. Lying prone on his dorm roof, listening to steadily approaching steps, Jamie knew he wasn’t in any shape to continue running.

“Will you change your mind, now that you can’t care for that ice-brain?”

The figure crouched above Jamie’s head was both the most beautiful and most horrifying he’d ever seen. A perfect face, only marred by blood trickling from his nose. Wreathed in fire, and bracketed by a raptor’s wings, the god was blatantly supernatural. Cupid hadn’t changed really, it was more that Jamie was seeing him clearly. The mortal was deeply aware of why Cupid was described as more feared and more dangerous than any dragon. The god burned. He was a star and Jamie was much too close. The god looked down upon his fallen prey with nothing but hunger.

“No answer? No matter. You’re assent was merely a formality.”

Jamie laughed (or maybe sobbed) when he realised just how screwed he was. He could feel the allure trying to suck him in, but the lead in his veins poisoned it weighing down. Even as he wanted to flee more than ever.
“You fucked up,” Jamie managed between gasps of sarcastic laughter, “The arrows work on – ha – first sight! Hah! And the one I saw first was you!”

Cupid’s face shifted from hunger through a confused frown to land on something between panic and anger. He reached forward and yanked the arrow out. As if that would do anything but cause Jamie to scream in pain.

“Ow, fuck! Like that’s going to make me not hate you.” Jamie hadn’t been in quite enough painful near-death situations to know whether they always broke his brain-mouth filter. But this certainly had. “I’m still going to choose Jack over you.”

Definitely the wrong thing to say. Any trace of worry vanished from Cupid, replaced with pure anger. He raised his arm, holding the lead arrow aloft like a sacrificial dagger.

“Well if I can’t have you then,” bit out Cupid, bringing the arrow down into Jamie’s chest again, “he can’t have you! And if I – wrench – can’t have you then you can’t have anyone!” – stab – “No lovers” – stab – “no friends” – stab – “no family” – stab – “no one.” Stab.

Jamie felt the first couple of wounds but none after that. Instead he felt cold and weak. The edges of his vision blurred and some distant part of him mourned that the last thing he’d see was a face twisted in rage backdropped by thick clouds. There was speck of blue getting bigger by the second, which only sparked more fear in Jamie’s tattered heart.

It was a relief when everything went black.

Reading between the lines I can see a few possible scenarios that lead to you sending this question, POLI. But I’m going to answer the two main ones* – you are the outsider, or you’re in fact in the relationship and thinking about a third. Please read both.

Before you do anything, please read up on polyamory. I’ve got some recommended links at the end. It can take a few forms, but all of them require work. Which is true of any relationship. Also please think about why you want to do this. There is a chance you’ll destroy the couple’s relationship.

If you’re the outsider. Don’t have an affair with one of them, or do anything that’ll harm their relationship. Does destabilising the foundation you want to join really sound like a good idea? Make friends with both. With friendship the aim not slipping into their relationship. It’ll help you know if you really want to get involved, and means they’ll know you when you ask.

And if you do decide to keep with this, ask with them both present. Don’t expect an immediate answer – you’ll probably get a no. People don’t generally think about triads and couples aren’t generally looking for a third. Part social stigma, part pair-normativity, part we’re-a-loving-relationship-right-now-why-would-we-need-to-mess-with-it?

Expect rejection. Leave them with some time to think and read up on polyamory themselves. However be prepared for them to still say no. You’re asking for something that is unusual.

The alternate scenario, you’re in the relationship and asking a “friend of mine” question. First, please sit back and think about why you want to add a third. Is it purely selfish? Are you unhappy with your partner and want someone new without breaking up or having an affair? Are you prepared for your partner to break up with you for suggesting this? Are you prepared to have to deal with three relationships rather than just one?

Once again, communication is key. Before you approach whoever you want to add, talk with your partner. About whatever reasons you have for a triad rather than polyamory itself. Maybe there’s
some root cause you’ll solve and not feel the need to open you relationship anymore. Then discuss polyamory. If they don’t want to entertain the idea or after thinking about it decline, drop it. Or as brutal as it sounds, if you still want someone else more than them, break up with your partner.

Short version – sort out your existing relationship before shaking it up.

Then it’s similar to above. Ask the question with everyone involved present. Be clear with what you’re asking and what you want. Expect them to say no. Give them time to think.

*Sadly the most likely scenario is that you are in fact a troll. You’ve wasted my twenty minute mid-cramming break. Congrats. You’ve mildly inconvenienced me. The horror.

Chapter End Notes

Next: Jamie deals (not) with the aftermath of Cupid's assault. And heads home for Christmas.

This may be the event I was maniacally laughing about. It's okay. Jamie's not dead. I promise. And Jack's going to make sure Cupid wishes he was (chapter after next). This week is mid-semester break so hopefully I can get both of these out quickly. Partly because I don't want to leave you with that cliffhanger for too long, and also next chapter is kinda short (because I want to get to Jack's one).
Closing Up

Chapter Summary

Jamie deals with the immediate fallout from the attack. Not that he expects the police to achieve much. He heads home for Christmas, and is subjected an ungodly chipper driver.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

NOTICE OF CLOSURE

I’m shutting down J’aime Bien. To be cliché: it’s not you, it’s me. I can’t do this anymore. I have too many things on my plate, and I guess I’ve also lost the drive to wade through hundreds of submissions for questions worth answering.

Besides, I feel like a fake. I haven’t been in a relationship in years. And right now I don’t see myself being in one anytime soon.

I’ll be leaving this site up in case people want to go through the archives. The domain is registered for another six months. I can’t guarantee I’ll renew it after that.

I wish you the best of luck finding a new agony aunt/uncle,

Uncle Jay

“Good afternoon, Mister Bennett. I’m Detective Childs and this is Detective Bell. Do you feel up to answering some questions?”

Jamie looked away from the heavy snow falling outside the hospital window, to the new strangers in “his” room: a pair of campus police officers. The speaker was a dark-haired woman oozing professionalism, and her partner was an older black man.

Sitting there in a gown, with an IV drip and finger clip, Jamie hardly felt up to it. But he’d given up on feeling comfortable hours ago. He didn’t feel much of anything at all, really. Mostly tired. And almost annoyed by all the people trying to talk to him.

“Yes,” Jamie answered dully.

“We haven’t got a clear picture of what happened last night,” said the female officer. Her tone was no-nonsense, which Jamie vaguely appreciated over attempting something maternal. “What are you able to tell us?”

“Not much,” said Jamie promptly, earning carefully neutral looks, before elaborating, “I don’t really remember of yesterday. I can guess some, but most of that’s based on eavesdropping and this.”

Jamie gestured to his chest where his gown hid bandages, underneath them was the reason he was hospitalised. Half a dozen stab wounds, weirdly shallow for their size. Moving his arm triggered a
twinge in his chest, but Jamie did his best to ignore it. He didn’t want to stay here any longer than he needed. He just wanted to go back to his room and sleep.

“Jamie, can you think of anything, anything for us to look into?” the male officer asked, his tone falsely friendly, “Is there anyone who would want to hurt you?”

“No. I don’t think I’ve made any enemies. I mean other than being openly queer.”

An awkward silence fell. Jamie’s college was pretty progressive. The idea that the distant nightmare of hate crime had visited them was uncomfortable.

“Did you go up on roof often?” asked Officer Childs.

Jamie frowned at the new line of questioning, he knew the answer was yes but he wasn’t sure why. He shrugged and answered, “I guess? I like to look at the sky.”

“You’ll have to find a new star-gazing spot. Security is upgrading the lock on that door.”

“Do you remember what you had for breakfast yesterday?” asked Officer Bell.

Jamie’s answer came without thinking, and didn’t have any real memory attached to it:

“Waffles. At IHOP.”

“Do you remember who you were with?”

“No.”

Jamie tried to. But all he could remember was an empty seat opposite, and making excuses to the waiter for it.

“I’m going to level with you,” Officer Bell said, “we don’t have much to go on. Without you giving us some idea who might have done this we’re unlikely to find whoever attacked you.”

The interrogation continued a little while longer before a doctor came in and offered Jamie an out. It wasn’t going anywhere anyway. The officers were transparent in how they would try to prompt Jamie about some aspect of his forgotten yesterday. Before asking him questions he’d pieced the answers to from listening in on the gossiping nurses.

Jamie had been attacked, and probably given some date-rape drug beforehand. Possibly starting at breakfast. A mortifying examination hadn’t revealed any evidence of… penetration, but the massive hickey under his jaw was telling. The actual attack was some kind of open-air locked room mystery. Witnesses saw Jamie frantically running up to the roof. Alone. No one else was seen going up, and the only other way was to jump.

There was an alternative possibility that Jamie didn’t want to admit. That he hadn’t an attack. Which was ridiculous. Jamie hadn’t lost track of reality in years.

The officers promised to keep investigating. They gave Jamie their cards, so he could call them if he remembered anything. They made no promises.

After a small eternity, Jamie was released. It wasn’t until he was safe and sound in his room that he felt he could relax. The blessed silence of his room was ruined when Jamie’s phone beeped a low battery warning. Despite not wanting to talk, Jamie plugged it in. Damn Pavlov. He saw notifications filling the screen, and some small spark of curiosity made him check them. There were almost two
dozen messages. Almost all from the same contact, some guy called Jack. A mix of apologies, get well texts, and nonsense.

[Jamie call me when u get this]

[I hope ur better soon]

[I went after pinky but I think I made things worse]

[Sorry for spam. Pls text when u get these]

[I’m not gonna b able to give u a lift home duty calls
[I’ll organise some thing]

How did this guy know he’d been attacked? Weren’t ninety percent of crimes committed by people the victim knew? Perhaps Jamie should give the police this guy to track down. Except, while Jamie couldn’t place a face to the name, he was pretty sure Jack wasn’t on campus. His phone chimed again as a new message came through.

[Just so u know I’m gonna keep texting u like normal
[I’ll work out some way for us to see each other again]

Jamie kind of hated social expectation making go home for the holidays. Jamie certainly not a fan of Jack’s “some thing”. Which had been etickets with two connections between three airlines. Good thing he wasn’t taking anything more than carry on.

If the medical examination had been embarrassing and the police interrogation pointless, then plane trip(s) to Harrisburg was torture. Trapped in a tin can with a few hundred strangers for hours at a time. Even when he wasn’t in humanity’s loophole abuse of the laws physics, the airports were just as bad. The standard chaos of pre-Christmas flights made worse by spill-over from some blizzard engulfing the UK. At least the US wasn’t snowed under yet.

Jamie arrived in Harrisburg some single-digit hour in the morning before dawn. Now he just had to complete the three hour drive up to where Burgess nestled in the Appalachian foothills. Jamie was only half surprised to see someone waiting at the arrivals hall holding a sign with his name on it. After the ridiculousness of his flights, Jamie hadn’t been sure that the driver would show.

“Jamie! Good to meet you! I’m Paulo and I’ll be, like, your driver this fine morning!”

Sitting there, burning Jamie’s retinas, was a heavily suped-up Solaris. The undercoat was a golden-
yellow so bright and shiny, Jamie was surprised it was road-legal. The bonnet bore an exquisitely
tacky painting of two rearing horses, their hind legs extending just behind the front wheels. They
were blindingly white, with manes of fire. A motif that sparked under their hooves and spread down
the sides of the car.

“I can’t be both?” huffed Paulo, “My chariot is a mighty vehicle I’ll have you know.”

“It was just a surprise,” said Jamie neutrally, hoping that he hadn’t ensnared himself in a real
conversation.

Fortunately he hadn’t. When Paulo started driving, he didn’t talk, instead switching on the radio.
Something classical and slow filled the car. Not that Paulo was capable of keeping quiet. The blond
started singing along. No real words, just oohs and dahs. Paulo’s surprise ability to improvise
counterpoint harmony was just the icing on pretentious cake. It wasn’t silence, but it was bearable,
and Jamie soon fell asleep with his cheek against the window.

Jamie woke surprisingly refreshed. Like he’d got nine hours in a real bed. A glance at his phone told
him it had only been two.

“Have a nice nap?”

Jamie “hmm’d” affirmatively.

Paulo took that as permission to start prattling again. His monologue wandered over a multitude of
topics, jumping from one to another without warning. Jamie did notice two frequently recurring
topics.

Paulo’s boyfriend and family.

“Hiro – that’s Tadashi’s little brother – is, like, a little imp. He’s lethally cute but I don’t think he’s
heard a rule he hasn’t been, like, compelled to break yet. He didn’t like me at first. Which is, like,
understandable, since I was kinda stealing Tadashi a bit. He warmed up to me after I took him on a
ride in this baby. Well, more like saved his life, since some, like, yakuza were there…”

And amusing mis-adventures in medicine.

“I once found a pair of nail clippers in a patient once. I know that forgetting surgical equipment is,
like, astonishingly common – I’ve never done it of course – but where would nail clippers have even,
like, come from?”

The peace was broken about twenty minutes out from Jamie’s house. Paulo dropped his light-hearted
rambling for voice with a doctor’s authority laced through it. The change caught Jamie’s attention,
and he stopped idly gazing out the window to look at Paulo. The model-esque Greek met his eyes,
glancing down at where Jamie’s bandages were hidden, before turning back to the road.

“When you injure yourself it’s important to rest. To take the weight off what’s been broken. The first
part of healing needs that. But you can’t stay still forever. Or you’ll waste away. If you want to heal
strong, you need to start using it, just a little. Ease back into it. Because what is enough to when
you’re lying down is not enough when you’re running around. Same goes for mental wounds.

“Jamie, I’m a doctor. I know when someone is hurting. I can only guess what hurt you. My advice is
to focus on yourself for a little while, but don’t cut yourself off from your family and friends.”

Something curdled in Jamie’s gut at the mention of family and friends. At least with strangers the
contact was once and fleeting. Barely anything at all. But family. They would expect him to be there.
To put in an effort.

Jamie didn’t answer. He just gave Paulo the silent treatment and turned back to looking outside. A
bitter atmosphere surrounded the rest of the trip.

“Thank you for the lift,” was all Jamie offered, when he stood at the curb outside his house.

“Not a problem, dude,” said Paulo grinning.

Paulo sauntered around and got back in the driver’s seat. Jamie was about to turn when he heard the
window open. Paulo was leaning across the car to achieve eye contact. And he’d donned his serious
doctor persona again.

“But seriously talk to someone you trust. Call me if you like. Just don’t let it fester!”

Jamie didn’t get to respond (not that he wanted to), because Paulo departed with an engine roar and
squealing tires. Jamie inhaled and started up the steps. He’d made it home for Christmas. He didn’t
get to knock on the door before it was thrown open and his mother dragged him into a hug.

“Jamie! My big college boy!”

Jamie lifted his arms to return the gesture. He had hoped being home might be a relief, but it didn’t
really feel like anything. At least he could go through the motions.

“Hi mom. Nice to be home. Trip was horrible, I’m gonna go take a nap.”

His mom released her grip to lean back and survey Jamie. She frowned slightly and brushed a thumb
over the tired shadows of his eyes.

“Okay, not a problem. Sophie probably won’t be up until noon. We can have brunch.”

Jamie smiled, for real this time, and headed on up to his room. He dropped his bag by his desk, and
flopped onto his bed. Staring at his fake star covered ceiling, surrounded by childhood paraphernalia,
Jamie finally relaxed. He was alone, without even an imaginary friend.

Comments on “NOTICE OF CLOSURE” have been disabled.

Chapter End Notes

Next: Jack deals with the attacker.

Sorry it’s a little short, but there's not much to it. Jamie isn't okay, and won't be a for a
while. Does mean I'll get to dealing with Cupid quicker. (Except I have band camp this
weekend, which is not a very good place for writing).

I may edit this when I post the next chapter. There's a couple of things I could add, but I
wanted to power on.
Winter's Wrath

Chapter Summary

Jack is not happy. Cupid has kidnapped his boyfriend. So Jack is going to give the "love god" a piece of his mind. And maybe a blizzard to the face.

After seeing what Cupid has actually done, Jack's going to a bit worse than that.

TWs: Generally not a happy chapter. Same as chapter 13 (attempted non-con, violence) plus some (at least references to) murder and torture. Plus (to be explained in later chapters) OOC behaviour.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

UNDER (TEMPORARY) NEW MANAGEMENT

Hi Bienettes!!

My name is Jack, and I’m going to be minding the site for a little while. I’m a friend of Jay (I’m not going to call him Uncle because I’ve known him since he still had baby teeth). It’s not my place to share details, but things happened and Jay needs to take some personal time to deal with them.

Yes, Jay doesn’t want anything to do with running J’aime Bien right now. However, this site is kind of his baby, and I know he’d regret pulling it down if he did. So I’ve changed the passwords and won’t return control until he’s back on his feet.

In the meantime I’m going to take up the task of answering your questions. Don’t worry, I’ve been Jay’s sounding board in the past and have submitted a couple questions myself. Okay. I’ll admit most where a little stupid, and sometimes Jay used them as examples of what not to do (e.g. ICE was me). But a good comedian needs to know what’s right and wrong to properly craft a joke.

I solemnly promise to do my best to help you while Jay’s away,

(Uncle?) Jack

“I’m going fucking to kill him! Who the Pitch does he think he is, kidnapping my boyfriend!”

Jack continued his rant even as the rushing Wind prevented any words actually sounding. In fact, he was traveling so fast he couldn’t see anything. Or breathe actually. Good thing he didn’t need to. Jamie’s college wasn’t far from Oregon, maybe a two hours by mortal plane. Jack planned to be there in less two minutes. He had to recover time lost due to Cupid using his teleport as a stun grenade again. Jack only knew he’d arrived when the Wind dropped him back through the sound barrier.

Still, at this speed if he hit anyone, they’d go flying.

Good thing his target was out in the open. The pink haired bastard was crouching near the roof
access, wings half open over himself. Looked like Jamie gave him the slip. Atta boy.

Cupid raised his arm and brought it down like a hammer.

Jack fell from the sky. He frantically patted his front more concerned with trying to find where he’d been stabbed than avoiding the ground. He couldn’t find anything, even though there was a burning hollowness in his chest. Almost as bad as when Pitch broke his crook. It took Jack a painful moment to realise what had happened.

“No! No. No, no, nonononononono…”

Jamie’s belief was gone. Cupid had killed his believer. Jack didn’t have time to process to this. If he started he’d go hide in a glacier for years. No. Jack needed to deal with Cupid first. It was a relapse in behaviour but Jack boxed up his centre for a while. He needed to function. This was not a time for fun.

Frost soared back into the sky, the local temperature plummeting with his rage. Eros had taken the life of one of Winter’s own. Winter would take its reparations. Dragging his impromptu blizzard, Frost plummeted towards the soon to be gone god.

The reckless thing that he was, Eros’ vessel stood and faced him. The archer raised his bow and loosed arrow after arrow at the storm bearing down on him. None came close to Frost with the Wind fouling their courses. The Wind surrounded the pair, obeying Frost’s silent command and preventing Eros from taking flight.

The archer was shouting and howling like a monkey, and Frost didn’t care. He’d sealed his fate by his own actions, and no one ever said Winter was a forgiving season.

Apparently Eros’ vessel was reckless but not completely lacking self-preservation because in a sudden flash of light he was gone. No matter. Frost knew where his lair was.

A groan drew Frost’s attention to the body lying on the roof. His own was alive. Spilling precious red onto the thin snow, but alive. Part of him wanted to hurt the mortal for causing him so much pain, but Jack refused. Jamie would not betray him willingly.

Jack reached out to gently touch Jamie’s unconscious face, still tight with fear. Perhaps he was hibernating? The skin under Jack’s fingers was dangerously close in temperature to his own. This place was far too exposed for sleeping. An idle thought had the cold receding as the spirit drew it all inside. Jack slipped a hand under Jamie so he could carry the mortal back to his room. Lifting the boy, Jack jostled him to the edge of wakefulness. Just enough for him to start judging reality. And to find Jack wanting.

It was another stab to Jack’s heart when Jamie fell through his arms to floor. Quite literally. Jack reached out again for Jamie’s attention, but his fingers passed through the mortal’s cheek. Groggy eyes darted around fearfully, looking for something (or someone) but finding nothing but snow.

Jack swallowed and rocked back on his heels. Far enough to dodge should Jamie threaten to pass through him, but close enough that he hadn’t abandoned his first (now ex-)believer. There wasn’t much he could do, but there were two things. First, Jack extracted his phone and dialled a number he’d only ever prank-called before.

“…University Campus Police. How can we help?”

Jack was silent for a moment, spinning a believable story.
“I saw two guys on the roof of Robinson Hall, and I think they were fighting,” Jack made no effort to hide the worry in his voice, not that he could act right now, “One’s gone now and the other is just lying there on the roof.”

“Okay. I’m sending someone out,” the operator spoke with a calmness that Jack needed, “Where are you?”

“Across the quad in the Bomba Building.”

While Jack stayed on the line, answering questions and bullshitting details, he did what first aid he could. Which being semi-intangible and a winter spirit wasn’t much. But he had to do something. Jack tried to apply pressure to the wounds, though most of his “success” was imagined.

There wasn’t much point continuing to talk to the operator, but he didn’t want to hang up and make them think it was a prank call. Jack didn’t hang up until the officers came up onto the roof. Judging by the way bored expressions flipped to concern, they had thought it was a prank.

Though he didn’t want to leave Jamie alone, Jack did float away enough to perch atop the roof access. He couldn’t hover where arms would be passing through him, but he couldn’t leave Jamie alone.

Jack was giving Cupid lead time to prepare, but he didn’t care. He needed to be sure Jamie was in safe hands. Only when the paramedics arrived and carefully took the mortal away on a board, did Jack think about heading after Cupid again.

The moment his own was inside, Frost blasted off into the sky again. A raw fury against the world gripped him. One he hadn’t felt since the first mortal he’d adored had died one early spring day, two and half centuries ago. She had been full of laughter and stories. Despite the way she loathed his pond, Jack couldn’t help but be drawn to her.

The shortest route from his own’s college to Eros’ floating lair wasn’t directly east but to head north to the edge of the Arctic Circle. Frost deviated a little further north, into the region where winter ruled unopposed. He wouldn’t leave any chance of Eros’ vessel escaping a second time.

Frost seized the polar vortex and headed south. He spun it tighter and stronger as he travelled. More to avoid wasting any of its power, than any concern about the repercussions of smashing through the jet stream’s loop over the north Atlantic. Where the cyclone in Frost’s grip began the size of a medium country, now he’d concentrated it to a medium city’s size. It was closer to a tornado than a cyclone now. Or possibly something from Neptune.

Eros’ lair displayed all the idiocy Frost remembered. A castle in the clouds, moored in skies not far from the poles. How was that defensible?

Not that Frost cared to lay siege, when he could lay waste.

The vortex slammed into the castle, spinning and tearing at it. Suddenly there was cacophony as the Wind shrieked through the myriad decorative holes in the castle. The unnatural pink clouds were consumed by the blizzard, briefly revealing the foundation stones of the castle before dark, crackling clouds wrapped around. The momentum of Frost’s storm pushed the castle across the isle below and out over the North Sea.

Frost delegated control of the storm to the Wind, his focus on preventing his prey’s escape. Mortals had a curious concept of coldness so absolute that everything stops. He took the idea and laced the air with it, neutralising any attempt at escape magic. Frost left it an idea rather than fact, a trap for
things beyond the material. Otherwise his storm would be frozen too.

Storms are ephemeral, and castles made of stone, so one might think the castle safe. This would be true for a well maintained keep (which this was) facing a normal blizzard (which this wasn’t). Centuries of erosion passed in seconds as the vortex polished the castle to nothing. Soon the Wind got into the cracks and started freeing car-sized stones to crash into the sea below. Booming sounds arrived seconds later, providing an uneven bass to the Wind’s high-pitched cries.

Most of the towers were gone now. Their lace supports no match for the Wind’s ferocity. In fact all the filigree merely provided finger holds for it to tear at. The curtain wall had fallen in places, and from within the castle bled deep red smoke.

A flash of pink and white soared out through one of the holes. The figure struggled to reach Frost, but both knew the Wind was allowing him passage to its commander.

“Enough!” yelled Eros’ vessel, sculling his wings and holding his sword at the ready. “You go too far!”

Frost noted the archer’s tacit admittance that a bow was useless here. He almost smiled in vicarious triumph at the way blood smoked from Cupid’s nose – proof Frost’s own had defended himself. But this was not a joyous occasion.

“And leaving my own to die wasn’t too far?”

“Your mortal is still alive!”

“Only due to my intervention.”

“But I knew you would, so he was safe!”

“ Barely, and now I am nothing but a cool breeze to him.” Lightning struck the remaining tower, toppling it. Frost waited out the booming thunder, almost smirking at Cupid’s flinch. “So I will ensure you are simply nothing.”

Frost’s conduit was a shepherd’s crook. A perfect fit for a guide and protector to the young. It was a tool of peace, not a tool of execution. But Frost could change that. He could fill the curve of the crook with ice, fan it out, and sharpen it to a razor edge. But no. Just as he would not delight in this, Frost would not taint his symbol.

Especially when he had such a storm at his command. The Wind curled tighter around their prey, and grasped at him like it did the castle. Cupid’s sword was wrenched from his grip, feathers from his wings, and hail cut into him. From each cut red smoke billowed, just like his castle or his nose.

“It’s a test!” screamed Cupid.

Frost cocked his head and the Wind’s attack subsided. Desperation was clear in the love god’s voice, but there was a chance.

“For you to prove your love is true.”

“Oh? I have a test for you,” Frost’s voice had been cold so far, but now it gained an edge, “Pass it and I will spare you.”

“Anything.”
“Heal my mortal’s heart.”

“I can’t!” Cupid’s voice cracked, as pleas became useless rationalisations, “Even if I used a golden arrow, he’d still hate you. He’d love you and hate you. And it would drive him mad.”

“Then you fail my test, god.”

The Wind spun again, resuming its task. Frost watched impassively. Sometimes winter killed slowly, sometimes instantly. This looked to be quick. Already Cupid was paling from the blood loss, even his hair losing its red to smoke. The god was reduced to ranting, his words now a rabid dog’s spiteful and futile bites in the face of death.

“At first I didn’t want him. Not even as a replacement. But then he caught me like he caught you. I was going to make him mine. A consort to hold me up. I am the God of Love! I decide who loves who. But. He. Said. No! No one tells me no!”

“Really?” asked Frost, his softer nature incredulous, “You thought because you’re the God of Love you could make Jamie Bennett fall in love with you? Pitch Black is fear and he can’t scare him.”

“Correction: I can make the brat scared to his bones. He has just annoyingly mastered the skill of ignoring it.”

Frost rolled his head to look at the interloper (better than flinching like Cupid). But then, Frost couldn’t be ambushed surrounded by his element like this. Though with the storm blocking the star- and moon-light the Nightmare King was in his element too. He stood there on a small block of airborne black sand, much less affected by the wind than he had any right to be.

“Why are you here?” sighed Frost, opening an eye in the storm. A little starlight shone down, but the moon was absent.

“It isn’t every day an immortal is consumed by fear of freezing to death,” Black answered Frost, before examining Cupid’s condition, “And you maintain we couldn’t work together.”

Cold and dark were an effective combination yes, but their vessels Frost and Black wouldn’t be. Their aims and approaches differed far too much.

“We can’t,” Frost reaffirmed.

“Yet you dare trespass against me.”

“I’m not trying to scare him, I am punishing him.”

“Because what he did to your precious Last Light?”

“Yes,” Frost hissed, the Wind shrieking with him.

“I don’t think your punishment matches the crime.”

“Yes!” shouted Cupid, “That’s what I was saying!”

“A quick death seems too merciful,” mused Black, “don’t you think?”

“Wait! No!”

“Why do you care?” asked Frost. He didn’t care to draw out Cupid’s punishment for the sake of it. He wasn’t a cat, playing with his food.
“You forget, nuisance he may be, the Bennett boy was one of my few believers. And furthermore, like you Guardians,” sneered Black, “he was mine to bring low.”

Frost considered Black’s claim. Jamie did (once) believe in every spirit he’d learnt about, and there was a personal connection between the Last Light and the Nightmare King. Frost doubted Cupid had acted to slight Black though. The love god looked even worse now that his possible advocate had sided against him.

“How would you punish him then?” Frost asked, his voice still coolly disinterested.

“I would finish stripping him of the Mantle he has disgraced,” said Black, his little cloud circling both Frost and the trapped spirit, “then I’d take the now-mortal and teach him true fear. Make his life a living nightmare. Keep that up until he wants do die. Then keep going until I’m bored or satisfied. I’ll probably grow bored first. Only then would I let him have the mercy of death.” Black sent a predatory grin over Cupid’s shoulder at Frost, “I’d even let you have the honour of killing him, if you don’t care to get your hands dirty with the rest of it, Guardian.”

Frost was tempted. Sorely. Cupid hadn’t killed Jamie, the mortal would probably survive the night. But he would have to live with whatever curse he’d received for the rest of his life. A quick death didn’t really compare. However, Frost couldn’t maintain this detachment forever, and he would not twist childish fun to torture. But if Black took that burden?

Had Frost’s heart not been frozen he might have agreed. But he didn’t. He had enough presence of mind to realise that a deal with the Nightmare King was never wise. Especially when you handed him a pawn to break down and rebuild. Merely negotiating had cost Frost in the past.

“No,” said Frost.

Before Black could reply, Frost lifted the dam preventing the cold from drowning all Cupid’s remaining heat. The frozen body fell into the sea like a perverse comet, trailing the last of the red smoke stored within.

A harpoon of sand erupted from Black’s cloud, chasing the falling body. It slowed and retracted after crossing only half the increasing gap. Black summoned his oversized scythe and settled into a non-aggressive stance. The Nightmare King’s expression was thoughtful as it lifted back up to Frost.

“I didn’t think you capable of such… finality, Frost. But you’ve made a mistake,” Black warned, “I’m curious as to how you’ll clean up the mess you’ve made this time.”

With that last jab, Black slipped out of the light and disappeared. The absolute zero ward made it so nothing could teleport but didn’t hamper someone who could become nothing. Frost released the ward since its intended prisoner was gone.

Frost hung in the eye of the polar cyclone for a few slow heartbeats, just watching as the last few stones were torn asunder and dropped. He’d spent maybe half the storm’s power cruelly overpowering Cupid and his castle, but that still left a staggering amount. Frost wasn’t sure he had the energy to put it back.

The ring of storm clouds were bruised greys and blacks, occasionally illuminated by cracks of lightning. In the starlight Frost could see the faint pink residue of the red smoke drawn from both castle and owner. Without any other distractions, Frost could see that it was clumping and swirling together.

The writhing red mass contracted into a humanoid form. It was curiously unstable. It could be male
or female, young or old. However it wasn’t completely undefined. It maintained near-perfect symmetry and all of its shapes were the peak of health. As it walked on air towards Frost, it reached up and stretched, baring smooth planes and teasing curves. It stopped just beyond the sweep of Frost’s staff and set its hands on its hips.

“We thank you,” said Eros, with a perfunctory bow, “For freeing us.” Its face broke into a salacious grin and suddenly it was pressed up against Frost, hands petting and hips grinding. “However will we repay you?”

Frost separated them with a burst of cold air, and levelled his crook at the primordial. A frown temporarily marred Eros’ perfect suggestion a face.

“You really have sealed yourself away. *But…* we remember who you loved.”

Eros’ change was like a blur coming into focus. Androgyny became masculinity, timelessness crystallised to youthful adult, and vague impressions became a familiar face. A rounded jaw, wide open eyes, and a warm smile.

“Don’t you dare!” shouted Jack, sparking power coalescing around his crook, “Don’t you dare steal his face!”

The image of Jamie Bennett sculpted in reds and pinks, flinched and brought a woefully hurt expression to bear.

“But Jack, we could be wonderful together. We’d never forget you, never *leave* you.”

“You’re not real!”

“We could be,” the image pouted masterfully. Then flaunted the mischievous grin Jack had taught him, “We could be better.” One hand brushed down its side wiping away an appendectomy scar – “No flaws” – the other moving up in front of his face – “No widening gap” – revealing a pre-college Jamie. The first hand travelled lower dragging Jack’s gaze with it, “A little less here? And maybe a little more here?”

“No!”

“No?” asked the not-Jamie, tilting his head sideways to reveal a deep red mark nestled under his jaw.

“No,” Jack managed. Why hadn’t he just blasted the thing yet? He still had half the polar vortex to bring to bear. Actually, less than that, some of it had slipped his control to batter Scandinavia. No, Jack knew why, he couldn’t bring himself to attack even an illusion of his boyfriend.

The image smirked, his gaze raking down Jack, “You say one thing, your body says another.”

Suddenly Jack was terribly aware of how uncomfortable his pants were. They were tight and chafed against a foreign weight in them.

“You’re not him,” said Jack, possibly more to himself than the other. He hated when things turned into mind games.

“What does that matter?” the not-Jamie said with a shrug, “We could be everything you want, everything you don’t know you want.”

“You’re not him,” repeated Jack.
“Not the boy you love? Allow us to let you in on a secret,” the image leant forward and cupped a hand around his lips, but fortunately for Jack’s nerves didn’t come any closer. “Love is an illusion. It isn’t real. Just a fabrication people weight themselves down with,” not-Jamie cocked his head, baring the hickey again, “Right now a ten thousand people are saying I love you to someone they won’t talk to ever again. What does exist is us. Not silly love, but want.”

“What I want is my Jamie back. And you’re not him!”

Jack highlighted his objection by lancing lightning at the faux-Jamie. The image made no effort to defend himself, letting the bolt strike him right in the heart. Instead he laughed even as he burst into motes of gold and red.

Laughter which continued even after that. Jack honestly wasn’t surprised when the red smoke started to congeal again. For a brief moment it took Jamie’s form again before slipping back out of focus.

“You’re no fun,” huffed the ever-shifting figure, “We were just playing. We’re one of the progenoi, did you really think a little lightning would destroy us?”

Jack mentally swore. That had not been a “little” lightning, that had been several thunderheads’ worth. Plus, some inane brain cell shouted objections at being called no fun.

“But,” mused Eros, “though we could make you bow to us, you’ve ruined the moment. Why work for you, who won’t be going anywhere, when thousands would throw themselves at our feet?” Eros clapped its hands and held them in front of its chest, “Seven billion people! And no mortal prison keeping them from us!

“See you later Jack,” promised Eros, blowing a kiss from his open palm, “we’ll be waiting for you!”

Eros’ mocking laughter echoed long after the figure disintegrated back into smoke. Leaving Jack alone in the eye of the storm.

A super-storm of his own making, even worse than the infamous blizzard of seventeen sixty-eight. Jack closed his eyes, and shoved the mess with Eros and Jamie aside. As much as it grated, it could wait. Fixing this storm couldn’t. Drawing on his dwindling reserves, Jack raised his crook. He had a storm to shepherd home.

Sunny
Hope Jay’s troubles are resolved soon!
14 hr ago

Anonymous
Are you the ******* who asked whether it was gay if you kept saying “no homo” after each thrust?
14 hr ago

Jack
Nope. Even I’m not that stupid.
7 hr ago

Anonymous
Who are you? Why do you think you can replace our dear Jay?
12 hr ago

Mens Health
Do you need assistance going the distance?
9 hr ago

Jack
No I think I’m good thanks
7 hr ago

NERD
I’m sorry to hear things are bad for Jay, but I’m glad too hear the site’s not going away forever. Uncle Jay really helped me, and I’m sure he’s not done helping people
6 hr ago

Chapter End Notes

Next: Jamie navigates holiday shopping. And unwanted family attention.

Fun fact I: The polar vortex spends a lot of time as two vortexes, one over Baffin Island. Which isn't far off the great circle (the shortest distance on a sphere between two points, the equator is one) between the NW US and the UK midlands.

Once again, apologies for lateness. This was not a chapter that came easily. Partly because I built it up in my head a bit too much. Partly because the first pass failed because Jack arrived early enough to prevent the attack. Partly because the middle third really wanted to be written in present tense. Partly because I got swept up in the gruesome-punishments for Cupid bandwagon. (Which turns out that despite Jack's loathing for Cupid he didn't want to join in). Partly because we've reached about the point where my plot outline gets a little fuzzy and I've been spending time filling it in.

Fun fact II: Seraphina was going to make an appearance at the end to help Jack with the storm, but I ended up stopping the chapter before it. She might appear in the next Jack POV chap, though that might skip the storm clean-up. Who knows? The author doesn't! (Though Seraphina was totally the reason Pitch wasn't buffeted by the storm).

Jack taking over Agony Uncle duties would be why I asked for relationship questions earlier. Melodramatic questions (that Jamie might dismiss, but Jack would enjoy) are welcome too! Feel free to ask in the comments or my inbox, whatever. If you want extra anonymity my tumblr is open too.
A Christmas Carol

Chapter Summary

Jamie endures Christmas shopping with Sophie, suffers the attention of a crazy LARPer, and muses about the true meaning of Christmas.

Sophie makes a bit of a mess of things, while Jack continues to text.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Dear Uncle Jay,

I have been dating a guy for months. He bends over backwards and always makes me feel special but lately I have been feeling that our relationship is really unbalanced. He always gets me presents, pays for dates and rearranges his schedule to make time for me. The thing is, is I am a university student while he has a well paying full time job. I can't afford to spoil him like he does me and it makes me feel guilty. I have tried to talk to him about it but he waves off my concern. I feel like I am using him and am starting to not like the person who I see in the mirror. I am starting to think he's better off without me.

Would it be wrong of me to let him go?

From- Don't want to be a kept boy

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Jamie suspected he was the only person around who found the Christmas carol muzak the most enjoyable part of the holiday shopping experience. Not to say he liked the repetitive, offensively non-offensive, terribly mixed audio. But it was less of an irritant than the glittering decorations and banners with hollow salutations. Worse still were the people. His “fellow” shoppers, who Jamie was treating as soulless robots since they projected the same attitude. Always rushing, pushing, making noise.

[I’m off to see the wizard. The wonderful wizard of north]

He hadn’t wanted to come on this trip, but Jamie knew he’d have to face the muzak at some point. He couldn’t not get his family gifts. And his acquaintances he supposed. This morning he’d felt almost energised and naively thought that would last. Plus, if he delayed too long he’d have fight against the Christmas Eve crowds, and no one wanted to do that.

Jamie hated how moving through a shopping mall of strangers was now a laborious trial. He knew he hadn’t had this kind of problem before. It didn’t make any sense, and that just made it more annoying. Jamie wasn’t proud of his choice to try and power through whatever it was. He knew better than that, but for a brief moment that morning he’d honestly thought he could pretend he was okay well enough to fool himself. Now he was reduced to using his phone as a social shield.

[He wasn’t home. Weird. He should be really busy right now]

“Jamie! Where to next?” chirped Sophie.
She popped up in front of Jamie, forcing him to stop marching lest he bowl her over. Jamie took a step back and tried to cross his overladen arms.

“You choose. I don’t really care.”

Sophie narrowed her eyes and crossed her bag-less arms successfully. She glared for a moment, before starting to count off with one hand.

“Well you got that cookbook for Mom, but you haven’t gotten anything for Cupcake or Fairycake. Or Jack. Or me! Wait, are any of the cousins deserving of presents this year?”

Jamie shrugged, even as he was half distracted by the mention of the mysterious Jack. It wasn’t the first time Jamie’s sister or mom had mentioned whoever-he-was. Jamie wasn’t sure what to do with the impression he was building from the scraps of information they dropped. His mom had asked whether Jack would be visiting at some point, but hadn’t seemed surprised when Jamie answered that he didn’t think Jack would make it. Other than that, she’d dropped it.

Sophie however, kept including the guy offhandedly. Never actually talking about him, but Jamie didn’t get through a conversation without her mentioning him. If the prospect of more information didn’t slightly turn his stomach like asking too much about upcoming surgery, Jamie might have demanded answers. For now it was enough that the two in Jamie’s life he should trust most didn’t disapprove of his tenacious texter.

[A Chicago kid told me the worse joke ever, wanna hear it?]

“…ello Earth to Jamie. You’re really stuck in your head, more than usual. Anyway, who next?”

“Cupcake,” Jamie decided.

Buying presents felt so pointless to Jamie. What was the occasion? No one had earned these gifts, it was all just capitalism on top of old school religion. Besides, how could you properly choose a present? Everyone was an island, and you can only guess what they’d want. And most of the time you settle for pandering to some obvious quirk of theirs rather than finding something meaningful. Like, his sister right here. Jamie had no idea what to get her. In fact, how much did he really know about his own sister?

Sophie liked nature, animals, rabbits especially. Her news feed was half-full of social justice petitions and calls to arms about environmental action. The other half childish imagery – stuff about fairies and the Easter Bunny. Jamie didn’t really understand that, but then, she was a teenage girl. How did that translate into Christmas gifts?

[Sandy is being secretive again]

But Sophie wasn’t issue at hand, Jamie reminded himself as they (read: Sophie) started looking for gifts for Cupcake. It was pretty much the same problem as divining what to get Sophie. With the added complication that Cupcake was an adult. Like a proper adult with a job and disposable income.

Jamie had wanted to admit defeat and just get a gift voucher, but Sophie convinced him to buy an actual present. Some kind of fantasy board-game. It doubled as a gift for Fairycake too, saving Jamie some extra work.

Jamie’s exhaustion told him they’d been shopping for hours. His watch agreed, however it only said two hours. As they headed to their next stop – Sophie was after something for a friend – Jamie contemplated calling it a day. But that just meant having to come back another time. Jamie already
knew he’d have to at least once. When he went looking for Sophie’s present. (Though maybe he could save himself some trouble and ask mom about what to get).

[I think it might be that English girl]

The siblings passed the tacky set-up for the Mall Santa on this walking respite. Jamie wasn’t sure why it caught his attention. It was standard fake trees with fake snow, surrounding a big chair. The “big guy” wasn’t around but his elf costumed volunteers were. Dressed in red and green tunics and leggings, with bells on. Jamie couldn’t put his finger on it but there was just something wrong with them.

“Elves much more helpful than real ones, yes?”

Jamie only learnt the hearty, faintly Russian voice was talking to him when massive hands plonked on his shoulders and whirled him around. The Mall Santa had found him. Judging by the guy’s size and the tatts sneaking out his sleeves, “Santa” must be a biker the other eleven months of the year. In all of his disaster planning for today, Jamie hadn’t considered the risk of being manhandled by Santa.

“Uh, sir, could you let go of me please?”

Choosing polite words probably would cover being unable look the stranger in the eyes. It seemed to work, as Santa sheepishly raised his hands in mock-surrender and dropped them to hang by his sides. Didn’t really make the biker any less intimidating given he was still almost two feet taller than Jamie. The height disparity made it seem he wasn’t looking Jamie in the face but rather the chest.

“And what would you like for Christmas, young man?”

“How is that not offensive?”

“Aren’t you only meant to ask the kids who line up to see you that?” asked Jamie trying to distract the guy, “Besides I’m too old to believe in Santa.”

“No one is too old to believe!” boomed Santa.

Jamie could deal with a deep method acting LARPer one-on-one (just) but now the crowd of robots was starting look at them. He needed to get out of this confrontation. And well, there was an easy way to do that.

Jamie took a step backwards, turned aside and walked away.

Luck seemed to be in his side because a couple of kids burst from the crowd intercepting Santa for him. After quickly surveying the nearby stores for one where he wouldn’t accosted (by customers or staff), Jamie entered a newsagency. Santa would get called to his big seat and then Jamie could go find Sophie.

To while away the time, Jamie browsed. All the newspapers and people magazines seemed to care about was sex. He sadly understood that for the glossy magazines, but was true of the papers as well. All the headlines were about people in power having affairs, or otherwise-would-be-nobodies getting caught doing the unspeakable, or both.

[The set up today felt really boring. Just another day]
Hoping for something more wholesome, Jamie headed further back to topical magazines. Even they weren’t safe. One of them had a “Sex Special Edition” out. At least this one’s cover story was the surprise blizzard last week. The article was full of harrowing pictures of snow and ice. Sadly the explanation for the perplexing displacement of the polar vortex amounted to: we’re not sure exactly, but almost certainly climate change.

“There you are!”

Jamie looked up at Sophie’s voice and managed a weak grin. A few minutes in pseudo-solitude had recharged him some. Perhaps enough to endure the rest of this shopping trip.

So he did. Jamie spent the next few hours following his sister around, playing the dutiful pack mule. He did manage to pick up a couple of gifts for his other friends. Jamie even summoned the mental presence to note some possible presents that caught Sophie’s eye.

[Sometimes I don’t like xmas. My family are so polarised about it]

The partial success of the expedition helped Jamie feel less guilty about dropping the bags in the hall and flopping face down on the couch. He heard a second flump as Sophie crashed into the armchair.

“I’m not that bad,” huffed Sophie, poking Jamie in the side – probably with her toe. When Jamie didn’t respond she poked him again and said more softly, “Jamie, what happened to you? You’ve been weird all this week.”

Jamie shrugged.

“You don’t talk about it, you don’t talk about anything,” Sophie continued, in what Jamie supposed was the beginnings of frustration, “and Jack won’t tell me what happened. Says that I’m still a kid. I’m sixteen, I might not be an adult but I’m not a baby! Something’s wrong with my brother and I want to fix it but no one will tell me anything!”

Sophie was definitely angry now. Jamie however just felt numb. Numb and an urge just to go and hide. He rolled to his feet and headed up the stairs without a word.

“Jamie! Wait!” Sophie cried, then after a tell-tale thud, “Ow, stupid table, come back! I didn’t mean it like that! It’s just you came back from college and it’s like someone kept half of you there.”

Jamie ignored the rest of Sophie’s apologetic ranting and closed his bedroom door on her. He flopped face down on his bed, and just floated until she gave up and went away. He rolled over and stared up at the faded plastic stars on his ceiling. Faded. That was a good word. Or maybe washed out.

When Jamie resurfaced from his musings, the afternoon sun was now orange beams the cutting across his room. He lolled his head sideways and was only mildly surprised by the time. Had he really just wasted over three hours on synonyms for “faded”?

He hadn’t even considered the implications of Jack talking to Sophie but keeping secrets. With a mix of trepidation and curiosity that he didn’t understand, Jamie checked what messages he’d received from his one-way text pal. It was like an arachnophobe repeatedly looking under a web covered porch – did that make him a masochist?

[I hope ur day was okay]

[Mine wasn’t to bad. Just more work than play]
Jamie still didn’t understand what logic lay behind Jack’s texts. Both in continuing to contact someone who never responded, and how he seemed compelled to embellish his daily life with fantasy.

Jamie knew Sophie was right though. There was something wrong with him. He wasn’t really functioning right now, more coasting through the motions. He’d tried to make this call a couple of times already, maybe tonight would be the night? Jamie skimmed down his contacts. It was evening now though, and the holidays besides, calling out of the blue would be rude. He could make an appointment in the morning. Next time he was energised in the morning he’d definitely make this call rather than go shopping.

The text couldn’t have been intended as a prod to make the call. But it did. Jamie tapped the little green phone and listened to it ring. Part of him wanted to cancel the call before it was picked up, but Jamie knew from experience that would just earn him another person persistently trying to contact him.

“Hello Jamie. What would you like to talk about?”

Jamie’s breath froze at the voice. This was a person who knew his secrets, who could destroy him. But he had trusted them once, and he needed to trust them again.

“I think I need to see you again Doctor Joyce.”

“You can call me William, you know.”

Jamie ignored the invitation, better to keep things business-like, “When can I make an appointment, doctor?”

“Let me see, how’s ten tomorrow morning?”

_DWTBAKB, do you mind if I call you DWT for short? Anyway, I understand where you’re coming from. I grew up poor and now am surrounded by friends with money. I never really know what to with all the stuff they give me, and I often feel unable to repay them. But I’ve learned that isn’t the best way to think about it. Look at it in more relative terms._

_That’s money, other thing is time. Which should be a more level playing field. Perhaps you could invest time instead? Make things or something? Or compromise to alternate in rearranging your schedules? Idk I’m not good at this._

_Channelling my man Jay, you’ve got to talk with your boyfriend. You need to get through to him how your relationship style makes you uncomfortable. If the situation continues to make you not like yourself, then to be frank, you may need to break it off. Not because you’re not good for him, but because the relationship isn’t good for you._

_Uncle(??) Jack_
Next chapter: Meeting Dr Joyce (perhaps), and Jamie overhearing an important conversation (definitely).

Once again apologies for the gap between updates (without even an extra long chapter). I lost three weeks to full-time placement rounds, and also unsurprisingly it's hard to be motivated when you've given you main POV depression. So Jamie's recovery has been sped up even further for the sake of me actually writing the thing.

I forgot add, for those curious about Behind the Scenes. North wasn't meant to be in this chapter. Just a run of the mill Mall Santa, who was going to freak Jamie out by falling into his Uncanny Valley for some reason. But no. North decided to take a break from last minute Christmas prep to take a look-see at the Last Light.
Venting and Eavesdropping

Chapter Summary

Jamie talks to someone, gets talked to, and overhears others talking.

Jack breaks the rules.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Dear Uncle Jack,

(Hi! Sorry to hear things aren’t going well for Jay, but it’s cool you’re standing in for him. Let him know, all his fans are wishing him the best! Might be too early to tell, but I think you’re doing a pretty good job. Keep up the good work! Anyway, onto my question:)

What do you when your boyfriend’s family are too helpful? It’s nice they’re accepting and all, but they can’t seem to stay out of our business. First it was just unasked for advice, then them organising dates for us.

Now they’ve started sharing things my bf told them – things he wasn’t ready to tell me yet. I’ve tried telling them to stop, but they don’t seem to understand. I’ve even started covering my ears whenever they’re about to reveal something, but I can’t always be ready for it.

So far it’s all be pretty tame stuff, but it’s still annoying. I’m pretty good at separating player/character knowledge but that’s a bit different. I don’t want to avoid my boyfriend’s family (tricky since he lives at home) because other than this issue they’re pretty neat. What do you think I should do Uncle Jack?

Unfairly Helped

Doctor Joyce’s practise was found in the most eccentric house in Burgess. One could imagine that it started out as a perfectly normal house. A simple one-and-a-half storey affair, with timber-board walls and shingle roof. Then some force either pinched the roof ridge and pulled it up, making it look like a witch’s hat, or pushed what was a convex barn roof into a concave one. Add a couple of towers, a bunch of wrought iron lace, and a widow’s walk. But just in case that was becoming too gothic, paint the whole thing in warm, bright colours. It made for a welcoming, fantastical place.

[Do you ever wonder where our imaginary friends go?]

Jamie was terrified. Well, not terrified. He wasn’t scared. No, he just really did not want to go into that place. It wasn’t too late. He could call, make his apologies. Perhaps whoever had been rescheduled for him could have their time-slot back? And really, Doctor Joyce was a child psychologist, Jamie should go find an adult psych. He was twenty-two after – his phone was ringing.

Jamie glanced down at it and wasn’t surprised at the caller ID. After a beat he accepted the call.

“Hello doctor,” said Jamie.
“Are you coming in, or do you want me to come out to you?”

Jamie paused before answering, “I’ll be right in.”

He hung up the phone, pocketed it and took a deep breath. The walk was short and sweet, only because there wasn’t anyone else around. The upside of a one man operation. No one to judge Jamie. No parents, no children. Even Doctor Joyce’s receptionist – his daughter – was absent.

Jamie was both relieved and annoyed. He didn’t stop at the waiting room, walking straight through the doctor’s open door.

“Hello Jamie, what brings you here today?”

Jamie shrugged and took a moment to examine the office. It hadn’t really changed. Some of the details yes, but not the generalities. It was still bright, colourful, and filled with paraphernalia. One wall was books from floor to high ceiling, content maturing from picture books to psyche texts as you rose. Another was windows looking out onto the doctor’s equally fantastical garden. The other two were covered in art. Some professional, some motivational, most of it amateur offerings by the kids.

Doctor Joyce was sitting in an armchair by the window, drinking a cup of coffee. A distant part of Jamie recalled the doctor confessing sometimes the greatest challenge in dealing with small children was not being able to have a hot cup of joe on hand. Satisfied he’d wasted enough time, Jamie sat in the adjacent arm chair. Normally their sessions were frontloaded with small talk, but the doctor let the quiet linger.

Jamie didn’t look directly at the doctor, but rather focused on the doctor’s reflection in the water jug on the coffee table. Seeing him still waiting, Jamie looked up – still not quite at the doctor – and spoke.

“Something broke me again.”

The half-confession was easier than expected. Helped by the knowledge he’d bared his soul here before, even if it had been a long time ago. Helped by the chairs being at right angles. Helped by the art on the walls. Jamie wasn’t telling the man with the notebook this, he was telling the unpolished drawing of a dancing brunet boy. Twirling as orange and brown leaves fell around him. Clothes and scarf blowing every which way, but his feet staying on the ground. His peaceful, skyward turned face demanded more of Jamie, so he continued.

“I know self-diagnosis isn’t reliable but I think I’m depressed. I’m always tired, and what little energy I scrape together burns away too fast. The closest to feeling good I can get at the moment is not feeling irritated, which amounts not feeling anything. Crowds and strangers make me nauseous. I have a guy texting me day and night, and I can’t help but read the messages, even though he makes no sense. I can see it hurting my family, but I can only stand them in small doses, and not with anything meaningful.”

There was a lump in Jamie’s throat that no amount of swallowing could clear. Everything in him felt like crying, but there wasn’t even a tingle around his eyes. His heart was stone and his lungs ash, as he finished the confession, but there was one last thing to be said. The thing Jamie had been deluding himself he could avoid.

“They told me they think I’ve been raped.”

Doctor Joyce didn’t respond immediately. He set down his cup and poured Jamie a glass of water.
He didn’t intrude on Jamie to hand it to him, merely sliding it over to him.

“They?” the doctor prompted, dropping his grandfatherly tone (not an act, Jamie knew) for a more detached professionalism.

“Campus police.” Dispassionately relaying the facts was easy for Jamie. Even if he wouldn’t dare tell anyone else. “I was found on my dorm roof stabbed in the chest. Between a hickey and not being able to remember what sounds like a breakfast date or the rest of my day, they concluded I was roofied and probably sexually assaulted. No evidence of penetration but that doesn’t mean much.”

“And when did this happen?”

“About a week ago, just before I came home from college.”

“Do you think you were sexually assaulted?”

“I–” Jamie’s voice trailed off. He hadn’t really considered it. He’d rather contemplate word choice. He hardly any memories to judge from, just the evidence the police offered. However, “I don’t think so. I was definitely assaulted, I’ve got the stab wounds to show for it. And I could believe something sexual was behind it – that motive makes the most sense. Few things get people attempting murder. But I don’t feel like… I don’t feel like I was raped.”

Jamie dropped his gaze to his toes and raked his hands through his hair. Then smooshed one down his face. What he’d said so far was true, but didn’t feel accurate. Leaving Jamie to muse aloud to his feet.

“Like maybe they said something – insult or come-on – it doesn’t matter. Maybe they attempted to grope me. But I’d like to think I’d put up a fight – or just run if that’d work. So Perhaps the attacker tried something and maybe I escalated things? But still… I don’t feel like I was violated.”

Jamie’s peripheral vision caught the older man grab his coffee mug and lift it out of view. The doctor hummed, though Jamie was unsure whether at the contents of the cup or the confession.

“You’re the one who decides that,” Doctor Joyce began, “And I know this is the kind of issue you’ve dealt with for other people in the past. So I’m here as backup, as I’ve always been.

“This’ll be tricky, especially since it sounds like there’s simply no concrete evidence. We could try some form of memory recovery to be certain, but I’m not sure it would help. It’s far too easy to construct fake memories,” the doctor took another sip, “Is there anything more you want to say about the assault?”

“Not really,” admitted Jamie, what more was there to say?

“I think we should shelve it for the moment. It certainly sounds like the root of the other issues facing you, and I’d like to work on some exercises for dealing with them before you go today. But first, you mentioned a guy who kept texting you?”

While Jamie was kind of glad they weren’t talking about whatever happened during his lost day, the new topic was hardly one he had any firmer an understanding of. But still, what’s the worst Doctor Joyce could do with this knowledge?

“His name’s Jack. I guess we were – are? – friends. Mom and Sophie know him a little. My phone has a long history of texts between us.” Jamie frowned when he realised his phone had appeared in his hands. He was scrolling through the logs, a faint bittersweet amusement at the terrible overabundance of emoji. “They used to be silly, now they’re… I don’t know… earnest? Not sure
about what. Or apologetic. He seems to use me as a confessional.”

Jamie looked back up at the dancing boy, his eyes jumping from leaf to leaf following their swirl around the right half of the page. Something about the composition of the piece was imbalanced. The way the orange flecks circled the boy was mirrored by their whirl on the right, but something was missing.

“May I look? Just at the texts.”

Jamie’s grip tightened instinctively. It was his phone. His privacy. His digital pen-pal. Then he exhaled and deliberately loosened his grip. He leant forward and placed the metal rectangle on the table corner near the doctor with a clack. Jamie didn’t say anything, just pushed it towards his doctor.

“Jamie, are you sure? You don’t have to.”

“Yes,” Jamie told the dancing boy.

Jamie held his breath while Doctor Joyce scanned the texts. His chest hadn’t even began to tighten (any further than from the session in general) before the doctor slid the phone back to him. Jamie snatched it back the moment the doctor’s hand was clear and shoved it back in his pocket.

“Do you think this Jack had anything to do with assault?”

“No,” snapped Jamie, more sudden than his phone’s appearance. “No, even when I got his texts just after the attack, I couldn’t believe it was him.”

“Have you been responding to other people’s texts?”

“No really. Only basic stuff like where to meet in the mall and stuff.”

“So he’s a friend who just texts more than anyone else?”

“I guess,” said Jamie with another shrug. Friend didn’t seem quite right, but he didn’t know what fit better.

“Well, my advice is to double check how to block numbers. You don’t have to right now, he seems harmless at this point. If his messages become hurtful, block him,” Doctor Joyce’s voice was frank, not attempting any fake comfort, “Let’s move onto some techniques to deal with your social anxiety. Maybe he can be a test case once you feel more in control.”

The techniques the doctor taught Jamie were variations on familiar ones from years ago. From when Jamie needed help choosing to eat, help wanting to be heavy enough the wind wouldn’t blow him away.

Jamie was surprised when the chimes of the grandfather clock drifted in. He glanced at the silent clock nestled in the knick-knacks, it had only been ten long minutes into the session a moment ago.

“And you haven’t told your mother yet, have you?”

“…No, not yet,” replied Jamie, glancing back at the dancing boy. He would. Probably.

“In your own time.” Doctor Joyce stood and walked back around his desk, dropping into his chair. Jamie caught the doctor looking at him looking at the dancing boy in the corner of his eye, a curious expression on the doctor’s face. A small smile that didn’t reach his eyes.
“That’s always been one of my favourites,” Doctor Joyce said, “I really love what you did; hiding another boy in between the leaves.”

Jamie frowned, and stood himself, stepping around the coffee table to approach the picture. He’d been staring at it on and off for the last hour and hadn’t noticed any second figure. But now that Jamie knew to look, he could see it. How the leaves left gaps for arms and legs, their fronds curling between invisible fingers. The secret person floating in the leaves, reaching out the dancing boy.

“I’d forgotten,” admitted Jamie.

“It has been a while, though I expect to see you again much sooner. Would Friday, same time work? I’d like to get in a few sessions before you go back to college. I don’t mind conducting sessions over skype but in person just works better.”

“I’ll be free then,” Jamie agreed easily. He didn’t have to check his calendar to know it was free.

Jamie walked to the door and grabbed the handle. He didn’t turn it, feeling there was something he should ask the doctor, something Doctor Joyce would know the answer to. But Jamie couldn’t pin it down to even start wording the question. With a sigh, he opened the door and slipped through.

The waiting room wasn’t empty this time. Doctor Joyce’s daughter was at the reception desk, while a mother and daughter pair sat on the couch. The mother was unmemorable, while the little girl had bright ginger hair. And an odd, raggedy, doll in her hands.

[I like to think they hang around or maybe get passed to another kid]

Jamie avoided eye contact and left the building, his pace just within the bounds for a socially acceptable walking pace. Outside he sped up to an awkward jog, rushing to the safety of his car. He crossed his arms as a pillow for his face and collapsed onto the steering wheel. A deep breath in, a long breath out. Rinse and repeat.

His phone buzzed.

[I’m coming to visit my Last Light rn btw. I think its about time I helped out]

Jamie wasn’t sure who or what a Last Light was. But he had a suspicion. One that made him uneasy. (Especially the ‘my’.)

He didn’t drive straight home. (He almost stayed away until Jack live blogged an all clear.) Instead Jamie took a roundabout route through Burgess. He tried listening to the radio but it was all just lust songs and celebrity gossip. Leaving him only with some classical channel playing the Firebird Suite.

Jamie returned home to a quiet house. Mom was at work, and Sophie probably out with friends. Jamie didn’t call out. He let the door close heavily enough to announce his return, just in case. Jamie tromped up the stairs, following the ghost of eagerness at thought of collapsing face first into his bed.

The knot in Jamie’s chest had just started to loosen when there was an almost inaudible knocking on his door. After a moment it repeated a touch stronger. Jamie wondered how long Sophie would continue to knock. It had to be her; mom was at work, and there was no one else. The knocking came a third time, now reaching half normal loudness.

“Come in,” groaned Jamie, rolling over to watch her entrance.

Sophie slipped in shyly, hands fidgeting with her hair, her presence folding in on itself. Her pose roused old big brother training – to help his little sister. Jamie hoped it wouldn’t be too much effort.
Just watching her pacing made him tired. Despite Sophie’s hesitance, Jamie felt his room suited her better. All the homages to folklore, the pictures of nature, and the games – none of it really fit Jamie any more. Not that he had any plans to replace it with anything.

“I’m sorry,” Sophie said and waited for a response that didn’t come. When she continued, her voice gained the flatness of someone reciting a speech, “I’m sorry for yelling at you yesterday. It wasn’t fair. I know where you went this morning, and I’m glad you did.

“You taught me not to break promises. Because when you break a promise, you break a bit of yourself,” recited Sophie, before starting to ramble, picking up speed as she rushed through the words, “I didn’t say ‘I promise’ but I did say I’d do something if he didn’t do something, which is kind of a promise. He told me something he needed to tell you and I told him if you didn’t tell me that he’d told you I’d tell you myself and you haven’t told me he told you anything. So think I need to tell you something.”

“What?” Jamie asked, beyond confused. He was pretty sure he knew the ‘who’ though.

“I said I’d you that he’s too chicken.”

“Who?” Jamie didn’t know Jack, but from everything he’d put together, Jack and afraid didn’t fit. Maybe it was someone else?

“Jack.”

Jamie grunted and rolled his head, letting his gaze rise to the stars on his ceiling. The name still elicited a visceral reaction. Sent shivers and goose-bumps down his arms, yet curdled his stomach and pained his chest.

Sophie cleared her throat a couple of times, and started to speak, but nothing came of it.

“Too chicken about what?” asked Jamie, not knowing if he wanted to know the answer. Besides, he’d probably already read it in a text.

“That he wants—” Sophie cut herself off. She crossed her arms, huffed, and fiddled with her hair again. Something settled in her and she stared him straight in the eye, “What happened with you and Jack?”

Jamie didn’t know. “Waffles.” What?

Sophie’s eye squinted in apparent confusion but she didn’t ease her glare any.

Jamie was equally confused. Why did he say that? A half-eaten plate of waffles across a booth came to mind. The half-forgotten date before his blank day. “We went out for breakfast, had waffles at IHOP.”

“Like a date?” Sophie leant forward, her gaze intensifying.

“I guess..?” Jamie wasn’t even sure who (if anyone) had been at IHOP with him.

“Well… you going to tell me what happened? Who paid? Did he sweep you off your feet? Did you kiss?”

Jamie pulled his pillow over his face and just groaned. He didn’t want to talk about it. About the date he couldn’t recall. And he couldn’t tell her that.
“Okay, okay, fine I’ll stop being an annoying little pest of a little sister.”

Jamie peeked out from under his pillow, now vaguely concerned with what she might be up to. Sophie sprung to her feet and stretched her arms high. She must have been content with teasing him – for now. She walked over to the door and slipped out.

Then ducked her head back in, bearing a mischievous grin that couldn’t mean anything good.

“But in case Jack was too chicken to come out and say it, he’d like to be your boyfriend.”

And Sophie was gone before Jamie could even decipher what she said. Defeated, Jamie returned to smothering himself. What was he meant to do with this piece of information? He didn’t want a boyfriend. Or a girlfriend. Or anybody. Jack hadn’t said anything about this in his texts. Jamie grabbed his phone and started scrolling back up their history. Was this reason to block him? To reply if only to tell Jack to stop?

Jamie let his phone fall beside him, and returned to his hobby of staring at the ceiling. Again returning to the topic of the mysterious Jack.

Popping ears broke Jamie out of his stupor. He frowned and looked at his arm to find it covered in gooseflesh. He didn’t feel cold. After a moment – or maybe ten – Jamie rolled off his bed. His feet took him to the weather station mounted on his wall. It reported a pressure drop and forecast snow. Well that was a nice excuse to stay in.

Now he was up, Jamie realised he’d… deliberated? (angsted) napped? (sulked) meditated? Whatever, all the way past lunch. For a lack of anything better to do, Jamie left his room. His mom was probably home by now, but hopefully she wouldn’t be in the kitchen.

[Sweet home Ala Burgess]
[Re Old Thad’s new hat I plead the fifth]
[If you want me to go away just say the word]
[Here I go]

Jamie was at the top of the stairs when someone knocked on the front door. He stepped back to peer around the corner. Jamie didn’t want to get dragged into dealing with whoever it was but he probably should know who he was avoiding. If only to who he was hiding from.

“Coming!” called Jamie’s mother. She walked to the door and opened it. She quickly pulled the visitor into a hug, shouting, “Jack! It’s so good to finally meet you!”

Jack was here, in his home. Jack wasn’t meant to be real. Jack was just words on a screen. Not a real person.

“Yes, I was after Jamie?” his mother’s voice filtered up, “I’m not sure he’s home. I can check if you like.”

“That’s okay.” Jack’s voice was deeper than Jamie expected. “You’re the one I need to talk to.”

“Oh? Well, come into the kitchen and I’ll make you a drink. You feel like you could do with some warming up.”
Foreign laughter echoed up the stairwell, evoking both happiness and disgust in Jamie. He didn’t know what to do with them. Emptiness was simpler. His mom’s and Jack’s footsteps padded by into the kitchen. Leaving Jamie with a choice. Retreat to his room as he initially planned, or get closer to listen in? Joining them was not an option.

Despite his disquiet, Jamie was tempted to hear that laugh again. So he slid down the wall and lay on the ground. Jamie wormed his was along, to listen between the balustrade into the kitchen below.

“Yes please!” said Jack, making Jamie think of a kid in an ice cream store.

There were sounds of drawers opening and click of something being turned on.

“I see you stopped dying your hair, young man.”

“I’m a natural white-head, I’ll have you know. The brown’s temporary. Because white on a teen is unnatural.”

“Really? I thought it suited you. And it’s not like you had those ear tunnel things.”

“Hmm… maybe a couple of simple piercings first. Start simple, y’know.”

Jamie’s mother’s laughter danced over the boiling kettle’s rumbling. Neither elicited anything in Jamie. He guessed it was good his mother was laughing, he certainly hadn’t made her do so recently. Next came the sounds of clinking spoons and stirring. Jealousy flared in Jamie – he wanted his mom’s hot chocolate, or just lunch – before the thought of meeting Jack smothered it.

“Your hot chocolate,” said Jamie’s mom, accompanied by the clunk of mug hitting bench, “What did you want to talk to me about?”

“No, he hasn’t. He’s been a little withdrew though…” her voice faded away for a moment before returning angry, “What happened to my boy?”

“Woah, Missus Bee please calm down, drink and I’ll tell you what I know.” There was a pause before Jack continued, his voice only just reaching Jamie. “Disclaimer first, I wasn’t there when it happened and he hasn’t spoken to me since. Hasn’t responded to any of my messages. I think he’s in denial, or maybe repressing? Anyway, we hung out, when to IHOP. When I caught up to him in the evening I found he’d been attacked.”

Jamie couldn’t move, his strength lost to a phantom pain in his chest. Maybe Jack did know more than the cops?

His mother gasped before pleading, “Nothing serious?”

“Sorry, no. Jamie was hospitalised because some fucker tried to stab him in the chest.”

Jamie shivered at the venom in Jack’s tone.

“But they caught him right?” his mother demanded, her voice clipped and precise.

Jamie hated it when his mother was angry. Very rarely did she get pushed to the edge, and Jamie had only had it directed at him once. When he let Sophie play with some other friend of theirs and she ended up needing stitches. Jamie last heard her like this when some kind, old, married couple gave her advice about being a single mother, and that a good strong male influence would make their lives
much easier. And she was furious now. It wasn’t with him but for him, but still Jamie wanted to hide from it.

“Nope, they couldn’t get any evidence on who it was. Besides, they didn’t think it was serious since Jamie was discharged in the morning. And Jamie didn’t press charges, and it’s the holidays. *I* think it was that guy Jamie was helping with his *romance research*. The fucker’s disappeared from campus.”

Jamie had been helping someone with ‘romance research’? What did that even mean? He couldn’t remember working with anyone on something like that. All the working relationships he’d at college were short term and strictly business. Mixing business with ‘pleasure’? Ugh. Maybe it was something to do with his defunct blog? Probably. Jamie was done with that part of his life.

“And you told the police all of this.”

“Hah! I tried but they wouldn’t listen. I just have a hunch.”

There was a lull in conversation, Jamie presumed his mother was considering what Jack had told her. (How dare he?) Probably taking a long draw of her drink. The thunk of her mug on the bench in these situations always made Jamie think of a judge’s gavel.

“You knew Jamie hadn’t told me any of this. So why did you?”

“Sophie’s been asking about it,” said Jack, anger replaced with tiredness, “and it’s not something I want to burden her with. But I think it’s better someone around *Jamie* knows. I’d rather Jamie hate *me* for breaking his trust, than have him suffer on his own.”

Jamie was tensed at the stress Jack put on his name. It sounded like Jack was actually talking to him. Like he knew he was eavesdropping. Time to retreat.

Jamie scurried back to his room as quietly as he could. He crawled onto his bed and just blanked. Jack had been in his house. Had told his mother terrible things. Things that *Jamie* didn’t want to think about, let alone poison her with. Jamie had been keeping up appearances okay, but now the game had changed. His mom would try to be comforting, to be *there*, and under all of it she’d be simmering with maternal fury – and Jamie couldn’t stand the thought of it.

He grabbed his phone and brought up Jack’s number. He could call the guy. Scream at him. Let him know what he’d ruined. But then he’d be talking with the guy who wasn’t meant to be real. Meant to be at a safe distance. So instead Jamie opened the message stack.

[Who do you think you are?]

*I dunno, UH, not let yourself get caught with your boyfriend’s family without him? Wear earplugs whenever he’s not around? Let your boyfriend know ASAP what his family overshared?*

*Uncle (!?) Jack*

Chapter End Notes

Next chapter: What’s Jack been up to until now? (Guest starring Aster and Apollo)

Again I’m not dead! (Even if my home state is burning.) I’m just terrible at working
outside of semester/work. Plus I did try NaNo and a writing course in the last two months. Anyway, I'm a little (more than that) annoyed with myself, since chapter 19 has a Christmas party and it's probably not going to be up until after Christmas. Drat. Might rewrite the letter to Uncle Jack, but decided I need to post and move on.
Dear Uncle Jack,

I need some help with a long distance relationship issue. My beau is about to go overseas for a research position. Not a new problem. There’s plenty of advice about that on the interwebs. My case is a little more fraught.

He’s heading to a country that’s less... accepting. Basically, our relationship is illegal over there. Plus, the place is known for electronic surveillance so what contact we’ll be able to manage is probably going to be watched.

What do you think we should do? Talk in code? Not talk? Break up (temporarily)? Organise a beard for him? Pretend to be his bread?

Soon To Be Guy Back Home

Clean up this mess.

From above the storm looked peaceful. Rolling mounds of fluff sparkling in the moonlight. A slow swirl as they rotated around the eye. No flares boiled up from inside anymore. No lightning scaled the walls of the eye.

Jack was tired, oh so tired. But he had work to do, promises to keep, and miles to go before he could sleep. He would put this storm back where he took it from and then. Then? He wasn’t sure. Either hibernate in the ice or haunt someone.

Clean up this mess.

Jack wasn’t sure he’d even complete the task. His energy was almost spent – in all its forms. (Don’t think about the hole in your heart) He just had to drag it, get it back inside the Arctic Circle. Jack was heading straight north, if he had the energy he’d head round to Canada.

He just had to keep going. Had to keep the mantra going. He had to.
Clean up this mess.

Half spent and without Jack’s rage fuelling it, the storm was easier to work with. Not easy. It was still a massive polar cyclone but it was back to a more earthly scale. (Don’t acknowledge the Lady of Storms – you don’t want to owe that favour.)

Jack circled clockwise – counter to the hurricane – checking its spread. He refused to let it endanger any more people than necessary (than he already had). He would

Clean up this mess.

Jack let go of the storm once it was safely behind the polar front. The storm roared at its freedom, even as its spread weakened it. It prowled a lap of its arctic territory and then curled up over Baffin Island.

Now Jack could go curl up somewhere himself. (Or head south and haunt his lost light.) The Wind set Jack down gently on an ice floe. Jack flopped back and looked up at the sky. Maybe it was rant at the Moon time again.

Clean up this mess.

Well, thanks. He just had to remind himself that besides the storm there was also the massive issue of Eros (whoever they really were) the Protogenoi (whatever that meant) being free (which couldn’t be good).

“Wind!” snapped Jack, “Take me to North!”

The Workshop soon came into view, twinkling merrily in the ice and snow. This close to the big day Jack could feel the atmosphere of anticipation even outside the complex.

Jack landed on the doorstep, right in front of the massive oak doors, engraved with North’s tale. For once he wasn’t sneaking in. Jack reached up (on tip-toes because nothing here was on normal people scale) and yanked on the massive rope by the door. A deep boom, overlaid with bells chiming Santa Claus is Coming to Town rang out.

A panel swung in before the second ‘you better’ revealing a yeti, who grumbled something.

“Hello Harley,” Jack answered, slipping by them, “urgent Guardian business, where’s North?”

Jack marched towards North’s office. No pranks, no teasing yetis, no freezing elves. The furred giants were either working hard at their stations, or ferrying brightly coloured supplies back and forth. The elves were being elves, but when some tried to coax Jack into mischief he just swept them aside with his crook.

Harley caught up to Jack after a bit, grumbling and waving their arms in a different direction.

“Lead on.”

North wasn’t in his office, he was doing rounds of the main assembly floor, under the great dome. Hammers and power tools filled the air, competing with cookies and gingerbread. North was walking along the lines, inspecting work and barking corrections.

“No, no, too much red, paint it green!”

“North!” Jack yelled over the yeti’s frustrated wailing, “I gotta talk Guardian business!”
“Jack!” yelled North back, spreading his arms in the threat of a bear hug. But he didn’t, instead squinting. North’s jolly demeanour faded, and he started towards the stairs. “Yes, serious look.”

North didn’t rush them to his office. He kept noting issues and shouting orders without stopping their trek. They arrived at North’s office quickly enough (just). North opened the door, ushered Jack in, and closed it gently behind him. It was the only time Jack had seen someone treat the door kindly. When it clicked shut all the noise of the main Workshop cut out.

“What is trouble?”

“I made a mess of everything again.”

“Really?” For anyone else it would be sarcastic – but North didn’t do sarcasm. He was more simply unconvinced, waiting for Jack to explain the joke.

“I abused my powers. I dragged a super-blizzard from Canada across the UK, and used it to kill Cupid over the North Sea.”

North paused, then asked, “Why?”

“He tried to kill Jamie! And he might as well have! He–”

The door crashed open, cutting the rest of Jack’s rant off.

“Why does nobody knock?” wailed North.

“Coz ya so touchy ‘bout it, mate.”

“Bunny?” Jack frowned – he hadn’t convinced North to set off the aurora yet.

“Aye, yah larrikin,” agreed Bunny, sneaking a shoulder squeeze as he walked past into the room, “North, you can go back to the coal-face if yah like. This cockup isn’t a threat to the ankle-biters or Christmas. It’s more my area than yours.”

“We are ahead of schedule enough for me to hear what has happened.”

“I told you–”

“Apollo schemed, it went tits up, and now Jack and Jamie are playing the price.”

“What?” both winter spirits yelped.

“Cupid’s been dodgy for yonks, Apollo tried to trick him into training Jamie as his successor, and well that didn’t work out, did it?” explained Bunny with a roll of his eyes before grimacing sheepishly, “Sorry, Jackie. Jamie’s gonna be fine, the best ambo I know is fixing him up.”

Jack’s grip on his crook and the tension in his shoulders loosened a little at that. Jamie was going to be okay. When he woke, the hole would be filled, and Jack wouldn’t feel like the last decade was a dream anymore.

“So North, it’s not holidays or children – it’s Powers and Mantles. I’ll keep you updated, but there’s no need for yah to abandon yah post. Esspesh this close to Chrissy.”

“It’s not Pitch?”

“Well, I’ll return to preparations. Christmas is most important after all.”

“How? None of that!”

Bunny stomped his foot, opening a tunnel right below him and Jack. As they fell the lagomorph took a chance to get the last word and yelled, “Easter is better and you know it!”

For once Jack wasn’t enjoying the thrill of a tunnel slide. It was just more time between things going to shit and fixing them. Jack didn’t doubt he was leaving a trail of frozen moss in his wake.

Even the Warren seemed to have lost some of its appeal. (Despite contractual obligations to protest nearly everything Bunny related, Jack did actually like the place.) The stillness of the air, the spring greenery when it was deep-winter/high-summer topside, and roof above. All things Jack normally ignored, but today he just couldn’t.

“Okay, we’re here,” grouched Jack, brushing himself down, “Now, can we talk?”

“No just yet, we’re waiting on someone.”

“Who?”

A streak of light came barrelling towards them. Jack dived out of the way and heard a heavily dopplerised “Sorry I’m so totally late!” before it crashed into a wall to reveal Apollo’s stupid glowing self.

“Why is he here?” groaned Jack.

“He’s the best healer ah know. Plus he has some explaining to do.”

“Okay, okay, before we get into that, can I, like, report on my patient?”

“Jamie?” Jack did not yip, as he flipped back to his feet, “How is he?”

“He’s healing. Physically he’s gonna be fine in, like, a couple of days tops. Totes a miracle from the god of healing here.”

Jack slumped against his crook. Jamie was going to be okay! (Jack refused to consider the ‘physically’ qualifier.) Now that he’d been reassured of that, he could focus on cleaning up this mess.

“Drop the valley girl act, yah numbat,” said Bunny, enforcing the order with a swat upside the blond’s head.

“But, I like, like, it,” Apollo pouted.

“Can we get into what Bunny meant by you scheming and Jamie paying for it?” Jack found leaning against his crook was doubly useful. It kept him from attacking the dick who’d started this, and stopped him falling over from exhaustion, “I’ve already fallen off the wagon once today.”

“Hold yah horses there Jackie,” said Bunny, ‘gently’ shoving Jack back onto some comfy moss.

“What…”

“First we gotta get on the same page. This is gonna be about stuff yah probably know in yah gut, but you’re not gonna know our words for.”

“Are you telling me we’re going to waste time on a kangaroo rhyming slang lesson?”
“Nah, Jackie, it’s gonna be far more ivory tower than that. Too bad ya didn’t pay more attention in yah classes with North.”

“Yes, because I’m sure toymaking is so relevant right now.”

“This is, like, basic magic theory,” drawled Apollo from his own moss boulder/recliner and offensively colourful drink in hand, “which you should’ve, like, got to by now.”

“Don’t you start, schemer,” said Jack with a half-hearted jab in the god’s direction.

“You don’t even know what I was trying to do!”

“So tell me!”

“Cupid’s been going crazy for centuries, and someone needed to replace him.”

“And you volunteered Jamie?”

“He was the only choice.” Apollo made a placating gesture with his spare hand, “No other love spirit has the global presence. If they could, they would’ve taken Cupid’s Mantle from him already. Much easier for a mortal to take his title.”

“And this is why ah wanted us to talk words first. So both of ya quiet. Most spirits are like North, dependent on belief to fuel them and define them. Then there are Powers – Primordials, Protogenoi, whatever yacallsit – who are embodiments of things that’ll exist whether yah believe in them or not. Whether there are people to believe in them or not. Yah day, night, earth, fear, yadda yadda.”

“So Cupid’s a Power?”

“Nah, he was just a Mantle bearer. An avatar for the Primordial Eros. Like how ya the bearer of the Mantle of Winter. And this nonce succeeded me in bearing the Mantle of Light.”

“Hey! Name calling’s rude, ya know,” grumbled Apollo in the background.

“Primordials were never and will never be human,” Bunny continued right over Apollo, “In fact most of the time they aren’t even singular figures, like us. They’re more just spread throughout their ‘element’. A Mantle bearer gives them a human face, helps them understand you lot. But also pins them in place and acts sorta as their conscience.”

“Well he was doing a great job, wasn’t he?”

“He used to,” Apollo butted in, “but since his wife faded, not so much. So he’s been losing himself to Eros for a while.”

“And Eros ain’t love, mate. Love don’t exist without people. But the primal urge to procreate does. And that’s Eros.”

“Okay, so Cupid needed to be replaced, why Jamie?” Jack asked, directing his question at Apollo.

Apollo’s response was half conveyed through interpretive hand wave, as he moved imaginary things from one place to another, and just rolled his hand around.

“If a spirit couldn’t do it, we needed a mortal to. And there aren’t a lot of magically aware mortals these days. Plus Jamie’s story is still being written.”

“That’s it?” That’s all the reason Apollo had for sacrificing Jamie?
“I mean, I thought, like, he’d be a good Cupid. He was already kind of doing Cupid’s job. So I ensured that their paths crossed. Cupid would want to ‘retire’ and he’d train Jamie up as his successor.”

“And that’s it? Nothing more?”

“No, swear on my sister’s chariot,” said Apollo, crossing his heart.

Jack recognised the frown Bunny was levelling at Apollo. It was the eyebrow quirk Bunny used when he knew you were hiding something but didn’t have any proof. A sentiment that Jack shared about Apollo.

“Fine. Pretend I believe you. Jamie’s cursed, how do we fix it?”

Apollo deflated, draping himself over his boulder and staring forlornly at the ceiling. Disgusting really.

“Don’t think we can. Jamie’s going to have to have it. I couldn’t cure Diana of her cursed arrow, and she could still see me.”

Jack flinched at the implied barb and shot back, “Didn’t you turn her into a tree?”

“That was an accident!” flailed Apollo, “Mixing magicks and curses does weird shit.”

“Still, let’s not try that cure. No turning my boyfriend into a shrub.”

“Getting back on track,” Bunny huffed, “what can we do healer-boy?”

“I’m sorry to say but – from what I’ve learnt from studying other lead arrow cases – the best cure is time.”

“How long?”

“Depends on the patient. The curse is basically a mental trauma. People’s recovery is dependent on them, their environment, everything. But…” Apollo trailed off, even his hands falling a little, before continuing more solemnly, “their hearts heal. Enough to fall in love again. But in every case I’ve seen they end up with someone new.”

“So it’s hopeless?”

“Course not, Jackie. Where there’s life there’s hope.”

“Yeah, there are loopholes,” agreed Apollo, “We can use Jamie not being able to see you right now to our advantage.”

“How?”

“We teach you to cross the veil and you reintroduce yourself to your Jamie. You’ll probably look different enough not to trigger the curse, and with the wonders of modern technology you can still talk to him in the meantime.”

“Well, let’s get started!”

[The set up today felt really boring. Just another day]

Crossing the veil was hard. And Apollo was a terrible teacher. All of his advice was stupid
metaphors and empty faux-koans. ‘Remember what it was like to be mortal, all the everyday boring stuff you forgot.’ ‘It’s like flying by throwing yourself at the ground and missing, only not at all.’ ‘Bundle up all your magic and shove it under your hoodie.’ ‘If you meet your mortality, kill him.’

Jack practised every spare moment he had. Not that there were many. It was the height of winter – his busiest season. He had to make appearances all over the world. He couldn’t disappoint his believers (or miss out on new ones). Even if he could tell the kids could tell that he was half faking it.

The simultaneous highlight and pits of his day was texting Jamie. His First Light never responded. But that also meant he never told Jack to stop. Jamie was receiving and reading the texts, Jack knew that at least. Jack did his best to stay positive in the messages but he wasn’t afraid to be honest. Especially since he was having to be tricky with his words, so as to seem a sane mortal guy. Jack wasn’t sure Jamie believed him was falling for it.

Sometimes I don’t like xmas. My family are so polarised about it

Eros was also making a mess of things. It wasn’t interested in kids, but there was spill over from its ‘playing’. It helped nudge thought into affair, which lead to divorces and broken families. It caught the older kids, dragging them into some aspects of adulthood earlier. It pushed wandering eyes to wandering hands, which lead to crimes that were the Guardians’ concern.

Too bad the protogenoi wasn’t staying in one place long enough for them to do anything. It was smoke in the wind – all around the world. Without a vessel, nothing was confining it to a single spot. They were all keeping an eye out for it on their various rounds. Bunny was looking through his and North’s libraries for a spell to entrap it, but no luck so far.

[I hope ur day was okay]

[Mine wasn’t to bad. Just more work than play]

[Sorry for whining at u]

Jack was cold. And heavy. He looked at his hands and gasped – breaking the spell. His briefly tanned skin returned to pale, and his temperature sense returned to comfortable.

He’d done it! Only for a second, but he had! He’d been trying for months (weeks) and he’d done it! (Okay, days, Jack was a quick learner with the proper motivation.) Now, if only he knew what he’d done differently this time…

[I managed to hold my breath today!]
[Only for a few minutes but Im learning]

It took half as many tries to get it again, but after that Jack had worked it out for himself. He had to do three things at once.

1) Suppress his magic, which was simple but a lot of effort.

2) Concentrate on his mortal memories – channel Jackson Overland and be him. Not so simple and a lot of mental effort. Jack hadn’t considered how different he’d become but he had. Overland’s world was so small, his concerns so personal (and old fashioned).

3) Jack had to manually breathe and maintain his heart beat. Jack Frost had vital signs, it’s just they rested somewhere around the stage 3 mark unless he was active. No good for a mortal.

Any one was easy (for a value of easy), any two was doable, but all three at once? That’s where he
kept tripping over.

[Do you ever wonder where our imaginary friends go?]

Reliable sources told Jack that Jamie wasn’t dealing with things well at all. He was retreating into himself. The mortal definitely hadn’t told anyone anything about what had happened. While Jack hadn’t mastered crossing over, he could manage half an hour. That should be time to inform Mrs B. Jamie was hurting and needed the people in his life to help him. Jack couldn’t help, not directly, but he could do this.

[I’m coming to visit my Last Light rn btw. I think its about time I helped out]

“Wind, take me home!”

Jack hadn’t been to Burgess since Jamie was cursed. That was just asking for heartbreak trouble. Even with the safety net of being able to cross over, Jack waffled before heading to the Bennett’s house. Pulled a couple pranks, made a couple of kids’ day. He sent a couple of warning texts – hoping for a response, any response.

[If you want me to go away just say the word]

[Here I go]

Jackson knocked on the door. It was kind of surreal. The wood felt more real than it had before. And he was about to go through meet the parent – unsanctioned. A faint cry escaped the house, soon followed by Mrs B opening the door.

“Jack! It’s so good to finally meet you!”

The meeting went better than Jack expected. The conversation was easy, and laughter flowed. Even as Jamie’s absence gnawed at Jack. He channelled the pain into anger at Cupid when he had to tell Mrs B what she’d believe. Her protective maternal anger made him think she’d be perfectly fine learning that Jack had dealt with Cupid. But maybe not. She did call him out on sharing something implicitly secret. It stole the wind from his hoodie and Jackson had to be honest. To her, to himself, and to the eavesdropper on the stairs.

“…I think it’s better someone around Jamie knows. I’d rather Jamie hate me for breaking his trust, than have him suffer on his own.”

That confession nearly upset his mental juggling (he might have frozen the remainder of his hot chocolate), so Jackson made his excuses and left. Or shouted “Sorry” and ran out the door. Jack made it down the street to the pond before his control failed completely. His magic erupting brutally enough to throw him off his feet into a snow drift. It was downright undignified. He phone chimed and Jack rolled over to check it. Jamie had messaged him. Jack wasn’t sure what to do.

[Who do you think you are?]

That was the question wasn’t it? Jack was many things – spirit, Guardian, prankster. He was Jamie’s friend, brother-by-choice, and boyfriend. He couldn’t lie to Jamie, but claiming to be his boyfriend wasn’t a good idea. And Jack doubted they were together as far as Jamie was concerned.

[Your BFF I hope.]

[Your friendship is the first I ever had, and the best I’ve ever had]
Friends don’t rat out friends to their mothers.

Mister Would-Be-Bread, yes, you should cross-dress, take photos, set up a facebook profile, and pretend to be his beard. No wait. That was sarcasm. The law doesn’t generally have a sense of humour (it certainly never has for me). In fact, I hate to say it, but you and your beau should go get a lawyer and/or talk to your embassy (I think?). Is it safe for your beau to go at all? Even if you stop sexting, the pics of you two being all lovie-dovie will still be up on the web.

I'm doing a great job of this aren't I?

Uncle (???) Jack

Chapter End Notes

Next: Jamie has to deal with the family Christmas party. And shunning the texting bastard.

Another reminder that Jack's (my) inbox is open for hypotheticals for him to answer. Crack-ish questions welcome. Send them via reviews here, or you want to be anonymous my tumblr.

I mentioned this in the author notes for chapter seven, but I find Bunny really difficult to write. Which is amusing since I’m a six foot tall Australian, who’s been learning Tai Chi since 2010ish and holds Easter close to my heart.

Part of it is just Bunny being Australian itself is weird. Rabbits being foreign/alien to down under is about the only level it works on. Australia’s seasons are backwards. Easter is an autumn thing, but lots of things grow in autumn because it’s cooled off a little. Almost all natives are evergreen (or more accurately ever shedding) so there’s no winter-is-the-season-of-death. And a lot of places don’t have four seasons. Up north was two: wet and dry. The Wurundjeri (the native land-holders around where I live) worked with a six season calendar.

The other part is the accent: ocker/strine is old fashioned. A (flawed) analogy I like is it being sort of like the mother-tongue of grandparents who immigrated to the new country. I understand it when it’s spoken to me, but I’m not very good at speaking it myself. A few (simple) bits get sprinkled in everyday speech, but it’s rare that I’d say someone was flat out like a lizard drinking. Plus, strine is like 30% swearing which is a little awkward in this context. Bunny totally would call Jack the c-word (which as an Australian I don’t consider much worse than the others): before movie as an insult and after as a friend.

I lost our old strine dictionary and so bought a new one. Which is sadly missing “egg-nishner” for air-conditioner. But, here a definition I think’s relevant.

Dorothy Dixter, a
A question asked in such a way as a to solicit a particular answer, particularly in a parliamentary setting; a question with an obvious answer. (After American journalist Dorothy Dix, who purportedly made up questions for her own advice column so that she could write more interesting answer
Jamie Bennett and The Burgess Clan Christmas Party

Chapter Summary

Jamie Bennett attends The Burgess Clan Christmas Party. Extended family is a trial.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Dear Uncle Jack,

I’ve gone and managed to make a royal mess of things. I’ve fallen for my best mate, and I haven’t the foggiest how to fix it. I’ve known for a while, but he’s happily getting married this year and my conscious is gnawing at me. He asked me to be in the Wedding party, and part of me wants to come clean. Not in Taylor Swift style of stealing him away, I’m not that delusional. More so that if he wants/needs to swap out Groomsmen he can. I guess I think I value his happiness and friendship more. Any tips for a wayward soul?

Sincerely,

Not_Making_Sense_And_Confused

Burgess looked picture perfect in the late afternoon light. Snow was falling, but only a little. Just enough to enhance the winter wonderland. Snow was banked high in gardens and rooves but not so much as to be unnavigable. Soon the weak winter sun would set, bidding them to find a warm home for the night.

Jamie was slumped against the car window, his gaze unfocused. He was in the backseat, and knew if he looked forward, he’d see his mom’s concerned face in the rear view mirror. He really didn’t want to go to this must-go event. He’d much rather just go for a walk out in the snow. Even with an odd feel in the air, like some storm on the horizon. It made him feel something like nostalgia, made him wonder if he wandered would he find some childhood innocence he’d lost?

Burgess was a small town. Not quite so small that everyone knew everyone, but small enough it was still “ruled” by the Burgess clan. Knowing your relation to clan was critically important. People didn’t stay long in Burgess before they were adopted in some form into the clan. Whether by marriage or just being taken under someone’s wing. Jamie’s connection was that his great-grandmother was Burgess. And he knew some thought that was tenuous enough to warrant “marrying back in”. Might be too late though. After a couple of years out of town, Jamie had developed a slight aversion to dating anyone he could accurately pin-down his relation to.

Each year the Burgess clan had several Christmas parties, it was simply too big to have just one. The clan was far from homogenised – it had factions and squabbles. But never so bad that it actually split. However, only one party was recognised as The Burgess Clan Christmas Party and that was the one hosted by whoever was mayor that Christmas. (Once in the 1800s it had looked like the mayor wasn’t going to be a Burgess in time for Christmas, so the town had had a rather unusual shotgun wedding to fix this.)
Currently Mayor Burgess was Pippa’s dad, and somehow Jamie was still considered a close enough friend to earn his family an invite. Jamie really didn’t want to go, but one did not refuse an invitation to The Burgess Clan Christmas Party. Even if the basis for your invitation was that the mayor’s daughter was your (amicably estranged) ex. So, yeah, Jamie wasn’t looking forward to it.

Of course, the Party was held at the mayoral residence, the old Burgess estate. The mansion was the grandest in town, both by sheer size and lovingly cared for detail. (Mayors had been impeached for apparent neglect of the building.) Early arrivals meant that the Bennetts had to park a couple of block away and walk, but Jamie didn’t mind. It gave him time to centre himself and practise some of the breathing exercises Dr Joyce had retrained him in.

Just outside the gates, his mom put a hand on each their shoulders and pinned them with a Look.

“Okay, you two. Be good, text me if anything happens, and we’ll aim to head out about eleven thirty. Okay?”

“Okay,” Jamie and Sophie chorused. Jamie considering how long he had to stick around before walking home.

Nodding decisively, his mom turned and marched to the front gate. She presented their invitation and they were let through. The front garden was already packed, and Jamie had no doubt the house and back garden would be too. After a moment of hesitation, Jamie grabbed a champagne flute and took a long sip from it.

Sophie grabbed Jamie’s bicep and reached up to whisper in his ear, “Text me if you need saving, bro,” before flouncing off into the crowd.

Jamie stuck with his mom for a maybe fifteen minutes before her worried looks got to be too much. Ever since Jack’s unwelcome visit, she’d been trying so hard to be there, to be a listening ear or a shoulder to cry on. They’d had a couple of almost fights about it. So Jamie gave a grim smile and slipped away while she was being interrogate by some aunt.

Now Jamie had to field inane questions himself. What was he studying? Oh, is that what you do to be a kid shrink? (No one ever asked about the creative writing stuff, not that Jamie had much to share these days.) Are you planning on replacing Old Man Joyce? How old are you again? How’s the girlfriend? My niece is single, oh, there she is! Why don’t I call her over?

At that point Jamie slipped away.

“Hello, Jamie.”

Jamie flinched, and slowly stood up, pretending he hadn’t been hiding behind the buffet.

“Pippa,” he replied with a nod. They’d been a couple once, but now they could only be polite. Jamie couldn’t even remember why they’d broken up. Something about another friend of theirs?

“What’s with the hiding?”

“Uncle Syd was trying to set me up with Nat.”

Pippa chuckled. Not unkindly, Jamie decided after a moment, despite his first thoughts.

“Not your type then?” she asked.

“More, I’m not looking for anyone right now,” corrected Jamie. And right now included the
foreseeable future.

“Well, you’d be better off lying about having a girlfriend with this crowd.”

After a brief not-quite-awkward moment of silence, Pippa frowned – almost nervously – before asking, “So how’s Jack these days?”

“Wouldn’t know, haven’t seen him in a while.”

The mostly-a-lie came easily. Jamie hadn’t seen Jack since the visit. And whether that counted was debatable. But he had some idea how Jack was: unhappy. And probably due to Jamie’s own virtual words.

“Really? That’s great!”

Jamie frowned, surprised at Pippa’s response. Why would Pippa care? And why were her thoughts about Jack so opposite to Sophie and his mom’s? Before he could get an answer she was pulled back into the crowd, leaving Jamie very confused.

So confused, he forgot to steer clear of Great-Aunt Esther. She was the image of a kindly, little, frail, old lady. She even had glasses on a beaded chain and a lacy shawl over her shoulders. But in truth she was the most hateful person Jamie had ever met. Full of bile she liberally shared saccharine sweet.

“James Bennett, what have you been up to?”

“Not much, still at college.”

“I do hope you’re not letting any of that liberal nonsense pervert a good Burgess boy like you.”

“Ah,” Jamie floundered.

“I mean, making themselves seem legitimate by seducing the Supreme Court into pretending they are in the right.”

And she was off. A long rambling rant about all the evils in the world. All the others corrupting her vision of a utopia. Part of Jamie wanted to rail against her. She was so wrong. But what would be the point? Many had tried, and her hatred could only keep her alive so long. Tonight (like usual) he just didn’t quite have the energy. Macabrely Jamie noted that the faint heartburn of righteous indignation was probably the closest to feeling something he’d been in a while. (Except when Jack was involved). But he didn’t want to return fire. So he just nodded and hummed when appropriate.

“Oh sorry dear for rambling my little old head. I do hope I’m not keeping you from your lass.”

“I don’t have a girlfriend,” said Jamie, immediately realising his thoughtless response had cost him an escape.

“Well then, let’s see. Christina has finally seen sense and stopped leading on that coloured boy. Or maybe Marianne? Suzanne keeps protesting something about ‘not defining herself in relation to a man’ or some such nonsense…”

Jamie’s protested disinterest in dating went unheeded, leaving him to throw beseeching looks out across the crowd. No one came to his rescue. Jamie couldn’t even really blame them. To do so would be offering themselves up in his stead.
Which is why the snowballs were such a surprise.

They thwacked behind Great-Aunt Esther’s ears, sending her into a flurry of swearing. Jamie tried to trace their flight but there was no one there. Though throw-and-run was probably wise if your target was Esther.

“Quick!” hissed a voice and Jamie was dragged off by small hand’s strong grip.

The next couple of minutes were a blur, as Jamie was pulled along, ducking and weaving. His ‘saviour’ was undoubtedly one of his younger cousins. And the elementary kid kept forgetting that Jamie required a bit more room to move through the crowd. At least the far reaches of the back yard were about as far away from Esther as possible.

A thought Jamie had to hold onto when he was delivered for his next round of harassment. A dozen or more kids had surrounded him, cheering his name. Jamie could already feel his energy draining.

“Where’s Jack?” a little girl (Amber?) piped up.

The question silenced the crowd, who’s faces all became impatient for the answer.

“I don’t know,” shrugged Jamie, “Why? Is he meant to be here?”

The kids’ attention scattered. Some demanding Jamie make Jack appear, some insisting that Jack was always here for The Party, a few looking around as if Jack was hiding in the bushes. One cousin, a boy perhaps ten or so, was squinting at him.

“When did you last see Jack?”

“Last week.”

“What did you do?” asked the boy (Michael maybe?) again.

“I didn’t do anything,” huffed Jamie, crossing his arms.

“Well something happened. Why else would Jack’s favourite believer not have seen him?” huffed possibly-Michael, hands on hips.

Jamie was not impressed by this interrogation, nor swayed by ten year olds trying to channel their parents. His patience was running thin, and if there was anyone at this party he actually wanted to talk to he’d walk away right now. So instead Jamie just channelled all his apathy into a deadpan look.

“Right now I believe Jack’s shi-ocking at keeping secrets.”

“Ooooh?” The fickle mood of the kids turned easily.

“I’m not going to tell you,” said Jamie, rolling his eyes. “It’s bad enough he told my mom.”

Now the kids were confused. Not quite the response Jamie expected. But then children often didn’t make much sense.

“But adults can’t see Jack.”

And now Jamie was confused. Why wouldn’t adults be able to see Jack? The only “people” kids knew that weren’t visible to adults were imaginary friends. So the Jack Jamie was talking about wasn’t the same one the kids were. They were talking about some shared folklore. One that Jamie
knew he should know the “facts” about, but was drawing a blank. But then, Jack was a pretty common name in nursery rhymes.

Probably-Michael was definitely unsatisfied with Jamie. He obviously wasn’t going to let Jamie get away with forgetting such basic rules of Jack Whoever. And despite everything Jamie didn’t want to be the kind of jerk who told kindergarteners Santa wasn’t real, so he was going to have to bullshit his way through the rest of this.

“I’m an adult and I can see Jack,” countered Jamie.

“Well, you’re different.”/“You’re not a grown up.”/“You’re the Last Light.”

Having a title in this ongoing story made something in Jamie twist. It made it all too real. Next their Jack would be showing up uninvited like his Jack.

“Maybe he’s playing hide and seek?” offered Jamie, “I’m going to go look.”

Jamie needed to get out of this conversation, and once again choose just to walk away. At least his suggestion scattered some of the kids looking for whoever their Jack was. Jamie did feel Michael’s glare on the back of his head, but refused to engage.

“When did you get scared? Jack Frost wouldn’t walk away.”

Jamie’s countenance crumbled. He hurried as much as he could through the crowd. Slipping between people, and probably spilling drinks. He needed to hurl. Jamie didn’t even know why. Jack Frost was just an expression, so why did the name have such an effect on him?

After misusing some lovely looking hydrangeas, Jamie headed for the nearest buffet. He desperately need something clean to rinse his mouth out.

“Aren’t you cold?”

Jamie sent Pippa a confused look and looked down at his outfit. He was wearing good snow boots, pants, long sleeves, and a scarf. A quick scan of the crowd confirmed that most where wearing gloves and beanies too. Jamie wriggled his fingers, they weren’t blue or anything.

“No? It’s not that cold.”

“Jamie. It’s snowing, and it’s a hair above freezing.”

Jamie shrugged. He guessed he just had better tolerance for the cold than most. That said, he wasn’t going to refuse the warmth of some eggnog now his stomach had settled a bit. Jamie was tempted to alternate sips with catching snowflakes on his tongue.

He didn’t. He was a grown up.

However, Jamie’s curiosity had stirred from slumber. As usual, about Jack. Jamie didn’t know what it was that kept him digging. It was an itch, or maybe a scab he kept picking at. All it caused was pain.

“Earlier, when you were asking about Jack,” Jamie asked anyway, “which one were you talking about?”

Pippa frowned, but explained “Jack Frost. Our imaginary friend that you kept talking to way after you should’ve stopped.”
The blunt delivery tore a wounded gasp from Jamie. He didn’t even know why it hurt so much. Jamie hated not knowing what was going on with his emotions.

“I thought you were asking about a… friend of mine from college.”

After a moment Pippa observed, “That was meaningful pause before… friend.”

“We’re not really talking right now.”

“Ah,” said Pippa in a sympathetic tone, “do you want talk about it?”

“…Not really.”

“Fair enough.”

What followed was a top ten contender for most awkward silence in Jamie’s life. Standing at a family Christmas party, with his ex-girlfriend, not talking about his college friend, sipping eggnog. Which didn’t even have the decency to be spiked.

What was his Jack’s last name anyway? No, bad grammar. The Jack who kept texting him. Jamie unlocked his phone and navigated through his contacts to Jack. No need to look at the dozen purposefully ignored messages. Frustratingly he’d saved Jack’s contact details sans last name.

Sophie broke it by appearing on his elbow and whining, “Jamie, I want to go home.”

“Already?” Jamie probably shouldn’t be looking a gift horse in the mouth, even if it had grabbed him by surprise.

“Already,” said Sophie with an emphatic nod, “Mom says we can go.”

“Well, nice seeing you again Jamie,” Pippa said, more polite than honest, “We’ll have to catch up and talk before you head back to college.”

With a little wave, Pippa slipped away in the crowd. Leaving Jamie feeling extra awkward with his half-raised hand and half-spoken goodbye. But still, he’d wanted out of this throng for hours.

It was probably too early to leave in good manners, but they were going anyway. Jamie turned down the offer to drive, instead asking to walk. It wasn’t far, and he could enjoy the light snowfall.

And Jamie did. For a while. Sophie lasted twelve minutes before breaking the quiet of boots tromping through snow.

“How come you never texted me? I told you to text if you needed saving. I mean, I’m sure everyone’s wanted to peg Esther with a snowball at least once. But still…”

“…Thanks,” Jamie quietly offered.

The snow glowed as it floated into the nimbus of each streetlight, gently settling on the piles all around. A ghost of a smile skittered across Jamie’s face at the couple of snowmen around the place.

“I’m sorry.”

Sophie’s voice was just a soft now, blending with the tranquil atmosphere around them. Jamie glanced out the corner of his eye and saw she was looking up and around – not at him.

“I haven’t been a great sister the last few days. I already apologised a little, but I’ll do it again.
You’re my brother, and Jack kind of is too, but if I had to choose, I’d choose you. Always. Not that it really matters right now, since Jack isn’t talking to me either. But enough about him.

“I’m proud to be your sister, and I’ll be there if you need me,” a pause in her murmuring, “Or I’ll shut up if you want.”

Despite Jamie not saying anything, Sophie did stay quiet. For another couple of blocks at least. The waxing moon seemed unusually large in the sky, leaving no true darkness between the streetlights.

It didn’t last forever. Sophie resumed talking. Now, just reporting on what had been happening lately in her life and Burgess. Nothing ground-breaking, or even expecting a response from Jamie.

“…Asking to leave early wasn’t entirely just for you. I was sick of that party too. If another guy asked if I’d head upstairs with him, I was going knee him in the balls.”

Jamie snorted. That’d be right. Sophie was the kind of Girl Scout who probably stashed a boot knife in preparing for an extended family party.

“…I wonder why Pippa kept chatting you up. Your break up was pretty dramatic and I doubt you’d work any better now…”

Honestly, Jamie tuned Sophie’s prattle out a little. He let her talk, let it become more white noise in the white snow. It did make the walk not so lonely.

Soon enough they were trekking up the familiar path to their home. Jamie unlocked the door, and stepped through. Silently he held the door open and waved Sophie in. She grinned and skipped up the steps, kissing Jamie on the cheek on her way past.

“Thanks again Jamie, for being my brother,” Sophie called as she ran upstairs.

Jamie absentmindedly closed the door and headed for his own room. His hand drifting up to his left cheek. It had been a fleeting peck, but somehow he felt it more than any of the cold that night. The warmth of it melting something in his chest just a little. Jamie still didn’t care about the familiar strangers at the party but if there was one person in the world he gave a damn about it was Sophie.

Jamie stumbled through his bedtime routine, but when it came time to set his phone up as an alarm, he sent a message as well before falling into bed.

[Stop avoiding Sophie. She misses her brother.]

NMSAC, you’ve got two real choices. Tell them as soon as possible, or don’t ever tell him. You said your conscious is ‘gnawing’ at you, so don’t go with option two. Don’t put yourself through the pain living in denial. I’ve seen what it does to people, just don’t.

The ‘them’ wasn’t a typo. It’s their wedding, so they both should know if there you might be a problem. Plus making him think he needs to keeps secrets from his better half is a little bit not good.

But do it soon. Don’t let it gnaw at you further. Plus the sooner you confess the sooner you and your friend can get back to normal.

(~)Uncle Jack
Next Chapter: Jamie gets a bunch of unwanted visitors as he goes about his day. Including one that's already barged into his house uninvited.

Happy Australia Day! (Completely irrelevant to this chapter but hey whatevs) Also next chapter might be a little delayed since my laptop died. It served me well, even if I treated it very badly. Rest in pieces.

Another reminder that Jack's (my) inbox is open for hypotheticals for him to answer. Crack-ish questions welcome. Send them via reviews here, or you want to be anonymous: guest reviews here or anon over at my tumblr.
Chapter Summary

It's Christmas Eve Eve and Jamie wants out of the house but not to deal with people. Just a little time for himself before he picks up a present and goes home. Instead he gets a bunch of guys who want to talk.

Jack isn't going to be happy.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Dear Uncle Jack,

It’s not good dinner conversation, but I need some help with religion. Specifically what do you do when your girlfriend accidentally starts a cult? A sex cult. To herself. And I’m apparently(?) her high priest now. It’s weird.

If we are a cult we’re not acting like the ones that get in trouble. No drugs, no extortion, no secret compound, and honestly people are free to leave. I mean that, people leave without repercussion. My girlfriend just seems vaguely sad and we all have sex to make her feel better.

So I don’t know if we really are a cult. I don’t think there’s any brainwashing. And the ‘worship’ my girlfriend likes is purely sex. As far as I can tell we’re now in an open polyamorous relationship with almost a dozen new people.

My actual question. Any advice on how to get some solo private time with my goddess?

High Priest of the Lady of Heaven

Jamie was feeling okay this morning. He’d woken up with a little more energy to find the perfect snow had parted for a clear sky day. He’d also learnt from earlier shopping trip that he wouldn’t last in crowds like that. So he’d decided to spend his energy on somewhere with a little less people.

He was going to the Burgess Sports and Recreation Centre. The day before Christmas Eve only the die-hards would be there, and they’d be focused on whatever training they were doing rather than him. Jamie would have to talk to Old Ryan but he was a stoic guy anyway.

Jamie had decided to walk, bow and arrows in their case over his shoulder. It wasn’t cold enough for him to justify ‘stealing’ the car from Sophie. And it was a beautiful day. Pristine snow under foot and pristine skies above. The air carrying the crisp scent of winter and the sound of children playing.

“Excuse me.”

The British voice jarred Jamie out of his thoughts, so much he almost tripped. A firm grip at Jamie’s elbow helped him avoid face-planting in the snow.

“Sorry ‘bout that.”
“It’s okay,” Jamie answered automatically, stepping back to look at the Brit.

The guy was tall and thin, wrapping in an old fashioned, long, black coat. One of those people who appear in high contrast. Jamie figured he was normally fairly pale, which made the cold induced blush on his cheeks all the more obvious. Which then brought out his bright green eyes. Finally cementing the high contrast was messy, wind-swept, ink black hair.

“Still, sorry to have startled you,” the guy repeated, his gaze dropping, “Anyway, since I’ve got your attention, could I ask for some help? I’m looking for someone. I know they used to live around here but I don’t have their current address.”

“Ah,” Jamie hedged, “sounds more like you need a private eye.”

“Heh, funnily enough I am one. Give me a sec to find my card,” muttered the guy.

He patted his coat down and retrieved an old-fashioned business card holder. He flipped it open and handed one to Jamie. On very heavy card stock, it read ‘Harry Black, private eye’, and listed both a .co.uk email and a foreign phone number.

“So yeah, I’m a little outside my home territory.”

“Fine. I’m not sure how much help I can offer, but who are you looking for?”

Harry grinned sheepishly and scratched the back of his head. “Okay, I’m looking for a Jackson Overland, who might these days go by the name Jack Frost.”

“I think you’re being pranked,” Jamie answered after a moment (or he was.)

“Really?”

“The only Jack Frost I know is a shared imaginary friend for the kids around here.”

“So you don’t know him?”

“No. If that’s all?”

Harry frowned, and his gaze dropped again. Jamie had thought it had merely been embarrassment earlier, but now Harry’s frown was suspicious. The Brit was definitely looking at something, rather than just avoiding Jamie’s gaze.

“Do you know you have a..?”

Jamie looked down, and saw nothing, “A what?”

“Never mind, it’s nothing. Call me if you think of anything.”

With a wave over his shoulder Harry continued on his way. Jamie stood there staring, nonplussed, and vaguely wondering if he should chase Harry down for some answers. Which did allow him to catch the start of a phone call.

“You’re not always right, y’know. That’s why I have a job. Anyway the kid’s a victim, not the challenger…”

In the end, Jamie let the confusing English private eye go. It just wasn’t worth the trouble. The rest of his walk was blessedly uninterrupted. Giving him time to put that bizarre conversation out of his head. It was almost interrupted a couple of times by kids but they scattered when Jamie levelled his
best been-studying-all-night-might-kill-someone glare at them.

The Burgess Sports and Rec Centre was pretty decent for a small town. A couple of indoor basketball courts, a gym, a rink, and two pools. Right now the outside one was repurposed as a second ice rink. Around the building spread fields for various sports. And off down in a far corner was the 1st Burgess Scout Troop’s hall. Which doubled as an archery lodge.

Jamie spied Old Ryan in the distance, already getting started on setting up. The giant of a man tromped through the snow, planting fluoro orange cones along the butt’s edges. Jamie picked up his pace. Even if he didn’t want to talk with people, he would pull his own weight. Especially since he was likely to be Ryan’s only company for the day.

Though he’d been away for a few months, Jamie quickly fell into routine. Grabbing the boundary tape and stringing it between the cones. Ryan’s greeting was a silent nod, and to hold up four fingers. Jamie nodded and grabbed four cones for ground quivers. Ryan started hauling out the archery butts, and pinning up targets.

Ryan was a man of few words and whistled once for Jamie to begin when ready. The old scoutmaster would supervise and deal with any other attendees.

Jamie checked his arrows before placing six in his cone. Then he checked his bow and braced it, making sure the bowstring was tensioned right. Jamie’s good bows (one compound, one recurve) were still at college, so he was using is ‘retired’ recurve. He took his place on the seventy yard line and grabbed an arrow.

Nock, draw, beat, exhale, release.

The first arrow went left of centre, and Jamie over-corrected the second. Nocking the third he realised he was resting them on the draw side, and wondered who taught him that. He’d had vague plans to retrain himself but they never came to anything. Jamie put it out of his mind, focusing on the draw. By the last few arrows he was reliably getting within the centre red. Conditions were good but not perfect. There was a light, changeable (almost playful) breeze and nothing to tell what it was up to.

Jamie soon fell into rhythm, into an almost meditation. His world narrowed to him and the target. No worries, no anxieties, just a simple mantra.

Nock, draw, beat, exhale, release.

Ryan’s whistle blew thrice, signalling time to retrieve arrows and score. Jamie might be the only archer this morning but safety first. He strolled down the field and collected his arrows, marking his warm-up score.

Jamie returned to his post and loosed another end. And another. And another. On Jamie’s return from his fourth collection he found Ryan wasn’t alone anymore. With him was Paulo – the overly cheerful hoon doctor.

“Morning Jamie! Fancy seeing you here!” he chirped, and then answered the unspoken question, “Ryan’s a family friend. Used to go hunting with my mother and sister.”

Jamie deadpanned and merely took his shooting position. Thankfully Ryan seemed tired of Paulo the Chatterbox and signalled the start of another round.

Ignore the idiot, nock, draw, beat, exhale, release.
Repeat. Repeat. Repeat.

Quiver empty Jamie set his bow on the rest. He waited for the three whistles and headed down the fairway for collection. Paulo took the signal as a cue to speak.

“So, how have you been?”

Jamie hummed non-committedly. Ignoring how all the hairs on the back of his neck and arms stood up.

“That great huh. Do you want to talk about it?”

A negative grunt.

“But you are talking about it?”

A more agreeable noise.

“Okay then!” Paulo said with a clap, “I’m gonna, like, rant about boy troubles then! Like, feel free to interrupt me to, like, talk about your own problems!”

Jamie made no effort to censor his groan of utter despair. He did not care about romance. Especially not the love life of someone he met only once. He did his best to tune Paulo out and focus on their arrow groupings. There was something odd about them.

“So we had a small fight, and I don’t think I did anything wrong this time. So, I’m, like, pagan and the solstice is kinda big deal for me. The return of the sun, the lengthening days, all that jazz. A week long Saturnalia is like totally ridiculous these days – plus, like, Cronus was a baby eating jerk – but I did want to do something special for the solstice night with Tadashi. Like–”

Paulo’s prattle lasted all the way back up the field. But thankfully cut off when Ryan blew the whistle twice – the signal to approach the shooting line.

Another end. Another round of peaceful meditation.

Another whistle, and more babbling from Paulo.

“But noooo Tadashi was, like, too busy. And he got kind of dismissive of my beliefs. Not like malicious, but like he doesn’t Believe in his own heritage. He’s too good a scientist-engineer. No, he just uses it for like a philosophy of life or whatever. I mean, I get it sorta. Melting pot family, foreign traditions, local holidays so commercialised to have nearly lost all meaning. I don’t expect him to Believe everything I do, but it would be nice if he at least listened to me about them.”

Again Jamie collected his arrows, again with a hunch that there was something weird about the groupings. The thought niggled at the back of his mind all the way back up to the shooting line. It was pretty good at washing Paulo out though.

Nock, draw, beat, release, breathe.

“Sometimes I wonder what Hiro’d think of me being pagan. The kid’s a genius and capable of some impressive leaps of illogic. But he has this tendency to decide on a ‘truth’ and stick with it. Even when–”

“Paulo. I don’t think I’m the one you should be telling all this too.”

“Right,” Paulo agreed with a kindergartener’s contriteness.
“Also, this is the third time your grouping has been a mirror image of mine. Are you doing that on purpose?”

“Heh, yeah. I wanted to give myself a little extra challenge.” Paulo brightened back up to his normal ridiculousness. “We should, like totally, have a showdown.”

“You just admitted to perfectly replicating every one of my shots,” Jamie noted, dry as salt.

“They were, like, good shots, though! Nothing outside the red!”

“Still. No. I think I’ve had enough archery for today.”

“Please,” whined Paulo, complete with wide, watering eyes.

“No.”

“How about just a turn using my bow?”

“Uh,” what?

Jamie looked at Paulo’s bow. It was beautiful. It was a fairly simple and old fashioned recurve, but obviously well cared for. The body’s lacquer shone like polished gold. Part of Jamie wanted to take Paulo up on his offer, but it felt kinda weird. And he’d really just rather get away.

“No.”

“Aww,” Paulo whined again, before snapping to huffy attention. “Fine. But if you ever want to use it just ask.”

“I make no promises.”

“They are dangerous,” agreed Paulo with surprising solemnity.

“I’m definitely done with archery for today.”

Jamie strode over to his case and put his bow and arrows away. Despite Paulo wearing down his patience, Jamie didn’t rush. Ryan came to his rescue, dragging Paulo off somewhere, throwing Jamie a dismissive wave over his shoulder.

Snickering to himself, Jamie walked around the scout hall. He’d enjoyed himself – even with Paulo’s surprise appearance. Jamie just had a couple of errands he had to do and then he could go home. He’d teased some advice from his mom about what to get Sophie. With the wonders of the internet, Jamie had already bought it. Though he had to go pick it up. At least he hadn’t left it to actual Christmas Eve.

Jamie knew of the rule of threes, so he probably should’ve expected a third surprise meeting on this trying winter morning. But no. He wasn’t that canny.

Jack was waiting for him in front of the scout hall, holding a peace offering.

“Hot chocolate?”

The take-away cup – from Jamie’s favourite café even – was presented at arm’s length. Jack’s head was bowed, but Jamie could see brown eyes peeking up through brown hair. Jack was in his trademark hoodie, but unlike his cosplay today he was at least wearing shoes.
“Oh, stop that,” huffed Jamie, snatching up the drink. He had no plans on drinking it (did Rohypnol work in hot drinks?) but it would keep his hands warm. He brought it to his lips and savoured the smell.

Jack unfurled, springing upright, beaming, and almost bouncing on the balls of his feet. He stepped forward and Jamie stepped back – effectively smothering Jack’s good mood.

Jamie hated it. That smile may have been the most honest and beautiful thing he’d seen, but it made his stomach turn. If he had drunk any of the hot chocolate it probably would be on the snow now. Jamie hated that once again his emotions were all over the place, and hated Jack for so easily upsetting them.

“Jack. What do you want?”

“I want to be your best friend again.”

Jamie sighed. While Jack might be a Nice Guy™, Jamie didn’t really think he was. There was too much in other people’s talk of him and their conversations stored in electronic amber. Jamie decided he could at least put some of his cards on the table. Maybe Jack would keep his distance – let Jamie get his shit together. It wasn’t quite trust, but more pragmatism. Jamie wanted some space and the truth probably would stand stronger.

“I don’t know if that’s possible,” admitted Jamie softly, “I can handle texts with you, and I can even handle thinking of you as family. You don’t always get a choice with family. But this… face to face… I’m this close to running away.”

“Why? Don’t you trust me?”

“I don’t know you. I keep getting mixed messages about you. I have plenty of reasons to trust you and plenty of reasons not to. My family likes you. But I’m pretty sure you were with me the day I was drugged. I have thousands of texts from you, but I can’t tell which ones are real and which are you maintaining character.”

“…maintaining character?”

“Your Jack Frost thing. It doesn’t help me tell what’s real about you and what’s an act!”

“Well… it’s not really an act,” said Jack, biting his lips and hunching a little, “It’s just me, but with white hair.”

“And no shoes,” Jamie said, uncaringly of his sarcasm, more focused on getting himself back under control. “I don’t even know your last name. And if you say Frost I will punch you.”

Jack visibly swallowed what he was going to say, before tilting his head back and looking at nothing in particular.

“My last name was changed, so don’t punch me for that, but my family name is Overland.”

Jamie stared at Jack and face-palmed. What was wrong with his life? He took the business card out of his pocket and held it out for Jack to take.

“Bumped into this guy this morning,” Jamie made no effort to hide absolute exhaustion of fucks in his tone, “Don’t know why. Take it. I’m leaving.”

Jamie turned to storm off (run away) but was stopped by a grip on his backpack.
“No! Don’t go!”

“Let, go, of, me.”

“Jamie please…”

“Please, what?” shouted Jamie, his tether finally well and truly snapping. “You make me sick. When you’re around I actually want to throw up. But at the same time I can’t help but want to know everything about you. That’s not healthy. At all. Maybe you didn’t attack me, but you were there. As far as I can tell you – Jack – are the source of a lot of my problems. So why don’t you disappear?”

Jamie easily shrugged loose of Jack’s weakened grip. He ignored any whimpering and walked away. Jamie refused to punch someone because of his issues. His gut curled, and Jamie doubted Jack was the cause.

When Jamie snuck a glance over his shoulder Jack was gone.

Jamie stormed off, feeling peevishly justified as clear skies darkened in sympathy. Jamie’s anger-want-disgust sputtered out without Jack’s presence to fuel it. Leaving Jamie with only sick irritation with his own turbulence. Long before the snow became more than merely inconvenient.

The meeting did prove it was past time for Jamie to start investigating who Jack was exactly. Jamie had been browsing Jack’s various accounts and their past ‘talks’. But he’d been doing it piecemeal. Jamie was tempted to get started, to pull out his phone and page through it. But outside in a strengthening snow storm was not the place. (Despite what that pair in the bushes might think.) Plus, he had to get Sophie’s present. And maybe another gift.

By the time Jamie reached home the wind was gusting sideways, blowing up more snow from the ground than fell from the sky. The windchill starting to test even Jamie’s tolerance. He almost rued not wearing a proper winter coat.

Home was warm and bright. The moment Jamie entered baking gingerbread gripped his nose. Someone was trying too hard to create a Christmas atmosphere. Jamie suspected that if his mother didn’t hate carols they’d be filling the air too. Instead, she was singing along to 90s pop hits.

“Mom! I’m home!”

“Hi Jamie! Cookies will be done in half an hour.”

Jamie paused, hand on the bannister, foot on the first stair. There was a conversation he needed to have waiting there in the kitchen. Jamie wasn’t sure he was ready for it – or ever would be. His mom already knew some of the secrets he was hiding. But he’d have to reveal more. Jamie gazed up at the safety of his room, but turned away. He needed to at least fact-check Jack’s report.

“Mom… I need to talk with you.”

His mother’s light-hearted mood – however artificial – evaporated, replaced with a very motherly concern. An expression Jamie hadn’t really seen since he came home from his first college break a couple of years ago. She pulled out a chair for Jamie and set about making a hot drinks.

“Sit, get your thoughts in order. We’re going to need comfort chocolate for this conversation.”

Jamie complied. He really could use a moment to collect himself. He didn’t hesitate to take a burning sip the moment the hot chocolate was received. Jamie did hesitate to meet his mom’s eyes though.
“I overheard Jack’s talk with you,” Jamie told the cup, his speech stilted like it had been with Doctor Joyce, “And he was mostly right. But I don’t know where he got some of it.

“Two days before I returned home for Christmas break, I woke up in hospital, my chest bandaged. I’d been attacked. Though my injuries looked worse than they were. After the doctors asked their questions, campus police arrived.

“They asked more questions but I wasn’t really about to answer. I still don’t really remember the day I was attacked. I remember going to IHOP for breakfast, but I don’t remember who with. I think it was Jack.

“I’m not so certain of things as he is. The police think I was drugged but resisted enough to anger my attacker into just attacking me. They got a call from an unregistered cell – apparently a known prankster – who saw the attack happening.”

Jamie’s mother was quiet. Just waiting for him to continue. Nothing like the angry interjector she’d been when Jack told her. Guess some good came of that then.

“Jack told you it was some psyche post-grad I was helping out. I don’t remember doing that. Which weirdly kind of supports his story.

“I don’t remember Jack. Not just that day, but how we met or what we used to do together. Doctor Joyce and I have talked about it. I’m repressing the attack and my memories of those involved. Not that I think Jack was involved – but he might have been there.”

Otherwise Jack had been the attacker, and Jamie was repressing memories of betrayal by his reportedly best friend.

“Honey,” his mom coaxed, reaching out to wrap her hands around his, “what can we do to help?”

Jamie looked up and shrugged, “Doctor Joyce thinks we shouldn’t try too hard to recover them. Too easy to end up with fake memories. That’s not all though, I saw Jack today.”

“Oh?”

“He was waiting for me after archery. With hot chocolate. Him just being there made me panic. I was scared, sick, angry. I took it all out on him. And he just accepted it.” Jamie looked down again, and softly added, “I think I made him cry.”

“I know that face. You had that face when you came running to me guilty because you thought you’d sold Sophie to the fairies.”

“He looked like a kicked puppy, Mom. Worse, I think he thought he deserved it. I called him faintly and then told him to go away.”

“Honey. Did Jack attack you?”

“No. I really doubt it.”

“Then, you should be able to guess my advice: apologise to him and explain it. Doesn’t have to be face-to-face. Call him, text him, clap-chap him. Don’t use me or Sophie as middle-women.

“Speaking of which. You probably should tell Sophie this. Jack didn’t want her to know, but I think she’s old enough. Certainly better than whatever impossible theories she’s stewing on.
“Now, the gingerbread men will be done soon. You want to try one while they’re piping hot?”

“Yeah.”

“Do you want to hang around with your mom, or do want to go play video games or whatever?”

Leaving was tempting – especially to go start his investigation. But Jamie decided he deserved a little reward for a weighty conversation. Certainly not procrastination on writing whatever apology-explanation he’d have to send Jack.

“I’ll stay down here.”

“I could regale you with stories you’ve told me about Jack’s pranks,” his mom said with a mischievous grin, “or we can make fun of holiday specials.”

“Maybe later, let’s stick with crap movies for now.”

Before the pulpy, saccharine story of Rudolph started, Jamie did extract his phone. And quick sent of a message. It was hardly enough, but it was a start.

[I’m sorry what I said hurt you. I’m going to work on finding the words to explain it properly, but I don’t hate you. I’m going to keep building myself back up and maybe we can be friends again.]

_HPLH, uh, what? Okay. I’m touching the sex cult thing. (But seriously, accidentally, how?) I guess you just need to ask her for some actual private time. I’ll leave that as an exercise for the reader._

_I don’t understand why your actual question is about getting ‘solo private time’. That seems like a basic request. So there must be more than you’re saying. But if things are really not working for you maybe you need to resign from the priesthood?_

_(P.S. I know I said I’d drop it - but how do you accidentally start a sex cult?)_

_(P.P.S. Wait. Are there rituals? You being a priest kind of suggests that. Does your girlfriend do sex magick?)_

Chapter End Notes

Next: Christmas! Jack has duties to attend to and questions to get answered. Apollo's going come clean if he knows what's good for him.

Okay. That's it. That's the low-point (maybe the first half of the next chapter, depends on how one looks at it). Time to start rebuilding the ship.

I'm also throwing together a little fluffy one-shot for Valentine's Day. Not in this series though, more stand alone. However, it looks like it's going to be like New Year's Kisses in that it's only going to be half done for the day.
Chapter Summary

Top 10 best/worse Christmas for Jack. He just wants to lick his metaphorical wounds in private, but apparently spirits can smell introversion. And then he's summoned by one sister before visiting another.

Chapter Notes

TW: Suicidal thoughts/suicidal ideation (of a kind) for first couple of sections. Perhaps ctrl+F skip to “Streuth. We need more tropical Guardians.”

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Dear Uncle Jay (Jack?),

So my boyfriend and I are childhood friends, we grew up together, he's had a crush on me since we were little kids and I never noticed, I'm not gonna say the long details of how we got together but long story short I found out, friend zoned him for 4 years only to realise I return his feelings, I told him we went on a few non-dates and got together....

Now here's where the story starts to resemble a shoujo manga or something but this actually happened.. So there's this boy in his class who hates him I know one of the reasons but not all and keeps trying to get me to break up with him... And no it's not cause he likes me, cause he's my friend's ex and as far as I know still has lingering feelings for her.. But anyway the guy is always harassing my boyfriend in school and loves to mention me cause it makes him blush....

But the thing is.. Lately my boyfriend has been distant, like not responding to my messages, tho seeming them for days at a time and his excuse is that he's busy, or not sitting next to me in church when he said he would and walking off to sit somewhere else, he didn't even want to do valentine's day tho I made it really obv that I wanted to... He's told me to have patience with him and then later that he's been having family issues and it does sort of explain some of his behaviour but not all.... Cause he's kinda shy and he's never acted shy around me and now he suddenly is... I mean we can talk perfectly fine in person or over the phone but over text seems to be a problem... And the thing is our friends or others can never bring me up without causing him to blush... So he's really confusing me and I've tried talking to him about it but that was over text cuz we don't get to see each other in person too often... I just don't know what to think anymore... Can you please help.

Yours,
Confused About This Situation

Why don’t you just disappear?

It was a serious question. Jack had considered disappearing when Jamie was first taken from him. But he'd decided to try. To rage and demand a cure. Which probably didn’t exist. Now, now Jamie
had asked him to go. And Jack would do anything to spare Jamie pain. Even disappear. Return to his
 torment of invisibility. Jack had had his fifteen minutes of fame.

Jack wondered if he’d die without belief. Was he enough of a Guardian for that? Or would he just go
back to being untouchable?

Jamie was free of him now. Free to grow up. Become a productive member of society. Free to put
away childish things. And he only had one last request.

*Why don’t you just disappear?*

A mini blizzard churned above Jack, mirroring his troubled circling thoughts. At Jamie’s request he’d
disappeared. Fled Burgess for a remote, unnamed icy patch of Greenland. The only more isolated
place he could go was Antarctica. Maybe he’ll go there once he’s solved this question.

Jack was turned in on himself. Arms curled around his crook and knees. Drawing his power – and
the storm – around him. It sealed him off in an almost peaceful white. A tendril of foreign intent
nosed into the storm, clearing a path. Jack lifted his head from his arms and vaguely looked in the
right direction.

The curtain of the white-out rippled and two spirits stepped through. One a sturdy, dark tanned man,
wearing a caribou pelt – draped so he looked half man half beast, antlers strong and proud. With him
was a huge white wolf – easily shoulder to shoulder with Jack.

Jack frowned, he’d never seen Tekkeitsertok and Amaguq together before. The caribou protector
and lone wolf hunter were hardly friends with one another. Though Jack did consider them
acquaintances. Tekkeitsertok as a fellow herdsman and Amaguq as a fellow trickster.

“We were mistaken,” said Tekkeitsertok.

“Huh?” eloquently conveyed Jack’s confusion. Underscored by him shaking out the pins and
needles in his legs from standing up.

“We thought you soft.”

“That you weren’t real winter,” the wolf added.

“Uh, thanks?” Jack wasn’t sure whether that was a compliment or insult, either way it seemed a little
backhanded.

“You now pose a dilemma to me, Frost. I am tasked with protecting those of the northern skies.”

“Yeah. And you’re good at it. Even helped me once or twice.”

“And now? How am I to protect you? You who wields winters’ heart? Or ban you from our skies
when the Wind bends to your will? How do I protect others from your wrath?”

“I – I would never!”

“But you *did*, boy,” barked Amaguq.

“That was different! Cupid took my believer away!”

“Are you going to do this every time you lose a believer?”

“No! Jamie’s different,” stressed Jack, before more quietly, “he was my first.”
“I am sorry for your loss,” said Tekkeitsertok, his words formal and cool, “But still. I can no longer offer you my protection. Instead, I will work with you, like I do with any of the far-northern spirits.”

“Like Amaguq?” snarked Jack, “Because I’m so used to seeing you too working together.”

“I’m here because you are something of a trickster and Nanuk is too honourable to counter your wiles. Haven’t you ever banded together with a rival in face of a greater force?”

“You really thought I’d attack you?”

“There was a possibility. We’ve learnt the harsh lesson to always be prepared.”

“Fine. I get the message,” huffed Jack, dropping back into his curled sitting position and looking away from the pair, “I can I go back to my thoughts?”

“Yes.”

And they left. Closing their path behind them. Leaving Jack to his deliberations. Apparently even his old spirit acquaintances didn’t want him around.

Why won’t you just disappear?

Jack’s thoughts completed another couple of loops before he was disturbed again. The next spirit’s entrance was far more dramatic.

Fire cut snow, as burning intent blasted through the soothing self-exile.

Jack spun to his feet and levelled his crook at the intruder. The spirit walked calmly through the snow, wreathed in flames. Which in some sideways relation of good manners dispersed once they stepped into the eye of Jack’s storm.

“Greetings, Jokul.”

“That’s not my name, Loki.”

“Well,” the god shrugged, “Lots of us don’t know who you are now. What with the whole cold blooded vengeance thing. Reputation is so changeable. I used to be the Æsir’s fix-it, but now I’m the bad guy.”

“So I’ve been told. Did you have an actual reason for showing up in a ball of flame?”

“Yes I do actually. I have a question about vengeance.”

“Cupid as good as killed my first believer.”

“Oh, Cupid and the goði are topics for later,” Loki dismissed with a wave before starting to circle Jack, not quite talking to him, “No, back to vengeance. A vendetta can be inherited. But I wonder, does that only apply to the vengeance-seeking side? What if the subject is killed? Is the vendetta dissolved, forever unsettled? Or is the role of subject bequeathed?”

“I… don’t know? Haven’t really thought about it. Inheriting a vendetta seems stupid either way.”

“Hmm. I should’ve expected as much from a modern spirit. But then you’re hardly distanced from the issue at hand.”

“Which is? I’m not really in the trickster-logic mood today.”
“Cupid and thence you, and your little light. I owed Cupid payback – for something the God-Whisperer did under his orders. They’re both out of commission, one of them by your hand. So does my vengeance default to you, Frosti?”

“That’s what this is about?” cried Jack, throwing his arms up in exasperation.

Loki shrugged, “I’m a god, of course I’m petty.”

“Y’know what?” sighed Jack, flat voice at odds with his arms spread in blatant provocation, “Do your worst. I don’t care.”

Loki frowned but didn’t respond. Then copied Jack in throwing up his own arms.

“You can’t do that! It’s no fun if you don’t care,” a pause, “I thought you were meant to be fun.”

“Not today. Just get your revenge or go away.”

“Oh!” Loki lit up in mischievous glee, “Are you trying to change your story? My ‘becoming’ the god of fire in the seventeenth century was inspired!” he clapped, then shrugged again, “Not sure how being Thor’s adoptive brother is going to work out though.”

“Loki. Shut up. If you’re not going to do anything, I’m going back to trying to think,” muttered Jack, sitting back down.

“More like pointlessly mope. Maybe I should try for a mantle myself. Seems to becoming more and more a survival necessity. Chaos probably would be a good fit for me. But Shiva ain’t someone to challenge lightly.”

“I’m ignoring you.”

“Not very well. I wonder. Your first believers are adults now. I wonder if they make up little stories about your sex life. Very grown up that. Corrupting your childhood heroes.”

Jack resolutely didn’t follow Loki’s resumed circling. Didn’t lift his gaze above Loki’s knees.

“Though blasting the Celtic islands with a super-blizzard was pretty unheroic. Plus the collateral chaos to Europe. I’m actually kind of jealous.”

“Wind. Make him disappear.”

The Wind complied. Both by spinning the storm tighter around Jack, and bodily throwing Loki back to Scandinavia.

Maybe he should’ve let Loki stay. Let the god’s patience run out until he exacted whatever vengeance he planned. Nothing would match the crime Jack had inflicted on Jamie. Or make up for the damage he did to those innocents.

Why won’t you just disappear?

Jack’s next visitor (and really what did he expect trying to have a little time to think to himself?) arrived not from outside but from below. A circle of snow caved in beside Jack, revealing a tunnel. Soon followed by Bunny leaping out of it.

“Streuth. We need more tropical Guardians.”

“Did North hit the aurora, Bunny?”
“Nah, but he is wondering where yah were. It’s Chrissy Eve, don’t yah normally tag along these days?”

“Don’t feel like it this year.”

“Becuzza what’s happening with Jamie?”

“He told me to just disappear!”

Bunny frowned and dropped into a crouch before Jack. Something of his expression shuttered. More than a poker face, but actually trying to suppress his emotions.

“Jackie. Tell me from the start. What did Jamie say, exactly?”

Jack didn’t entirely want to share the details. But they’d been circling around his head so much anyway. Maybe sharing them would ease them a little? So Jack did. Told Bunny of his pitiful attempt at reconnection with his first light. Of all the hope thrown back in his face.

“Jackie. I’m not the best at this comfort thing, but that was the curse speaking not Jamie. Not the real him. I’m the Guardian of Hope and I know he still hopes to be your friend.”

“But, but… He told me to disappear.”

“He’s hurting and when we’re in pain we say things we regret. I wouldn’t lie to you about this. Not about hope.”

The shrieking storm quietened to a murmur, and Jack only just realised how strong it had been.

“Will yah be going to North’s, or do yah want me to send Sandy your way?”

“Nah. I do feel better. I just want a little alone time.”

“Don’t take too long. Or North’ll come looking for yah to aggressively cheer yah up.”

“Hah,” Jack weakly laughed, “You’re not the worst at the comforting thing Bunny.”

“Y’know who’s better? The nippers. You’re snow balls and fun times, not sooks and wobbles. Being all Pat Malone doesn’t suit yah.”

“Heh,” Jack was bittersweetly reminded of Jamie telling him to get back to ‘work’. “Maybe I will. I’ll just take a moment to get my game face on.”

“More like ‘style’ your hair,” snorted Bunny, “North is still going to come looking for yah, no matter what I say. Once he’s over his holiday hangover o’course.”

“Makes me glad I don’t have one.”

“Speaking of which—” Bunny stomped, reopening his tunnel “–I should get back to work on mine.” – and jumping down.

“Get going you lazy bum,” called Jack (only once Bunny was dropping of course).

“Lazy!? Who are yah calling lazy? Yah lazy…”

Jack felt lighter for that last talk. Things weren’t fixed but offloading was nice. Plus Bunny had used his knowledge of Jack’s buttons for good and not evil. The kangaroo was right. Jack had been
neglecting himself – and probably the kids – too focused on crossing over to talk to Jamie.

Jack laid back and stared at the stars revealed by his own calming down. So meeting Jamie face to face was a bust. Hopefully it had just been too much too soon. In the midst of his rant Jamie had said he wanted to know everything about Jack. Well, Jack had never kept secrets from Jamie – outside of surprises. Since Jamie had said texts were okay, what should he tell Jamie first? Jack didn’t want to lie but he’d probably have to continue censoring any magic-spirit-stuff. Jamie had rationalised Jack’s Guardian duties as some elaborate on-going roleplay thing. And he wanted to know Jack rather than Jack Frost. Which didn’t make much sense. Maybe Jack could start by explaining that?

Jack pulled out his phone and discovered a surprise: Jamie had texted him.

[I’m sorry what I said hurt you. I’m going to work on finding the words to explain it properly, but I don’t hate you. I’m going to keep building myself back up and maybe we can be friends again.]

[I forgive you. Take as long as you need. I’m good at waiting.]

Jack frowned and sent off another text.

[But do you want to start again as pen pals?]

It wasn’t much. Nothing compared to the piercing question. But Jamie had apologised. Had asked for friendship. Even under the curse. Jack blinked as that sunk in.

He leapt into the sky, whooping and tumbling in the Wind’s reactive joy.

Jamie was reaching out! Jack wanted to keep replying. Just blather his whole life story and attempt mushy poetry about how much Jamie meant to him. But that would be too much. Far too soon. If twitter was 140 characters, what could he say in 50?

Jack rolled those thoughts up and got up to ‘work’. Time to give as many kids as possible a white Christmas. Jack took the star of joy Jamie’s message sparked and seeded the clouds with it. He watered it with the hope Bunny had filled him with. Since it was Christmas Jack needed to mix in a bunch of wonder too. Childish curiosity was only a small step from fun, and a wonderful fertiliser for it.

His snow storms ready, Jack started herding them south to where the children awaited. He didn’t have time to deliver them all personally, but with his partner the Wind, Jack could trust they’d snow where they should.

“Jack” brushed across his ear.

Jack looked around. There was no one nearby to call his name. The Wind did that sometimes. Carried pieces of people’s conversations to him. It never could keep a full sentence together tough. Mostly it just ‘spoke’ his name, or sometimes laughter.

“Jack… Frost,” the voice was stronger now.

A strength echoed by the Wind curling around Jack’s limbs and dragging him south.

“I Name you: Jackson…”

Jack tensed. Being Named was rarely a good thing. Even in his lonely years Jack had known not to give away his name – what he knew of it. Though the time between learning he was an Overland and getting a magic safety crash course was pretty slim.
“I Name you: Jackson Overland Frost. I Name you Brother. I would have my Brother attend me.”

At the full summoning Jack relaxed. Now he could identify it was Sophie’s voice. He did wonder why she’d resorted to Name magic. Seemed a bit extreme. Though glancing at his phone Jack saw he’d ignored twenty-seven calls from her. Honestly, now Jack was surprised Bunny’s earlier visit hadn’t been to throw him in the Sack.

[Yeah, yeah. I’m coming. You can drop the spell.]

A couple minutes later, the Wind’s grip loosened and Jack prodded it to continue to Burgess.

[Good. But if you don’t get here in half an hour, I’m sending Bunny after you.]

[Joke’s on you. We’ve just had our court mandated chat for the month.]

Half an hour still left Jack a lot of time to spare. Allowing him a sedate journey to Burgess. By his standards. Especially since Jamie had replied!

[Pen pals? Okay. Let’s do that.]

Hi, I’m Jamie. My hometown Burgess, but these days I’m studying child dev psyche and creative writing at college cross-country.]

Jack frowned and replied. Balancing the full truth and Jamie’s acceptance was hard.

[Hi, pen pal, I’m Jack. Actually I’m from Burgess too. Moved away years ago before I even went to school. These days I work for this tiny charity group – doing deliveries and running kids’ events.]

Sophie wasn’t at the Bennett home, she was at Jack’s pond. Part of him almost expected her to be wearing a witch’s hat. And maybe standing by a circle of candles. Instead she was sensibly dressed for the weather. Wrapped up in a very Christmassy beanie, mittens and scarf. Probably Nick’s work.

“Jack!” she cried, bowling him over in a tackle-hug, “Are you okay? Jamie told me about your chat and what he said and I can’t believe he said that. I don’t think he realised how hurtful that was until he told me. He said he sent his apologies but he asked me to tell you too. And then you weren’t answering, and Bunny and Baby Tooth didn’t know where you were and I was afraid you’d done something stupid.”

Jack let her rant it out. He’d been selfish forgetting that it wasn’t just him effected by this mess.

“Sssh, Sophie, it’s okay. I was just having a brood up north. And Bunny gave a surprisingly good pep talk. But don’t tell him I said that.”

“Are you really okay?” a teary eyed Sophie asked, looking far younger than the witch who earlier summoned him.

Jack gave her his best big brother smile, “Honestly? Yeah, I’m okay. Not great, but Bunny gave me a reality check.”

“Jamie told me more than just what happened yesterday. He also told me he’d been attacked?” her tone lifting at the end into a question – obviously hoping Jack would correct her.

“He was. By Cupid.”

“Oh,” was her small sound of wounded realisation. “Jamie did seem to have only half the story. Said you might know more but didn’t want to ‘burden’ me with it.” Sophie’s eye’s hardened, the teen’s
confidence returning. “Jack. I’m not a little kid anymore. Tell me what happened to my brother.”

The look Sophie levelled Jack with left no room for disagreement. He wondered if she learnt it from Jamie or whether it was an inherent Bennett superpower. It was impossible to deny the same determination Jamie had faced Pitch down with.

So Jack told her. Told her about the ‘trials’ (the bits Jamie hadn’t already told her). Told her about the attack. About the curse. About his own retribution. His side of the disastrous chat.

When he finished, Sophie pulled him into another hug.

“I’m so sorry Jack. But there’s two more things. Do you want the good or bad first?”

“Bad,” said Jack after a moment’s consideration. “I’d rather save the best for last.”

“Jamie… it’s not just that he doesn’t believe in Jack Frost. He doesn’t remember you. And he doesn’t want us just telling him everything. Jamie wants to try remembering himself.”

The revelation hurt Jack, but nothing like Jamie not seeing him, or Jamie asking him to disappear. Amnesia kind of made sense. If Jamie had his memories of Jack, he would then believe in Jack Frost.

“It’s okay. I should’ve realised. I’ll see Tooth about what we can do. What was the good news?”

“Not news. Christmas presents!”

“Presents?”

“Yes, Jack, presents. It’s Christmas Eve remember? I snuck yours out from under the tree,” explained Sophie, sliding over to her backpack.

“Presents?” repeated Jack, emphasising the plural.

“Mum wouldn’t forget you,” teased Sophie, pulling out two gifts.

Both were wrapped in cartoony, garish, kitschy paper. Prompted by Sophie, Jack examined the one marked from Mrs B. it a floppy, flat square of snowmen in silly hats. Jack tore it open and smirked at the trio of t-shirts adorned with silly puns and pictures.

“Heh, how have I gone this long without a Disney Frozen / House Stark shirt?”

“Who knows? Open mine!”

Jack rolled his eyes but obeyed. The second present was in equally garish paper – this time just countless be-bowed presents on top of one another. The present was a solid block, sized about a juice box, and was silent when Jack shook it.

“Hey! It’s fragile!”

“Oh really?”

Jack tore apart the wrapping just as violently as the first. Revealing a heavy cardboard box, and inside that a carefully packed charm bracelet. A simple silver chain with a collection of charms – some silver, some wood, and a couple maybe even bone. The sheer magic of the crafting was heavy in Jack’s palm.

“You did all this?” asked Jack, awed.
Sophie blushed as she answered, “Most of it. Called in a couple of favours too.”

“Thank you very much.”

Sophie grinned and held up a ‘wait a moment’ finger. “And then last but not least.”

“More?”

“Jamie does still like you,” said Sophie, dropping a gift into his hands.

Jack’s struggling mind seized. In his hands was concrete proof Jamie was trying. Jack reverently unwrapped the gift, with a care he hadn’t used since his first Christmas gifts. He opened the box to find the contents covered by a note.

Dear Jack,

I don’t know how many drafts of this letter I’ve written. Nothing I write seems to be enough. What I said hurt you – and judging by Sophie’s face – worse than I thought. I still see your Most of what I don’t want you to disappear. I want to be your best friend again. I want stupid text conversations and anecdotes and all that. As much as trusting someone so much terrifies me right now.

My mind’s not in a great place. You know how I was attacked. Some It’s I’m sorry you seem to be getting the worst of it. Especially since I’m certain you did your best to help me. (And probably were when you talked to my mom). I’m sorry to hurt you again but if I keep this from keeping this from you is worse.

I don’t remember you. My memories of you were collateral damage to whatever my mind did in response to the attack. But I want to remember to know you again.

It’s not much but I hope this gift is a starting point. Your ears looked really cold sticking out like that when I saw you. Hopefully this’ll keep protect them a bit from the wind.

Yours hopefully, Jam. Merry Christmas. Hope you family is well. And whoever is so polarised about it behaves.

Yours hopefully, Jamie.

Jack’s emotions were churning again. But now it wasn’t just self-pity and despair. The letter wasn’t any less brutally honest than Jamie’s rant, but it made the gems in it all the more precious. It wasn’t careful empty platitudes. Jack very carefully folded the letter up and tucked it away into his pouch. Then looked at the gift itself.

Jack laughed. Not his trademark carefree laughter. This was something softer, stuttering, more bittersweet. Perhaps there was even a tingle around his eyes.

“He got me a scarf,” Jack snorted, holding it up, “And earmuffs. Jamie Bennett got Jack Frost a scarf and earmuffs, because he thought he was cold.”

The words could’ve been biting but Jack’s voice was too hitched, too raw for it. The set were dark blue, with snowflake-like geometric white patterns. They were machine made, store bought, completely mundane. They were nonsensical. But Jamie had seen Jack shivering in his mortal guise and got what he thought Jack might find useful.
Jack put them on. Watching as frost ran down the edges and the white patterning. The darker blue worked with his hoodie. And it wasn’t like his hoddie was made from magic.

“Crap.”

“What?”

“I don’t have a present for him.”

“You don’t have a present for your BFF boyfriend?”

“A) I was working on something but I think it’s too magical for Jamie right now. And B) I’m pretty sure we’re not boyfriends anymore.”

“A) What was it? B) You and Jamie didn’t break up. I’m fairly sure the moment this is fixed he’s going to fuck you silly. Or maybe ride you.”

“Sophie! Please don’t talk about me and Jamie like that. Or sex at all. You’re my little sister – just don’t. I’ll concede your point if you drop… that,” Jack flailed, before sheepishly scratching the back of his head, “I can’t give Jamie a wizard’s focus carved from Antarctic ice.”

“Why not?”

“It’s never-melt ice. He’s going to notice it’s always cold.”

“I dunno. He still seems oblivious to when it’s below freezing. And anyway, it doesn’t sound like you have a plan B.”

“I could find something. I’m sure I have something in my pouch I could give Jamie. I probably have something I picked up for him and haven’t yet got around to giving him anyway.”

Sophie let Jack rifle around for a moment before commenting, “You sure know how to treat a guy, don’t cha?”

“Fine. But it’s technically meant to go from my hands to his, so make sure no one else touches it.”

“Sure, sure. Can I see it, or is it already wrapped?”

“You’ll just have to wait till Christmas morning, like any other nice little girl.”

Jack stuck his arm into his pouch, reaching up and back into the extra protected space (Jamie had noted it look like Jack was reaching through a hole up towards his heart). His fingers brushed on paper and ribbon. Jack pulled out the first present – a pamper set for Mrs B – and handed it to Sophie. He repeated the manoeuvre for Sophie and Jamie’s presents. All were wrapped in tasteful silver paper with snow-flaky ribbon. (Silly cartoon paper had been tempting, but Jack didn’t want to be predictable.) Sophie’s – a calligraphy brush and ink set – was long and thing and light. Jamie’s was heavy and square – inside the box was a grapefruit sized crystal.

“Remember: no touchie.”

“I know. I know.”

“Now. You better get back to bed. Santa doesn’t visit little kids who stay up on Christmas Eve.”

“Yeah, yeah. I better get going before mom notices I’m out after curfew. See ya!”
With one last hug, Sophie ran off, back up the lane to House Bennett. Jack watched her go – torn on whether to follow. He pulled his new scarf tighter, relishing in its warmth. Jack closed his eyes for a moment. Just imagining the faint trace of Jamie was a proper hug.

Jack decided – after a brief mediation – he’d done his duty for the moment, the storms he’d seeded were behaving themselves on course to deliver a white Christmas. He had time to consult with a fellow Guardian and expert on memory. Jack doubted it would be a quick fix, but sooner started sooner finished. Jack opened his eyes and looked up. Jamie couldn’t remember? Jack knew who to talk to.

“Wind, take me to Tooth.”

The journey was both one of Jack’s faster and calmer travels. Generally traveling by Wind wasn’t direct. It would weave its way to the requested destination detouring for things it thought Jack might like. But when it heard Jack ask so seriously it would oblige. This trip was more ballistic. Hurtling Jack high over the roof of the world to the Tooth Palace. Which, if Jack remembered his geography right, now was somewhere in Thailand.

Jack went through the usual hurdles of an audience with Queen Toothiana. Greeting baby teeth, saying hello to the matriarch, and retreating to the tea parlour.

The tea hadn’t even boiled before Tooth flew in. Jack only managed a “Hi, Too–” before he was pulled into a hug.

“Jack, I’m so sorry to hear about Jamie.”

Jack returned the hug. Hugs were nice. This one was getting a little long though. Jack started wriggling, and after a moment Tooth got the message.

“Yeah, it sucks. He needs your help.”

Tooth frowned, that dawning concern pooling in her eyes, “Jack…”

“He’s having memory problems,” Jack said over her, “That’s your job, right? Helping kids remember.”

“Jamie isn’t a child Jack. He’s Grown Up.”

“No he hasn’t! He’s been cursed! He told me he can’t remember how we met. If you do your memory magic you can fix it!”

“Jack,” Tooth said kind and soft and unwanted, “it doesn’t work like that.”

“Why not?”

“The connection is broken. Let me show you.”

Tooth fluttered over to the nook’s back wall, where Jack noticed a curious arrangement of tooth boxes. One in the middle with three around it, and a few circles around them. Jack could almost see the crackle of magic between them, swirling into the centre. Tooth plucked up the focal tooth box and flew back to Jack.

She held it end first to Jack, and an eight-year old Jamie grinned up at him. A brush of feathered fingers and the box opened revealing the teeth inside.
“What happened?” Jack gasped.

The outermost were black. They looked burnt. Their neighbours didn’t appear much better, looking far more aged and rotten than they had any right to be. (Jamie had been very conscientious in his dental care.)

“I’m not sure. I’m guessing they’re reflecting Cupid’s curse’s effect on Jamie’s memories.”

“Exactly, you need to fix it.”

“I can’t Jack. The easy connection the teeth provided is corrupted. It’s easiest when a child has more baby teeth to lose and believes in me. Harder if only one of those remain. But impossible if both are gone. Jamie doesn’t have any baby teeth left and he doesn’t believe in my anymore. Jack, he’s out of my reach.”

“What about his wisdom teeth? He gave you one of them at least.”

“They’re the blackest Jack. The most I can do is stop it spreading to the rest of them. Keep the memories safe for a making.”

“But still. The baby are Jamie, can’t you use sympa-whatsit magic?”

“I’d have to force a link. Which is black magic. Jamie wouldn’t accept the cost of it, and he’d resist the spell anyway.” Tooth rested a hand on Jack’s cheek. “You have to accept it, Jack: Jamie is a non-believer now.”

“But it’s only temporary!”

“Jack. You know that’s not true. Adults don’t revert to childish belief. They may relearn how to see through the veil but it’s not the same.”

“So it’s hopeless?”

“If you wanted hope, you shouldn’t have come to me, Jack,” explained Tooth, her voice heavy with pity, and conveying her countless years, “I’m the one who helps children learn from the past and keeps memorial for those lost to time. I’m the Guardian of Memory, Jack. Not hope. Not dreams. Not wonder. Not fun. I told you this day would come. We did what we could for Jamie. Now he’s an adult. Maybe he’ll come back to us when he has children or grandchildren.”

“No! He still cares. He got me these!” Jack said, tugging on the scarf and earmuffs.

Tooth’s gaze was tired and almost judgemental.

“You’re not the first spirit to come to me when their lover forgot them.”

Jack buried his face in his hands, futilely protesting, “Jamie’s my boyfriend not my lover.”

“Jack, whatever you’re calling yourselves, I can’t help. My parents may have Truly Loved each other but that’s a magic I have no knowledge of.” Tooth trailed off into a mutter, “Except it causes as much – Sorry! Is there anything else?”

“No. I guess not. Sorry for wasting your time.”

Jack let himself out through the backdoor. He didn’t want to float through the palace. Especially now Tooth had told him it was also a memorial. Down a million steps to the landing strip for North and Bunny.
Jack breathed in, drawing up power to summon the Wind so far south, when someone tugged on his scarf. He looked over his shoulder to see a nervous looking Baby Tooth. Not a common expression for the little spitfire.

“Yes, Baby Tooth?” said Jack, setting aside his disagreement with Mama Tooth for a friendly smile. One she matched before grabbing the scarf’s end and fluttering up in front of him with a questioning look on her face.

“Christmas present from Jamie.”

BT looked confused, pointing alternately at Jack and one of the embroidered snowflakes.

“I crossed over to visit him and he thought I looked cold,” explained Jack, somewhere between bittersweet and sheepish.

BT dropped the scarf to fly victory laps around Jack’s head, her bell-voice chiming happily.

“I know, right. Still the curse is effecting his memories, so he doesn’t remember me. I thought your mama could fix it but she’s says she can’t.”

BT frowned increasingly severely as Jack continued his explanation. A moment after she brightened, and snapped her fingers, before flying wholly into Jack’s pouch. He felt the very weird wriggling sensation of Baby Tooth rummaging around, looking for something. Jack’s suspicions were confirmed when she emerged victorious with Jack’s tooth box. He obligingly held out his hands for it. Baby Tooth’s look was one asking permission, to which Jack nodded. She returned the nod and touched the box.

The world fell away.

It is night. Jack’s outside a familiar windowsill. Watching himself. On the bed is a boy. A boy and his toy rabbit. The boy pleads to the toy. The toy does nothing. The boy discards the toy.

The spirit breathes on the glass. Frost spreads. A(n unseen) finger scrapes. An egg appears. The boy looks. At the window. At the discarded toy. He frowns.

Fresh frost blanks the window. Another drawing. A simple rabbit outline. The spirit’s hands coax. The outline rabbit is drawn out. It jumps free of flat glass to run through the air. The boy’s eyes track it. The boy laughs. Even as it bursts above him. Back into

“Snow?”

A frown of confusion, and a spark of epiphany. A whisper:

“Jack Frost?”

Silence.

“Did he just–?”

The spirit sputters. The boy turns. His eyes widen. A shocked realisation:

“Jack Frost.”

“That’s right! But-but that’s me!”
The spirit continues to wonder. The boy’s jaw drops. The spirit begins to guess.

“Wait, you can see me?”

A nod.

“Can you… can you see me?”

Another nod.

“He sees me! He sees me!”

Reality rebuilt itself.

“Baby Tooth. You’re a genius. But. We have to plan this perfectly. Lay a lot of groundwork. I’m pretty sure we’ll only get one chance.”

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Okay, CATS, I don’t really know what to tell you. I’m still working through a similar situation myself. Again, communication is the answer, but I guess it’s also the issue. I can think of one or two reasons why he might suddenly act all shy and distant, but they’re miles apart. So I’ll leave it to you to get it out of him.

I can think of two main tactics. One, ask him directly. Next time you’re on the phone – talking rather than texting – just ask him. This might not work straight away, so be ready to try again. Whether you do that soon after, or try to let things settle is up to you. Depends on how he reacts. Bear in mind, confronting him about things will make him defensive, whether he has any reason to be or not.

(I went through with the direct conversation, and almost ruined everything. So be careful. But don’t give up if he shoots you down in the moment. He might just need a little space to process.)

The second is to ask others. Maybe your friends know something? Maybe the guy pestering your boyfriend knows something? Maybe ask them, idk.

(Be extra careful with this. These people are not your boyfriend. They don’t know everything, and they might with or without meaning it mislead you.)

Best of luck!

Chapter End Notes

Next: Jamie looks into Jack Overland Frost. And is himself the subject of far more attention than he wants. Again. Will someone save him?

Sorry for the delay, but this chapter clocks in at about 6k, definitely the biggest so far. Probably not a sign of things to come. (About to receive a new laptop, so less write and type. Plus I’ll be back into the swing of uni, and able to use gaps between classes to write.)

This time it was Tooth refusing to do what the chapter outline said. I skipped back to Chapter 9 for how I described the palace, and was reminded that, well, Tooth might provide a shoulder to cry on, she kinda sees this as the natural destination of Jack and
Jamie's guardian/believer relationship.

Intended to be included in this chapter, but never found a good spot for it, was the fact that Jack's Guardian Oath provided a subconscious safety net while he was going all Winter's Wrath on Cupid. So besides logistical nightmares, the storm didn't actually threaten nearly as many lives as it really should've. Good thing Baby Tooth decided to pick up the slack.

Some headcannons developed in writing this chapter (even if they didn't make it in):

- Jack can teleport between different points of the upper atmosphere. Rather than the Wind blowing him around at Mach 6 like I keep having it do. In the movie his trip from St Petersberg to Burgess seemed pretty instantaneous. Not just the scene cut nature of it. But the apparent times in each location, sorta. There's eight hours time zone difference between the places. I.e. 10pm St Petersberg is 2pm Burgess-time. The movie's set around Easter, which even at its earliest is after the spring equinox, so days are longer than nights. The shadows in the Burgess scenes aren't long, looks to be ~30 degree shadow angle, so about 2pm pretending it's an equinox. It's probably not 10pm in St Petersberg, but maybe 7pm. Which leaves Jack 3 hours to travel ~4000mi/~6500km (great circle as the crow flies). So hypersonic Mach 5+. Or teleportation. (Edit it's 1 am but I realise that I forgot to divide by three here. So it's probably just Mach 2 or something. Still super sonic just not hyper sonic. Jack try harder.)

- Toothiana infuses the new fairies she makes with memories of her favourites. As living tributes. It got creepy lonely being surrounded by personality copies of herself, and she started to wear thin. (Guess who's memories went into making Baby Tooth?) That's what Tooth meant by "keeping [Jamie's] memories safe for a making".

- Tooth is more than a little bitter about True Love. She's seen it in action and as a tragedy. Her mother was immortal and eternal until she fell in love. I'm not sure whether Tooth has personally been involved/hurt by romance, or whether she just swore off it completely. But yeah. This Tooth wasn't interested in anything but Jack's teeth during the time of the film.
Chapter Summary

Jamie continues to attempt to solve the puzzle of Jack Frost, Jackson Overland, and elaborate Christmas presents. And random strangers keep trying to have his attention.

Also, kids are weird.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Dear Uncle Jack,

I think I’m going to fail at Christmas. I am really bad at gift giving. Really bad. So bad. I get socks for people who never wear shoes, only flip-flops. I’m that bad.

This year I have a girlfriend. I really don’t want to stuff it up. I don’t know what to get her. I don’t know how to find out what to get her.

Greatly incapable at Christmas

P.S. Could you get a copy of this letter to Santa?

Jamie blearily rubbed sleep dust out of his eyes and the imprint of a spiral notebook out of his cheek. The previous night’s imagery was quickly fading. Not that he could remember the plot — if there was one. Jamie remembered only two horrifying figures. One tall and grey and black, with yellow eyes. The second — the worst — was like a flame, constantly shifting.

Maybe once he was done looking into Jack, he’d unearth his old dream journals?

Jamie looked at the mess covering his desk. Papers, and books, and maps(?), and photos. Oh, his neck hurt from falling asleep on his arms. Staying up late on the computer had more than few downsides compared to hiding under your sheets with a torch.

Jamie’s gaze landed on his gift from Jack. After a moment he realised he’d fallen asleep cuddling it. The paperweight sparkled, drawing his eye. Jamie wondered if it had some greater purpose he hadn’t deduced yet. The smooth sphere was filled with hexagonal flakes that at least reflected light, maybe even fluoresced by themselves. But not the usual vaguely sickly green type either. They glowed pristine blue. Sometimes even golden yellow in the right light.

It was beautiful. Whereas Jamie’s gift in return had been so functional. But Sophie said it brought Jack to happy tears. Jamie didn’t understand. Then again, that was why he’d fallen asleep on his desk. Soon he’d get back to it.

But first, breakfast.

Jamie’s mind was mostly awake, but his limbs were lagging, so his descent into the kitchen was far from quiet. Judging by the slant of sunlight pouring through the windows it was late morning. Not
that that meant much in the non-time between Christmas and New Years.

He didn’t encounter anyone else while raiding the kitchen. Jamie wasn’t sure whether anyone was up. He poured a bowl of cereal half-made from marshmallows and sugar, but made no effort to check. Instead stealing back upstairs with his diabetes inducing sustenance.

Looking into his room from the outside Jamie wondered if he should go all the way — with cork-boards and string connecting scraps across the room. Deciphering Jack sometimes felt about that level of indecipherable conspiracy.

Jamie had dynamite data mined for info about Jack on the internet and in their communique. Maybe it was time to move to hard copy? It certainly seemed they were friends before either established their digital selves. Though that could be due to dropping old terrible, forgotten usernames. Time to dig through his room.

Jamie started with “long term storage” — under his bed. (His poor forsaken bed.) The boxes contained pretty much everything Jamie had kept for sentimental reasons, but couldn’t fit on his shelves. If the answers to how Jamie knew Jack weren’t here they probably didn’t exist.

On Jamie’s desk, his phone lit up and tried to buzz itself airborne.

[Right and my sister was a brat sometimes. But I think that might be required or she’d lose her membership of the sisterhood. Anyway. Emma loved to blame me for things. And since I was a brat too shed generally get away with it.]

Jamie considered how to reply. Should he wait? Nope, his fingers were already tapping away.

[And you never did the same to her?
Sophie’s never been a brat. Just a menace on my nerves whenever I was meant to be watching her. I don’t think she got a self-preservation instinct until she was twelve.]

Texting Jack was easy. Comfortable. Jamie would go so far as to call them friends. Their texts were filled with facts, but no secrets. Details but few emotions. As long as Jamie ignored what everyone said about Jack wanting to be his boyfriends. Which Jack hadn’t asked. Or even really spoken about.


Looking at the Tetris perfect packing and order-destroying shuffling Jamie wished he’d just kept a diary. Too bad he had probably thought “diaries are for girls” rather than “gender binaries are for sheep” at that age.

Time to head down memory lane. Too bad it looked to be extremely potholed.

Naturally the first item Jamie pulled out was a drawing of Jack. With white hair. The mischievous look on the drawing’s face was more standard cartoon motif than real life rendering. But still, not bad, for a twelve year old. According to Jamie’s own signature and date ten years ago. The Jack in the picture didn’t look a day younger. Unless he’d bathed in the some fountain of youth.

Jamie looked down at the boxes. That was a lot of stuff. If he stopped to stare at it all he wouldn’t get anywhere before he had to pack it back up to return to college. Better to treat it like a library dive. Sort and flag first, then double check possible nuggets.

Good news: kid-Jamie had dated everything so sorting was easy.

Confusing news: Jack appeared in basically everything from when Jamie was ten onwards.
Perplexing news: Jack was always Jack Frost — white hair, magical — right from the start. No drawings of Jack with brown hair. No pictures of him at all. Which was weird since the Jack Jamie knew certainly wasn’t camera shy.

After a few minutes deliberation, Jamie decided he might as well ask directly. This little bit at least.

[So I’m going though the stuff under my bed. How come I can’t find any photos of you? Got lots of drawings. And you take like five selfies a day now. What changed?]

Jamie was pretty sure Jack was the type to constantly check his phone, so the lack of instant response was a little foreboding. But maybe Jack didn’t have any signal, or maybe he was busy. Or maybe he didn’t want to confess.

Jamie put aside that line of thought and got back to sorting.

Besides the drawings and lack-of-photos, Jamie found scraps of writing. Little him’s handwriting and spelling was atrocious. It was hard to be sure but it seemed the fantastic version of how he met Jack was nearly foundational to their friendship. The overall plot was the same as the one rehashed on Jack Frost’s web profile backstory. Less polished though. It seemed that every chance he’d had Jamie had continued sharing his fractured fairytale/nursery-rhyme characters — homework, competitions. Jamie didn’t feel like it should surprise him. His current college subject selection followed the trajectory. But why was all this affected by his amnesia?

[Why am I not in photos? Okay. For a long time I felt basically invisible — never allowed to be seen. You were my first friend. First to __see__ me. But I was still kind of insecure? Took me a while to be comfortable in front of a camera. I bet a few of those photos are ones I took. [Especially if they’re itty-bitty you in the snow!]

Jamie glanced at the photos. There were a few of him that weren’t selfies. Maybe Jack did take them.

Well. The internet and his own archives hadn’t cleared things up. Maybe he could go to a different source. Jamie could ask his friends. But they seemed too close to Jack to be unbiased. Plus Sophie might mean well, but Jamie didn’t want talk of boyfriends right now. Come to think about it, besides Sophie and Cupcake he didn’t have many good friends left in Burgess. Pippa was awkward history (though maybe a good counter-view about Jack). Monty, Caleb, Claude, and the rest were now just facebook friends off on their own college adventures. The joys of growing up.

Jamie’s stomach rumbled. Apparently it was time for lunch. Jamie sniffed, and the aroma of grilled cheese lured him downstairs.

“I thought that would get your attention,” Jamie’s mother teased when he entered the kitchen. She gestured Jamie to sit and placed a bowl of tomato soup in front of him. Matching the steaming bowl at her own spot. “What have you been up to this morning? I heard a lot of pacing.”

“Um, sorting through my hoard from under my bed.”

“Oh.”

His mom obviously knew why he’d be doing that. Jamie glanced down at his soup rather than watch her visibly decide what to say next.

“Well, I hope you don’t stay inside all day.”

Jamie looked out at the glittering snow, “Yeah. It is a pretty nice day.”
“You could go to the library!”

“Library?” Jamie deadpanned.

“Um,” she hedged before barrelling along, “Back in middle school you went through their archives and discovered Jack was your eighth cousin or something.”

Jamie knew that speech pattern. He and Sophie used it when they were dodging around something.

“And..?”

“I’ve got a bunch of late books and I don’t want to be lectured when I return them.”

“…okay. I’ll sacrifice myself to the librarians.”

Jamie was ushered into his coat and out the door before he could think about changing his mind. At least it was in fact a very nice day. Snow on the ground and just the right amount of cloud to dampen the snow-glare without feeling overcast. Not really that cold either, Jamie would’ve been fine without his coat. His mom worried too much.

Ambling along, Jamie’s mind returned to the task of deciphering Jack. Talking with their friends remained a contingency plan. The eighth cousin fact wasn’t much use. Probably the whole of Burgess (and most of Appalachia) were his eighth cousins. Not that Jamie remembered any Overlands around town. Huh. That is something he could check at the library: Jack Overland’s birth certif—

BUMP

“Sorry,” Jamie apologised reflexively.

“No need,” shrugged the singlet wearing, muscle flaunting guy, “I’d bump you anytime.”

“What?”

Rather than answer Jamie’s question, the jock just flexed.

“Uh, okay. I’ll be going then,” Jamie said, sidestepping around the guy.

The jock might’ve said something more, but Jamie was decidedly ignoring him. Jamie was not interested. Thankfully he got the message after couple repeats of him jogging to overtake and flex — while Jamie just walked past.

Jamie had a few more minutes of blessed silence before he was accosted again.

“Jamie! What did Santa get you for Christmas?”

It was a kid, bright blue eyed, bundled up and beanied. Jamie thought he recognised them, probably from some volunteering he’d done. Jamie was eighty percent sure this was Alex, ten years old, loves unicorns, hates horses.

“Um, a snow-globe and book.”

Jamie wasn’t even lying really. Someone had bothered to get him an extra present and label it “from Santa”. A heavy, beautifully crafted illuminated snow-globe. And a old-fashioned hard-back mostly empty journal. The quality of the gifts made Jamie suspect Jack.
“Ooo, what book?”

“A journal called *Finding Your Center.*”

The first few pages were full of mindfulness techniques, and then it was just blank.

“Your center is Belief, isn’t it? I thought everybody knew that.”

*What did that mean?*

“Nevermind!” Alex chirped, leaning forward and snaring at Jamie’s pockets, “Can I see the snow-globe?”

“No, I left it at home.”

“Well that’s silly. How can you use it when its at home? Where was it to anyway?”

“The North Pole?” Jamie answered unsure if that matched the question.

A globe showed an empty snow field under the Northern Lights, with “*In Emergency Break Glass Case*” inscribed on the plinth. Some ingenious glass-work made it look like the projected light was floating in mid-air.

“Well that’s boring. Santa should give you one to college and another here. Then we could play everyday!”

“I don’t think that’d work…” Jamie hedged.

Surely someone was going to collect this child soon right?

“Yeah. The Grown-Ups would get mad. Where are you going?”

“The library.”

“Gross!” Alex screamed and ran off.

They were gone behind a slammed front door before Jamie knew how to react. Apparently they hated horses and libraries.

Burgess Public Library was an old haunt of Jamie’s. He’d spent many afternoons here. First just exploring the children’s section, but eventually he’d traversed the realms of general fiction and non-fiction. Before descending into the depths of the community archives. For a brief period in there he’d even volunteered.

The place hadn’t changed since Jamie’s last visit. Same heartfelt — but amateur — decorations in the foyer. Same out of time feel where the present attempted to overlay itself without succeeding in sticking around.

Returning his mom’s books was easy. Drop them in the chute and walk away. Her late fees would still be her problem. Checking the archives for Jackson Overland’s birth notice posed a more daunting challenge. Jamie would have to talk to Mr Erty.

Mr Erty was Burgess library’s head librarian. At times it seemed he’d consumed every book in the collection, with his eidetic memory. He was pleasant, but eccentric and exuberant. Jamie was already tiring.
“James Bennett!? Long time, no see! I hardly expected you to drop by, what with how short Christmas break can be. Though I suppose I’m an oddball, opening this dusty old place in the last week of the year. Anyhow. You look like you’re here on a mission, rather than to just catch up.”

“Yes,” Jamie agreed when the torrent paused, “Just hoping to look up someone’s birth notice. A friend is being cagey about his birthday.”

“So you decided to play private eye?”

“Something like that. Honestly it feels a bit like he’s daring me to go looking.”

“I trust you remember where everything is. I’ll leave you to it. There’s a pair of not-so-young young adults in the YA section I fear I need to keep an eye on.”

Jamie was only going to be trawling through newspaper birth notices from two decades ago. All nice and digital. So Jackson Overland should be only a regular expression away.

Except he wasn’t. No matches.

Broadening his search parameters did get Jamie some results. However, none of whom really could be Jack. Too old or too young. Or the right age but too far away. Jamie sighed as realisation settled: Jack had lied to him.

“Jack* Overland?”

Jamie flinched hard enough to almost fall out of his chair.

Mr Erty continued, apparently oblivious, “Isn’t that the name of that great-great-lots-of-greats uncle of yours you found? The one who sacrificed himself for his sister?”

“Wait, what?”

“It was really an impressive piece of detective work. Tracking down the church records and those old journals. You even managed to get the council to put up a little plaque at the lake. An admirable job reviving a forgotten story.”

Jamie frowned. He didn’t remember any of that. Which meant that either his attack or Jack was involved. Probably Jack. The dead guy was probably a shared ancestor. Maybe they worked on the project together?

An idle search, and the computer displayed the Burgess Inquirer’s front page, of many years past. With teen Jamie on it, standing in front of the lake. Chopped by the edge of the photo was some blue, a white patch, and maybe an out of place branch. Which Jamie suspected was Jack. Apparently still not yet completely comfortable with photos. Not that past Jamie looked much better.

Jamie skimmed the article. Pretty standard puff piece. But something jumped out at him. “‘Turns out Jack Overland is my great’ (and here James starts counting his fingers) ‘great-great-great-great-great uncle. Or my eighth cousin, seven times removed.’”

“Mr Erty—”

“—Quintin—”

“—Quintin, did the library end up with a copy of my project?”

“Oh, yes. I couldn’t let such a work be thrown away after the exhibition. It’s over in the local history
“Thanks. Just want to check something, without having to go home for mine.”

Jamie slipped off the computer stool and headed for local history. Fortunately Mr Erty didn’t follow — probably returning to policing YA PDA. Jamie found his “project” easily enough. It looked oddly venerable bound in dark blue cloth with ‘The Playful Life and Heroic Death of Jackson Overland’ embossed in gold. Jamie flipped it open, catching the dedication page.

To Jack past and present.
The past that we may never forget you again.
The present for your help and friendship. And fun.

Jamie Bennett & JF ;)

Jamie flipped through the book. The slim volume was full of photos of old writing. Church records, letters, diary entries. Nothing quite primary source, but many tellings of the mischievous boy Jackson Overland. Who gave his life to save his from the ice. And towards the end, a genealogy of Overland’s sister’s descendants to the present day — including Jamie and most of the Burgess clan.

Jamie put the book back. And just massaged his eyes for a bit. He’d gotten more info about Jack — sort of. Most of which seemed to suggest Jack was stringing Jamie along. Yet. That didn’t quite sit right. It really didn’t make sense to claim a name that would just lead Jamie back to work they’d done together.

Unless that was the point?

No. He was over-thinking it. Jamie needed to vent with someone.

And not Jack long-distance. Maybe it was time to move to contingency plans and ask their friends. Hopefully it wouldn’t go like meeting Pippa.

[Cupcake. Are you free to catch-up?]
[Not right now. I’ve got lunch at 2. Meet at the diner?]

Jamie could do that. He just had to last — an hour — out of the house. Nothing like Christmas shopping. In fact, things probably would be quieter than normal.

The hairs on the back of Jamie’s neck stood up. He was being watched. Jamie looked around trying to catch them but failed. At least until he gave up and headed for the exit.

A surprised squeak and the thud of a body hitting the ground caught Jamie’s attention. He took a moment to breathe and center himself before investigating.

“Are you okay?”

The girl looked up from the floor at Jamie and squeaked. She blushed even redder, and her hands sprang to cover her mouth. Blatantly avoiding Jamie’s gaze, the girl scrambled and ran off.

“…Okay…”

It wasn’t far from the library to the mall, but the morning’s good weather darkened as Jamie walked. Soon he was power walking to avoid getting caught in the imminent rain. It wouldn’t even be decent snow.
One problem with the rain was Jamie couldn’t use his headphones. Not for fear of exposing his phone to the elements. So he heard quite clearly when a stereotypical wolf whistle pierced the air.

Jamie ploughed on, wondering who was being cat-called. The dark clouds had already cleared the streets.

“Hey, pretty boy. Give us a smile!”

Oh, him apparently. This was new. Ignoring had worked so far today. (Supplemented by running away.) No point escalating things.

“I bet you get lots of attention, if you know what I mean…” leered a second voice.

Jamie risked a glance out of the corner of his eye. A clunker was creeping along the far side of the road, pacing him. Jamie fixed his gaze forwards. He took a deep breath — the cold air settling his nerves.

“C’mon, we just want to make you feel good.”

“Yeah, why’re you playing shy?”

Jamie saw traffic lights up ahead. If he timed this right, he could arrive just as it went red. Then he could turn and make a run for it.

The guys in the car were still jeering. Their words were blending into static more threatening than a snowstorm’s white noise. Jamie wasn’t interested. Wasn’t that obvious?

Two shop fronts from the intersection, the crosswalk to keep going straight started its countdown. Jamie broke into a run. He had to time this just right.

“Hey!”

The car easily matched Jamie’s acceleration. They both reached the intersection as the light went yellow. They then headed in different directions. The clunker sailed on through.

Jamie flung out his right hand to swing two-seventy degrees around the pole to turn left, without losing any momentum.

Jamie didn’t look back, focused on the ground in front of him. Eying where the pavement was clear, where it was iced. Running and sliding and not slowing down. Looking for an alley for escape. The hollering voices getting softer and the static subsiding.

By the time Jamie arrived at Burgess’s Better Business Bureau’s pride and joy, it was spitting. The clouds were coming through on their threat to be unpleasant.

Jamie scurried into the mall, glad for the warm and dry. It was weird walking down decade old marble halls, still decorated with non-denominational adornments but empty of carols and holiday songs.

Now he just had to survive anonymous crowds for an hour. Which thankfully turn out to be much thinner than Christmas. Less fortunately, Jamie seemed to be wearing a sign saying “Please Talk to Me”. They kept sauntering up to him to ask for directions, or his opinion on their fashion. Jamie maintained a pleasant civility but fled at the first opportunity. Every time getting drained a little more.

Jamie was so focused on getting away from his latest interrogator he almost tripped over something.
“Uh, oops, sorry,” Jamie habitually said before properly looking down.

The something turned out to be a young boy — five or six — red in the face and teary eyed. A selfish part of Jamie wanted to keep walking. Children were tiring. But Jamie quashed that, he refused to let his mental-whatever make him a bad person. He judged he had the spoons for it. So instead Jamie crouched.

“Hey, what’s wrong kiddo?”

“I lost my mom,” said the boy, his voice tense and wavering.

“Oh. I’m Jamie, what’s your name?”

“…Spence.”

“Okay, Spence, why don’t we head over to one of the help desks? They can make an announcement and help us find your mom.”

“No!” Spence yelled, before his voice faded again, “Mom said if I got lost to stay where I was and not to go with strangers.”

“Your mom’s smart. We’ll stay here then.” Jamie sent a grin Spence’s way. “I’ll use my magic rectangle to call for help.”

“Nine one one?”

“Hmm, I can if you want, but the mall police should be enough, don’t you think?”

Spence’s brow furrowed in concentration. Waiting for permission to call, Jamie found the mall’s phone number and readied it. Spence nodded, and Jamie dialed. He putting it on the ground between them, on speaker phone.

“Hello, Burgess Mall, Candice speaking. How can I be of assistance?”

“Hi, I’ve got a lost kid outside the Everyday Emporium.”

“Oh no! Can you bring him to the info desks or security?” Candice asked, genuine life blooming from customer service monotone.

“No. His mom told him to stay put if he got lost, so he’s not moving.”

“Okay, I’ll send one of the guards your way. What more can you tell me?”

“His name’s Spence. How old are you Spence?”

“Five! And a half!”

“He’s wearing a white t-shirt with red sleeves and a red ghost on it.”

“Spence,” Candice prompted, “Do you have a cell?”

“No. Mom says I’d lose it.”

“Do you know your parents’ cell phone numbers?”

“No. It’s got a six in it.”
“O-kay, what’s your last name?”

“I’m a Wright, because a Wright’s right and never wrong.”

“And what’s your mom’s name?”

“Jane.”

“Okay, I’ll put out a general announcement. Try and keep Spence amused until security gets there, I guess. I’m going to have to put you on hold, but please stay on the line. I’ll check in when I can.”

Jamie mentally put the muzaking phone aside, and looked at Spence. The kid didn’t look so on the edge of crying anymore. But keeping the boy’s attention on something else might be a good idea.

“Have you heard the story of Nicholas St North?” Jamie asked, reaching through mental cobwebs.

“No… who’s he?”

“Nicholas was an orphan, raised by Russian bandits…”

Jamie told the story — a fractured fable about Santa Claus fighting the Boogeyman. It passed through Jamie’s lips as easy as breathing. He idly noted it was one of the tales he’d developed with Jack; and then wondered why he could so easily remember it. It was just the kind of immature (at first glance) thing children loved. Despite what “people” said, Jamie found dealing with this lost boy — one on the edge of tears — much less tiring than any of the adults so far today.

“…and so all was well. The Nightmare King defeated and Big Root safe again. But the Guardian’s journeys had just begun.”

Jamie trailed off. He could just start the next one — about the Easter Bunny — but shouldn’t people have arrived by now?

A mix of clapping and whining for more was Jamie’s answer. Sitting around Jamie and Spence was a gaggle of children. Their parents standing around that ring. Looking a little out of place, but equally enraptured was a mall security officer. Who stepped forward when he realised a small riot might be imminent.

“Okay, I’m really sorry, but story time’s over. I bet you and your parents have other things you were going to see today. And our fabulous storyteller wants his afternoon back.”

It wasn’t easy, but the crowd did disperse. But only after Jamie coughed up the web address for where he’d posted the rest of the Guardians of Childhood series.

Soon it was just Jamie, Spence Wright, Jane Wright, and the security officer.

“That was so cool!” raved Spence, hugging Jamie around the legs, “I really liked the Boogeyman. Though he could’ve been scarier. Maybe some ghosts or zombies?”

“Yes, thank you,” added Mrs Wright, “I was so worried.”

“It’s fine, not a problem,” Jamie demurred, “I just couldn’t leave a kid in trouble like that.”

“Yes, well. What do we say Spence.”

“Oh right!” Spence released Jamie’s legs, grabbed a hand and bowed with a flourish. “Thank you very much,” Spence said before kissing the back of Jamie’s hand.
Mrs Wright seemed embarrassed on her son’s behalf and started to bustle him away. Jamie just thought it was cute.

“Spencer whatever gave you the idea to do that?”

“I saw it in a film, mom!”

“Quirky kid,” the security observed.

Jamie hadn’t really paid the guard any attention so far. The guy was a little older, a little tired looking. In fact his red face made it look like he had a fever or something.

“Oh, I was just going to go. Did you need something from me?”

“Well. Um. I just wanted to ask you a couple of questions.”

“Like a statement?” Could mall cops take those?

“No. Not really. More, well. Being good with kids is, like, neat and I was wondering if you were free tonight?”

Shit.

“Sorry, I’m sure you’re a great guy but I’m not interested in seeing anyone right now.”

“I don’t mind if it’s just a casual thing. You’ve got really pretty eyes.”

“Yeah. I’m going to go now.”

“Wait,” the guard pleaded, grabbing Jamie’s bag, “Don’t do this to me. You don’t know how much courage it took to ask you.”

“Doesn’t change that I’m not interested in anything with anyone right now.”

The officer yanked on Jamie’s bag.

“I tried asking nicely. If you continue to resist I’ll detain you so you can’t get away. Nobody watching would side against me. It’d just be security taking some college hooligan away.”

Jamie flinched and would swear his blood froze. The guard wasn’t quite lying. Any bystander would assume the guard was in the right. Plus he probably had at least a taser.

With a crackle a deep voice shouted from the guard’s radio, “Officer Rogerson, if you do anything like that you’ll lose your job. I heard everything you just said. He turned you down. Get over it. Head back to the office. We need to talk.”

With a huff, the officer let Jamie go and tramped off.

“Is he going?”

Jamie glanced down, realising his cell was still on speaker phone.

“Yeah.”

“Good. I always thought he was a nice guy. Apparently not. Do you want me to stay with you — so to speak?”
“Nah. I’ll be fine. I’m meeting up with a friend who’s super scary.”

“Okay. Well stay safe.”

Jamie ended the call and doing so noticed the time. He was late. Shit. Jamie grabbed his stuff and started half power walking, half jogging to the diner.

---

**GRINCH (nice [well naughty]).**

*Extra Holiday Season Disclaimer: Just the other day I was teased for not being great at gift-choice so arm yourself with massive boulders of salt.*

First off, maybe relax. How long have you known one another? Only a little while, then you’re both still getting to know each other. A long while, then I think she knows you’re likely going to get her something unexpected. Think of it more as a delightful quirk.

But I think you know the important thing — the thought behind a gift is what’s important. Got any inside jokes? Some moment you two shared? What is she interested in? (Especially if you’re not [support her liking things]).

If in doubt, something that’ll make her laugh.

*May the force be with you.*

**P.S. from Nick**

[GRINCH] (JF. He real named you sorry)

A test! Either the shoes with chillis on them size 8 or that citrus squeezer. She will love one of those! Choose wisely!

*Nicholas St North aka Santa*

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Chapter End Notes

Next time: Cupcake is awesome & Jamie asks a very important question.

Merry Christmas!

*flees, leaving a note*

I'm not dead! (Again) And neither is this fic! (Again) My goal for summer break is wrap this up, and if I time it right, it should end just at Valentine's. Just got get into a chapter-a-week groove. Wish me luck.
The True Meaning of Friendship

Chapter Summary

Jamie has some important heart-to-hearts, but is probably cursed.

Jack tries to explain himself through text.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Dear Uncle Jay,

I'm having trouble with my dating profiles. How much are we allowed to... embellish? Looking at my “honest” profile I wouldn’t date me.

It's just like writing a resume CV right? Everyone writing is upselling themselves and everyone reading is dialing down their expectations.

It's not like I'm lying. I'm not saying I'm a doctor, or a lawyer, or a veteran with a bronze star or anything like that.

Currently Vexed

The diner was an old — and kind of timeless — hang out for Jamie and his friends. The decor was brazenly stolen from any number of greaser films — vinyl booths, Elvis memorabilia, the works. The top two items on the menu were ridiculously over-sized burgers and ridiculously over-flavoured milkshakes. It was decently crowded with happily chatting people. The high backed booths only just managing to muffle the cacophony.

Cupcake was waiting in a booth, watching the door. When Jamie met her gaze she frowned and took a deep draw of her hot pink milkshake. Sheepish, Jamie scurried over.

“Long time, no see. How’s things?”

‘Fine’ was what Jamie nearly said, before he swallowed the empty word. It would be easy to follow the habits of small talk, but he needed a proper talk.

“Not great,” Jamie admitted.

Cupcake quirked an eyebrow in a silent ‘go on…’

“I don’t know exactly what’s wrong. I’ve got depression, anxiety, and memory problems. I’m a mess.”

“Jamie, do I need to pull out the ‘mental illness is an illness not a personality flaw’ lecture-bat?”

“Heh, no. From what I’ve gathered this is more a mental injury anyway. Just before the holidays I was atta—’
“What can I get you handsome?”

Cupcake and James both frowned at the waitress. Who was ignoring Cupcake’s glare entirely and Jamie’s perturbed expression utterly. Jamie hadn’t paid her any mind on his way in, but he didn’t think her apron had been tied that tightly earlier. And really, with her red face and eyes, Jamie doubted she should be working. She looked feverish.

“Oh,” Jamie stumbled, “A classic and a chocolate shake?”

“Coming right up, holler if you need anything sweetie. Anything,” she said with a wink, before flouncing off.

Jamie turned back to Cupcake, and judging by her expression missed the waitress doing something else unprofessional.

“She didn’t ask what you wanted.”

“I did order earlier,” Cupcake shrugged, “but enough about her. You were saying something you were atta..?”

“Right.” Jamie looked down at his hands. “I was attacked. I don’t remember it — or the day leading up to it — and the witness who called it in was across the quad.”

“Shit, Jamie. Did they catch the guy?”

“No. He got away before campus police got there. And since I can’t remember anything, they don’t have any real leads. But. That’s not what I wanted to talk with you about.”

“Fine,” Cupcake huffed, “But I reserve the right to go back to it. What do you want to talk about? That’s more important than you being attacked?”

“Jack,” said Jamie, ignoring Cupcake’s snort and continuing, “I don’t know what’s going on with him.”

“Well… he’s one of my memory blanks. I can’t remember our friendship or anything. And when he showed up last week I almost had a panic attack.”

“You saw Jack? Did he do anything?”

“No. I’m sure he didn’t but whatever action my mental immune system has taken over-reacts to him or something.”

“Jamie, you getting a child psychology degree with that kind of metaphor abuse? Never mind. So Jack’s still okay, you’re just mentally allergic to him?”
“Something like that.”

“But you’re worried about what’s going on with him. Not your ‘allergy’. What do you want me to do, facebo—”

“Your burger, sexy.” Roxanne leant over the table blocking Jamie’s view of Cupcake. She was blatantly attempting to get her chest in his sight. She seemed to have changed tactics though. Because she left quickly, and said with a wink, “Just call if you want to upgrade.”

“Okay. I know its apparently the ‘Winter of Free Love’ but that’s just tacky,” Cupcake complained.

“It’s been happening to me all day. Is ‘hit on me’ written on my forehead?”

“No,” she replied, “Sounds like you’re cursed. Want me to check?”

“Um, no. No magic in the dinner please.”


“Folk-lore isn’t magic,” Jamie huffed, ignoring Cupcake by taking a large bite. Cupcake made a disbelieving noise. Jamie could tell she was judging him. It made his skin crawl.

“D’you want me to pretend to be your possessive girlfriend? We could play footsie under the table.”

“You’re wearing combat boots.”

“I never said you’d win.”

“Aren’t you a lesbian?”

“Hence the pretending. You don’t think I can act straight?”

“Let’s not. I just need to ignore her till we’re done with lunch.”

“That’s a terrible plan, but you’re a grown man and have to learn it for yourself I guess.”

“Can we go back to Jack?”

“Right. Did you want me to facebook stalk him or — wait! I know that cheek bite. You already are!”

“Maybe. Anyway. We’re texting and I’m trying to get to know him again. I’m not sure if he can divorce himself from his ‘character’ anymore.”

“Character?”

“Jack Frost the magic ice guy, rather than Jack Whoever the real life actor.”

“Oh, right, the method acting. What’s he said?”

“He told me some stuff about his family, and I went to the library to double check it. It ended up matching the Jackson Overland I did a history project on. I don’t know why he’s still hiding behind other Jacks.”

Cupcake took another thoughtful sip of her milkshake.

“Have you asked him?”
"No. Not yet. I only figured out the historical Jack thing just before I texted you."

"Gotta confess Jamie, I knew Jack as Jack Frost first, Jackson Overland a much later second. If he’s got yet another name under that I wouldn’t know. You should ask him. Go direct to the source."

"He’s already lied once."

"Maybe he didn’t."

"Huh?"

"I’m guessing you looked for newspaper announcements. But not every family makes those anymore. Plus, lots of people have different names on their birth certificates. Even as kids. Mine certainly doesn’t say Cupcake."

"Hmm, I guess I should give him the benefit of the doubt."

"Does this mean you’re going to ask him?"

"I guess."

"Now you said you wanted to catch up. Besides the bad stuff, how’s college been?"

"Not too bad I guess. Lots of work, I’ve kinda had to cut back on some of my extracurriculars to keep up…"

Talking with Cupcake was nice, almost comfortable. For a little while Jamie could ignore the crowds of people around them and just sit in a little bubble with his friend.

"Everything to your satisfaction?"

The waitress’s poor attempt of seduction popped the bubble as much as her manicure needling Jamie’s shoulder.

Jamie jostled his shoulder free.

"The food was very nice. Can I get the check, please?"

"Of course,” the waitress purred somehow with a tone of annoyance, “would you like a last round of drinks?"

"No, thank you. Just the bill.”

"On the house?"

"No, we really need to get going."

“…Fine.” The waitress’s departing stomps sounded like whip cracks.

"Ignore her and she’ll go away, huh?"

"I’m rapidly running out of spoons."

"My ‘possessive girlfriend’ offer still stands."

"I don’t want a girlfriend, even pretend.”
“We could tell her you’re gay. We have been discussing your boy troubles.”

“I don’t think she’d care. Could you just scare her away?”

“I wouldn’t want to get us banned from this fine establishment for punching a waitress, Jamie,” Cupcake trailed off, “She’s behind me, isn’t she?”

“I am, and don’t worry, only you’ll be banned. Soon you won’t be welcome anywhere. You’ll grow old, sad and alone. Handsome will always be welcome here.”

“Could I get the check, please?” asked Jamie.

Jamie wasn’t surprised that the receipt was adorned with a heart containing ‘Roxanne’ and a cell phone number. He almost expected two checks — and a miscellaneous service fee on Cupcake’s. Jamie and Cupcake shared a quick, silent conversation of glances. She nodded and stood to go, while Jamie piled the notes and coins. Jamie stood, sidestepped the overly close waitress.

Together Jamie and Cupcake left without a word.

Six steps outside the diner, an angry shriek erupted from within.

“What did you do?” Cupcake asked over the staccato of approaching heels.

“Tipped five percent!”

“No wonder she’s pissed.”

“I’m going to kill you!” the waitress screamed.

Jamie looked back over his shoulder. The waitress’s redness had deepened from ‘working with a mild fever’ to ‘furious tomato’. She had her pen in a death grip, ready to stab someone. Him or Cupcake.

“Jamie, I think it’s time for plan R.”

“What?”

Cupcake grabbed his arm and yanked.

“Run!”

It was exhilarating. Dashing through the mall, dodging shoppers, laughing like misbehaving elementary kids. Soon they were outside, hugging each other, shaking with laughter in the rain.

“Oh, that was definitely not the mature way to deal with that Jamie.”

“Heh, definitely.”

“Kinda fun though.”

Jamie winced. Fun? Insulting someone and running away shouldn’t be fun. The reckless abandon which fueled Jamie’s flight sputtered out. Replaced by heart crushing anxiety. The sleet pelting them was burning compared to Jamie’s insides. Cupcake’s hug was even worse, so Jamie wrenched himself from her grip.

“Jamie. What’s wrong?”
“You. Me. Everything. Fun? I was an asshole and we ran like criminals and that was fun? You threatened to punch her! I asked you for help and you gave me nothing. Said I was cursed. Great. How is that helpful?” Jamie was talking as much with hands, pacing back and forth, “I might study folklore but I know it’s just stories. Myths people tell each other. To make meaning in this cold universe. And maybe that waitress was pushy, but I think she was right. You are going to end up sad and alone. I don’t even know why I’m still friends with you!”

Jamie ran out of steam, his arms pointing at Cupcake in a gesture of *What the hell?*

Cupcake was just standing there, arms crossed, unimpressed.

“Are you done? ‘Cause I don’t mind if you have more poison to get off your chest. I can take it. You can’t bully me. I’ve been a bully — I know you’re scared. You’re hurting so you’ll hurt everyone around you.

“So, no. You don’t get to decide we’re not friends. Not like this. If you could scare me away that easily, that’d mean I wasn’t any decent friend in the first place.

“Yes. I called it a curse. Call it whatever. I will help you get through it. May I give you a hug?”

Jamie dropped his arms, and nodded. A hug might be nice. Cupcake pulled him into a hug and kept talking past his ear.

“I believe wounds can be healed. I believe our friendship means something. I believe you will overcome this.”

The hug was almost nice. Soothing. Lacking the burn of earlier.

“Jamie, don’t take this the wrong way, but I love you. As a friend. For being someone who invited me in when I didn’t fit, and who kept in contact when life tried to drift us apart. I love you.”

With a squeeze and a light press to his shoulder, Cupcake released Jamie. At least enough to hold him at arm’s length.

“Feeling better? We could dance if you like?”

“In the rain? Outside the mall?”

“I’ll lead,” Cupcake smirked, interlacing one pair of hands and placing Jamie’s other on her shoulder.

“Heh, I’ll pass,” murmured Jamie, slipping out of her grip.

“Well. Fair enough. You’d better get home before *you catch your death of cold*,” Cupcake teased, finger quotes and old crone voice and all.

“It’s just raining. It’s not that bad,” Jamie shrugged. Though getting back to the dry of home sounded very nice.

“You still don’t feel the cold, huh.”

“Why is that so weird?”

“It’s nothing. Anyway. I need to get going if I’m going to change into something dry before my next class. But! We need to catch up again before you head back to college. Maybe bring Sophie along next time.”
“Sure. That’d be nice.”

“See ya!” Cupcake called over her shoulder as she paced away.

Jamie thought he might just be able to hear ‘*Singin’ in the Rain*’ and a slight rhythmic beat to her steps. He opted not to follow her lead in dancing — not a great talent of his. But Jamie did start walking home. He was already soaked — might as well get home.

Especially before the green in those clouds became hail.

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[Jack. I went to the library. I found something that says I shouldn’t trust you. A history project I did. About Jackson Overland. And his sister, Emma. What didn’t find was any evidence of you: a present day Jack Overland Frost whoever.
[I think I deserve the truth. Not one of your stories. Who are you really? Am I just a game to you?]  

---

Jamie paged through the decade old National Geographic, not registering anything. He was doing his best “functioning adult” impression, arriving a few minutes before his appointment and waiting patiently. Ignoring the awkward staring by the mother of the child currently with Doctor Joyce.

Jamie wasn’t sure how he’d offended them so much. Did the idea of children growing up and still needing counseling scare them?

Jamie reached the ads at the back of the magazine and grabbed the next in the pile. The cover had puffins.

Doctor Joyce’s door opened and a little girl came running out to hug her mother. Jamie did the polite thing and didn’t pay attention to them. He noticed Doctor Joyce return to his office, and figured he’d be called in soon.

Jamie was surprised when the mother hissed while she passed him by, gone before Jamie could parse her comment.

“You should be ashamed, dressing so shamelessly.”

Jamie looked down at his very basic winter wear. Long sleeves, jeans, and boots. What was shameless?

“Um, Doctor Joyce will see you now,” Katherine said, obviously uncomfortable with what had just happened. “I’m sorry about her. I don’t know why she’d say that. You look, you look fine.”

“Right,” Jamie grunted, getting to his feet and wandering towards the office.

“Would you like a hot drink? Coffee, cocoa?”

“Cocoa please.”

Jamie slunk into Doctor Joyce’s office and took a seat in the armchair. After a brief lull, the doctor made comment about the weather. Comparing Burgess and college snow was easy. Jamie didn’t even break stride while the doctor collected their hot drinks from Katherine. Jamie just accepted his cocoa and quietened with the warmth between his palms.

“How was Christmas?”

Jamie tensed and took a deep breath of chocolate steam. Small talk was over.
“Confusing, stressful? The usual? I mean the Burgess Family Party was pretty awful, but Christmas at home with mom and Sophie was nice.”

“Did you get any good presents?”


Doctor Joyce hmm’d and asked, “Did you like the present?”

Jamie took a sip. “I like it, but I feels a bit much. It’s this big beautiful piece of glass. And what did I get him? A scarf and earmuffs.”

“Is your friendship with Jack improving? If you’re exchanging Christmas gifts.”

“Yes and no. Sorta. It’s a mess.”

Another hmm and a wordless question from Doctor Joyce.

“Well, let’s see. Last week Jack dropped by to tell my mom about the assault and stuff, before I had a chance to. He showed up after archery trying to make nice with a hot chocolate.

“The first time I’d seen him face to face, and I just yelled at him, before walking away. I probably made him cry. I know I made him cry with my Christmas gift but Sophie said they were happy tears.

“I apologised and we’re trying to just be pen pals. To restart our friendship. But he can’t seem to let go of the Jack Frost character he’s developed. Or some historical Jackson Overland, who’s life story he’s copying.”

Doctor Joyce took another long drink.

“You yelled at him? Because he showed up uninvited?”

“I guess, but it’s more than that. Looking at him made me feel sick.”

“Did meeting him change your thoughts on whether he atta—”

“No. And it’s not just him. I yelled at my friend Cupcake yesterday. Over-reacted to her calling us being jerks fun. She just let me rant and said some stuff about my rant being untrue and hugged me.”

“Was it untrue?”

“Yeah. I was just saying stuff to hurt her. And she called me out on it. Said she was a better friend than to let one angry rant stop her.”

“So your friendship with Cupcake is still good?”

“Yeah.”

“How are things with your family?”

“Good. I told mom what happened. Sophie too. Things are still a little tense, but it’s all caring concern now. Not me hurting them.”

“And what about other people in general?”
“I’m fine as they don’t talk to me,” began Jamie before thunking his head on the coffee table, “but they keep talking to me. Hitting on me mostly.”

“Oh dear.”

“Yeah. Yesterday there was a bunch of guys. Who I’m pretty sure were willing to crash their car to get my attention. Got any advice, doc?”

“I’m sure I can think of something. But first, how have the techniques from last week been working out for you?”

“They’re fine, so long as I’m not surprised…”

The evaluation and revision of last week’s techniques was simple. The extra bits for calming away from a rant. Simple in theory but Jamie doubted if they’d work in practice.

Most of Doctor Joyce’s advice for dealing with pushy strangers was about just also mostly simple avoidance. And some web searching together for better ideas. Jamie doubted he’d have the emotional energy to try and redirect people though.

“Oh, right! Time’s almost up, but before you go, and I forget. What was the self-help book Santa gave you?”

“Finding Your Center”

“Who by?” Doctor Joyce frowned and snapped his fingers, “Um, Shala-something?”

“Amroz Salarich,” corrected Jamie.

“Right. A little old fashioned, relies a lot on Jungian archetype thinking, but full of good exercises. Very good for, well, re-centering yourself.

“Now,” the doctor said, heading over to his desk and opening his appointment book, “Will we be able to fit another session in next week before you go back to college?”

“Yeah, I’m in Burgess all of the this week. I fly back Saturday.”

“Very good. Friday then? But remember, I’m only ever a phone call away.”

[I have been telling you the truth. It’s not a game.]
[It’s just]
[These stories are my life.]
[I was born Jackson Overland, and I had a sister Emma. They’re family names.]
[The old Jack is an important family legend, and he’s the basis for the Jack Frost character.]
[But I’m trash. There was an accident when I was a teen. I lost my sister. My name was changed and being more than a little dramatic was changed to Jack Frost.]
[So yes. There’s a lot of overlap between me, the character Jack Frost, and the historical Jackson Overland.]
[Sometimes I don’t know who I am]
[I don’t know how to explain it better.]
[Believe me. It makes sense once you get it. But me just telling you won’t make you believe.]

Ding Dong
“I’ll get it!” yelled Sophie from upstairs.

Foot-stomps echoed down through the ceiling. Jamie looked up and idly followed their progress across the house and down the stairs. Sophie passed by the doorway to the hall in a rainbow blur. There was another thud (probably her colliding with the door) and the sound of it being wrenched open.

“Cupcake!”

“Sophie! Who’s ready for not-Christmas Christmas movies?” hyped Cupcake, her combat boots still quieter than Sophie’s slippers.

Sophie came to an abrupt stop when she saw Jamie and huffed, hands on hips, “Jamie! Where is your hat. We cannot have a meeting of the Burgess Witches Coven if you don’t have your hat.”

“It’s here!” Jamie said, waving the floppy and starry hat in surrender.

Jamie kinda thought the whole idea was silly, but well the starry robe was good for lazing on the couch. Cupcake was the closest to a stereotypical witch in an all black outfit. Sophie meanwhile was floral and alive. Her hat literally had a terrarium, with vines cascading down into a shawl. Jamie didn’t think it looked all that comfortable.

“Well, it’s a hat. It’s meant to be worn. Put it on.”

“Yes, Madam Cupcake.”

“Shut it,” grumbled Cupcake, executing a textbook pratfall into a spare armchair, “I’ve chosen the truest not-Christmas Christmas movie: Die Hard. What about you two?”

“Hogfather,” Sophie chirped, heading on past to grab supplies from the kitchen.

“That is a Christmas movie!” Cupcake

“Sure, just as much as Die Hard is!”

“Tonight’s meant to be movies with only a tenuous connection to Christmas. Not Christmas under a different name!”

“So I can’t suggest The Nightmare Before Christmas, then?” Jamie threw out.

“You better not!” / “Sure!”

“Sophie, Hogfather was a direct to TV two parter. Not a movie.”

“Well, do you want me to switch my choice to Nightmare Before Christmas?” teased Sophie, dropping a bowl of popcorn in Jamie’s lap on her way to leap onto her couch.

“No, no, Hogfather is fine.”

“Jamie what are you picking?”

“I was torn between Gremlins and Batman Returns, but in the end I had to choose… Home Alone.”

Cupcake’s groan and Sophie’s cheering made for a striking harmony.

Movie night was nice. All three got into the spirit of providing snarky commentary and throwing
popcorn at bad decisions. Jamie felt fine, no anxiety here, safe and sound with people he knew. It was nice.

Once Gruber had taken the plunge, and after McClane and Holly had driven off into the credits, they took a break to chat (and eat pizza). Jamie drifted around the edge of the gossip.

Because it was Sophie and Cupcake leading the conversation it became a discussion of battlefield first aid. Somehow.

“Do you know how you treat an arrow wound? It’s not pretty. You can’t pull it out. And only very rarely can you get away with snapping the shaft and pushing it the rest of the way through.”

Cupcake mimed snapping a stick. Jamie flinched as empathic pain echoed in his chest. Cupcake glanced at him in concern. After a moment Jamie realised she was looking at his torso.

“What? Is there something there?” asked Jamie looking down and seeing nothing.

“Oh, no. Nothing.”

Kevin was a monster and the poor burglars probably didn’t deserve to die so many times, but well, it gave the three Burgessites plenty to joke about. Really, it would take only minimal editing for it to be a horror movie.

There was just a small annoyance Jamie needed to address during the gap before the third film. He took his chance while Sophie was fetching ice cream.

“Why do you keep staring at me?” Jamie asked Cupcake.

“Promise to hear me out?”

“…Yes.”

“I really do think you’re cursed. And I’m trying to work out if I can break it.”

“And what do you think?”

“Frankly, your aura is really bruised. Healing but bruised. I think you’re under at least two curses.”

“Sounds serious.”

“Jamie, no sarcasm.”

“Right. So how would you fix it?”

“One’s already decaying. The other’s pretty new, looks like a twisted wish. Hmmm, I suppose TLK is out.”

“TLK?” asked Jamie.

“True Love’s Kiss,” clarified Cupcake.

“True Love’s Kiss!?” piped Sophie, popping up from behind the couch, “Who’s kissing?”

“No one!” yelped Jamie, “No one is kissing anyone.”

“Spoilsport.”
“Jamie, I’ll get back to you about other ideas, okay?”

*Hogfather* was a little too earnest for riffing on, and the three watchers a little too tired to bother anyway.

Jamie wouldn’t dare reignite the earlier argument, but *Hogfather* was too much a Christmas movie. All about belief and stories, and the True Meaning of Hogswatch Christmas.

Maybe it was just Jamie’s extensive past exploration of the ‘source material’ but he felt a little off-balance with how the folk-lore characters were portrayed. The Tooth Fairy was not a Boogeyman, let alone The Boogeyman. That was just wrong.

Plus, fractured children’s tales inevitably lead to Jamie thinking about Jack. Which was still weird.

Maybe texting wasn’t enough. Maybe they had to meet face to face again. Maybe if Jamie could control things and knew what was coming, he wouldn’t lose it.

Plus, Jamie trusted Sophie, Cupcake, and his mom. They would make sure nothing happened.

[Jack. Would you like to spend New Year’s Eve with Sophie and I?]

---

*CV, gotta say that felt like a suspiciously specific denial at the end there. You better not be doing anything like that all.*

*Just no.*

*I understand where you’re coming from. Sometimes it’s hard to see what about you could be so interesting, and how do you get people’s attention.*

*And there are plenty of guides for how to “edit” or “translate” your bio to be more interesting. But if you do that, anyone reading can reverse that.*

*Here’s my advice. Write about what you like and why. It’s gonna be what you want to talk about with them anyway.*

*Don’t write about your life story, what you did. Write about what you love, what you do.*

*Well that was sappy.*

Chapter End Notes

Next: Jack’s been invited to New Year’s Eve at the Bennett household. Now, what NYE traditions can you think of?

Happy New Year!
Chapter Summary

One year comes to an end for Jack, and another begins. He's been invited to the Bennett's for New Year's Eve. Hopefully it'll go better than his last meeting with Jamie.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

*Dear Uncle Jack,*

*Everyone’s telling me to kiss a boy. I’ll admit he’s cute. And I would like to date. But he hasn’t shown any signs that’s he’s interested in any of that.*

*How do I convince our mutual friends to back off? Cause it’s getting very close to having to take a swing and strike out.*

**Running Out of Patience**

"Well that was crappy."

"Alex! Language," chided Jack.

The ten year old ignored him. They scampered up into their tree house and leveled a surly teenage look on training wheels.

Jack hopped from the fence and in through the tree house's window. Continuing his over-offended chastisement as he went.

"You know who talks like that? Ruffians and ne'er-do-wells. You'll end up on the naughty list talking like that."

Alex rolled their eyes. They gave their unicorn tea-set a wipe before setting two places. They tapped a sequence on the painted flowers, and lifted it to serve. Perfect hot chocolate poured from the Santa-enchanted tea pot.

"Yeah, yeah. Still. I didn't get anything. Maybe Jamie really is Grown Up."

"No, I told you. He's been cursed."

"So, how do you break it?"

"I don’t know," grumbled Jack.

"What? No riddle? No true love's kiss? No dragon to kill?"

“I already killed the dragon, he doesn’t want to kiss, and there wasn’t a riddle.”
“That’s stupid. What kind of curse doesn’t have a loophole?”

“Cupid-made ones.”

“Wait! Cupid cursed Jamie?” pressed Alex, leaning halfway across the table. “Are you sure you aren’t meant to kiss him?”

“One - Cupid lost it because Jamie and I went on a date. Two - the curse makes Jamie want to throw up when he sees me. Not exactly romantic.”

Alex slumped back into their chair, “so do you have any ideas?”

“I made him believe in me once, I can do it again.”

“Then why did I have to go bug him about his Christmas presents? I had to pretend I hated libraries.”

“We can’t let him forget about the Guardians. Then he really will Grow Up.”

“Alex!” drifted in through the window, “Lunch time!”

“I gotta go. We’ll keep reminding Jamie,” Alex stood and hugged Jack, “Promise.”

“Thanks.”

Jack tidied up a little, before leaping out the window. The wind swept him high above Burgess. Jack surveyed his home-town, glittering below.

It was tempting to tail Jamie all day. Make sure his favourite was safe and sound. But Jack couldn’t bare the pain of watching without being seen.

Besides, Jamie would want him to be a responsible force of nature and look after the weather. Jack had done a good job with delivering a white Christmas, now people would want it clear for New Year’s Eve fireworks.

Mortals, so demanding.

Jack lost track of time for a few hours. He had to nudge things all over the northern hemisphere to not upset the balance. Plus, Jack had to drop in on his believers as he went. Throw a few snowballs, win a couple of skirmishes.

Jack had just helped a very adorable new believer — almost three years old! — build a snowman when he got a text. It was from Jamie, and it demanded the truth. More of the truth than Jack had given him, when Jack had been doing his best to give nothing but the truth.

Jack retreated to the top of the tallest, spikiest building in the Pacific north-west. The time stamps showed he was very late seeing opening the messages. He could take his time, crafting a perfect response.

[I have been telling you the truth. It’s not a game.]

Or he could just text vomit. Stupid fingers.

It was weird talking about his past as if it were someone else. Maybe less weird given the weirdness of three-hundred years without any memory of his mortal life.

No wonder Jamie didn’t believe the excerpts of Jack’s biography.
So yes. There’s a lot of overlap between me, the character Jack Frost, and the historical Jackson Overland.

Sometimes I don’t know who I am

I don’t know how to explain it better.

Just one last plea and Jack would leave the ball in Jamie’s court.

Believe me. It makes sense once you get it. But me just telling you won’t make you believe.

Believe yourself. Believe in your stories. Believe the message you’ve spent so much of your life spreading.

Jack pocketed his phone and lost himself in storm shepherding.

He almost fell out of the sky when his phone buzzed. He read the invitation, reread it, and replied as fast as he could.

“You see that Wind? Jamie invited me over!”

Jack looked out over his lake from the shore and closed his eyes. He turned his thoughts inward. Time to attempt the near impossible.

Jack needed to calm down. He needed to focus on his breathing. He needed to channel his past self. He needed to package away his grip on ice and snow. He needed to do all this so he could visit Jamie.

Jamie had invited him over!

Jackson slipped from Jack’s mental grip.

“Dammit,” grumbled Jack, kicking at the snow. Which was hiding a rock. “Damnit! Ow.”

“Aw, want us to ki—”

Jack whirled, leveling his staff at the newcomer.

“—ss it better? Guess not.”

Eros raised its arms in a show of peace. The only reason Jack hadn’t blasted it yet was the primordial wasn’t stealing anyone’s face right now.

“Why are you here?”

Eros shrugged, “we are everywhere.”

“Yeah. But why are you talking to little ol’ me?”

“You’re very important to us Jack. Why won’t you let us make you happy like everyone else?”

“You’re not making people happy.”

“I’m not?” it asked, wandering out onto the ice, and spreading its arms wide, “But I’m freeing people to pleasure themselves.”
“I’m the Guardian of Fun, I know happiness. Anything which leaves someone uneasy in their own skin, is not happy.”

“Sounds like winter cold isn’t happy for a lot of people then.”

“It doesn’t leave children afraid of parents,” ground out Jack, his crook crackling with magic, “Now. You are trespassing in my place of power. The town of Burgess and its environs are under my protection. Leave.”

Eros shifted its arms to pacifying gesture. It drifted into the air. It sketched a lazy spiral around Jack, always retreating but never fast enough.

“Fine, fine. We’ll go. But you should know, we’re almost as thankful to your beloved as to you.”

“No, no, we don’t mean him any harm. Quite the opposite. He’s done so much good for us. So we decided to give him a reward. No mortal will ever refuse his advances, and he’ll never want for attention.”

Eros delivered this speech with little signs and tricks. Underlining a word with a hip roll. Stretching words along with its back. But the worst move was its choice to emphasise the last word. It donned Jamie’s face.

“Bastard!”

Lightning smote Eros’ form. The red smoke travelling away in the wind. Its laughter echoing in Jack’s ears.

Jack almost chased Eros. But he had an appointment.

Jack sat down at the shore of his lake, laid his crook across his lap, and closed his eyes.

Jack breathed in and Jackson breathed out. He pulled his new scarf tighter. Feeling the cold and thankful. He turned away from Jack’s lake and trod up the hill towards the Bennett house.

He almost forgot to take the long way round to the front door. Only remembering when he went to vault the fence and gravity weighed him down.

Jackson was nervous. This might be the most important night of his life. One wrong move and Jamie could demand he stay away forever. Which would make rekindling Jamie’s belief pretty much impossible.

Jackson steeled himself. And pressed the doorbell. Then quickly stepped back and rocked on his heels.

He heard thundering footsteps through the door, and braced himself for a stampede.

The door flew open to reveal Sophie, who threw herself at Jackson.

“Jack!” she shrieked, wrapping her arms around him.

“Sophie!”

Jackson returned the hug, and after a moment she wriggled free. She made a show of looking him up and down.
“You look weird. And brown. And boring.”

“Hey!”

“Sophie, is that Jack?” Mrs Bennett called from further inside.

“Yeah!” she yelled back.

“Well, invite him in, and close the door! You’re letting the cold in!”

Sophie and Jackson made eye contact and started giggling. She grabbed his arm and dragged him in.

“Quickly, before the cold” she managed between snickers, “gets in.”

“Wouldn’t want that.”

“No, or our noses might get nipped!”

Sophie’s comment elicited another bout of laughter. Once it subsided, Sophie gasped, one hand over her heart, the other pointing at Jackson’s feet.

“Oh my god. You’re wearing shoes!”

Jackson looked down at the thrift store shoes he’d handed over hard-earned chore money for.

“Only because I have to.”

“Well, you’re inside now, so you—”

“Can take them off,” Jackson finished in wonder.

Jackson crouched down and started tearing open the pristine double bows. (Jack Frost might not wear shoes, but he had re-done many of his charges’ shoelaces over the years.) Manners his mother had hammered into his head stopped Jackson from just throwing the shoes away, instead placing them neatly besides the line of shoes by the door.

The sight of his scrappy tennis shoes next to Jamie’s sturdy snow boots almost upset Jackson’s grip on his mortal guise.

His equilibrium was shaken again by a voice down the hall.

“Jack. You came.”

Jackson looked up and his heart skipped a beat, before he remembered to take another breath.

Jamie was standing at the base of the stairs. And he was glorious. His expression was determined, but Jackson could see through the poker face. The coloured light from the Christmas directions added a rainbow to the mortal’s rosy complexion. Jamie’s thick comfortable clothes just teased at how good a cuddle would be.

The tops of Jackson’s cheeks and ears felt very warm.

“Yes. Yes I ca— I did,” stammered Jackson with a decisive nod.

There was a charge in the air between them. A force almost demanding Jackson grovel at his mortal’s feet and confess everything. Maybe then Jamie would kiss him again. Only the knowledge that would be the fastest was of alienating Jamie anchored Jackson’s to the floor.
Jackson and Jamie’s staring contest was broken by Mrs Bennett hurrying down the hall and pulling Jackson into a hug.

“Jack! I’m so glad you’re here! Oh dear, you’re nearly frozen, you need a better coat than this hoodie. Kids these days. No common sense.”

“Jeez, mom. Try not to play favourites so much.”

“Sophie, I’m not playing favourites. It’s just the first time Jack has made it to a family event.”

“You’re still hugging him,” Sophie observed.

“Oh,” and she released him, “Anyway, everyone come through to the living room. Now we’re all here we can get started on the games.”

Mrs Bennett grabbed Sophie and Jackson by the wrist and pulled them both along into the parlour, calling over her shoulder, “You too, young man.”

“Yes, mom.”

The Bennett house was warm and cozy. Bursting with little pieces of the family and their lives. The shelves were overflowing — children’s crafts nestled between heirloom crockery. Nothing matched, except by all not matching.

It wasn’t technically Jackson’s first visit, but it was his first official invited welcome. Not just a secret sneaking around.

Mrs Bennett pushed Jackson towards the kitchen table. Tiles, cards, bags of coloured sticks and houses, covered the table. Ready for —

“Catan?” groaned Sophie, “Mom. I refuse to start another year trapped because I have nothing but sheep!”

“Well, you better play fast then! Now, Jack, what would like to drink?”

“Um, hot chocolate?”

“Coming right up.”

Mrs Bennett placed Jackson’s captured wrist in Sophie’s palm and bustled off to the stove. Sophie quickly manhandled Jackson into a seat, and plonked down onto her own. She grabbed a bag full of green roads and buildings for herself, and held up two to Jackson.

“Blue or white?” asked Sophie, before tossing them away, “Nope! You get brown.”

“Sophie! Don’t be a pest. Let Jack chose.”

Jackson turned his nose up at the brown option, white and blue were his real colours. Now which to choose? He grabbed the blue. The epitome of a responsible mortal, Jackson stuck his tongue out at Sophie.

In his peripheral vision he saw a hand grab something. Jackson turned back to the table. Jamie was there, holding the orange bag and visibly debating which seat to take. The four-seater table had a seat each side, with Sophie and Jackson already claiming adjacent seats.

Jamie could either sit opposite Jackson, further away but facing him; or next to him, closer but facing
Sophie.

Jackson didn’t know which to hope for. Jamie dropped the orange pieces opposite Jackson, but fled to the kitchen.

Sophie stage-whispered, “Cupcake thinks TLK will fix him.”

Jackson’s question “Isn’t that TLC?” was interrupted by Jamie commanding “No kissing!”

Jackson’s stomach dropped at Jamie’s hair-trigger refusal, but he understood.

“I’m not going to kiss anyone who doesn’t want it, Sophie.”

If Jackson were to be completely honest, he’d much rather have his best friend back than his boyfriend. They’d been best friends for years — a much better track record than them being boyfriends.

Jackson’s musing was ended by Mrs Bennett and Jamie delivering a round of hot chocolate to the table. Jamie set about neatly arranging his pieces and studiously avoiding eye contact. Mrs Bennett claimed the red set and shook the dice menacingly.

“Who’s ready to lose?”

Boardgames in the Bennett household were brutal.

The first game saw Sophie and Mrs Bennett fight for board control after quickly boxing Jackson and Jamie away. While Sophie gloated after snatching victory, Jackson and Jamie shared a nod and a look.

Next time Jamie and Jackson teamed up to pull the same trick. Jamie claimed final victory by judicious use of development cards.

Their partnership lasted approximately three missions into The Resistance.

“You’re a spy!” accused Jamie.

“No I’m not. You are!”

“You sabotaged our mission!”

“I would never be seen in red.”

In the end the spies won because of infighting. Sophie sided with Jamie, while Mrs Bennett sided with Jackson. But plot twist — Jamie and Jackson were the spies. Jackson directed a satisfied grin at Jamie, who briefly returned it before looking away. Jackson resisted the urge to stare at such a kissable face, and turned to Mrs Bennett.

“Jack, how was your Christmas?”

“Busy, as usual,” Jackson rubbed the back of his head, “Actually. I missed the start of Nick’s Christmas eve charity delivery run. And he is the worst driver to try and catch up with.”

“Oh dear.”

“Eh, I’m sure I amused a bunch of kids by running around asking if they’d seen Santa yet.”
“Shouldn’t’ve they all been asleep?” asked Sophie.

“The Naughty Listers and Jack Frost have an understanding,” said Jackson, turning up his nose in offense. “Anyway! Thank you for the presents! I’m wearing one right now.”

“I can see that,” noted Mrs Bennett, eying Jackson’s scarf.

“Oh. I love the scarf but also the shirts. See?”

Jackson grabbed the bottom of his hoodie and lifted it over his face to show the mishmash of Calvin & Hobbes and Pokemon. Instead he got a surprising draft across his belly.

“Ah yes,” Sophie commentated, “a pasty white boy torso, a truly excellent gift.”

Jackson flailed and yanked the hoodie and shirt apart to restore his dignity. The shirt on show as intended, his face buried out of embarrassment.

“Sophie, stop teasing Jack,” ordered Mrs Bennett.

“Why? Teasing is how we show our love.”

Jackson was surprised when a soft voice came to his defense.

“He’s not in the mood.”

Jackson offered a thankful smile but Jamie just looked down at his hands.

“Oh, you’re really red. Your eyes are bloodshot too. Do you have a cold?” asked Mrs Bennett, reaching over to rest a palm on Jackson’s forehead, “Hmm, no fever. Any headache? Do you want a tylenol?”

“No, I’m fine.”

Mrs Bennett narrowed her eyes at Jackson.

“You haven’t been drinking, young man, have you?”

“No!” averred Jackson, adding under his breath, “One post-Christmas vodka is more than enough.”

“What was that?”

“Nothing!”

That was pretty much the tone of the evening. The four of them played games, while Mrs Bennett lead an interrogation into their last twelve months. She deftly extracted anecdotes from them as soloists - rather than any paired mis-adventurers. Jackson did note Jamie fishing for confirmation of things he’d already been told.

“You travel a lot, don’t you Jack?”

“Yeah…”

“If we were to go on a road-trip, where would you recommend we visit?”

“Two things. I’ve never been on a road-trip. And I hate hot weather, so I’ve kinda missed a bunch…”
Jackson did feel drunk. He made mistakes — the wrong moves, words, and actions. Something was fogging his mind.

Every time he looked at Jamie, warmth would bloom over his cheeks and ears. And something would curl in his nether-regions. If Jackson made eye contact with Jamie, he’d lose his train of thought.

Jackson rather doubted he’d make it to midnight with his mortal guise intact.

“It’s almost time,” Mrs Bennett observed as they finished another round of Clue (it was Sophie, in the library, with a candestick). “Now, let me get the champagne.”

“More like sham-pain.”

“No matter how bad your puns, I’m not serving you alcohol while you’re underage, honey.”

“Boo.”

Mrs Bennett ignored that. “Sophie, would you go clear the deck?”

“Fine,” huffed Sophie, stomping towards the back door.

Jamie and Jackson were left alone at the table. The past hours had been torture. Jackson had never spent so much time with Jamie and not been able to just casually touch him. If Jamie just said the word, Jackson would be all over him. He’d never refuse his first light.

Without anything to distract himself with, Jackson couldn’t shift his attention away from Jamie. His brunet had relaxed since the beginning of the evening. Jackson felt nice that Jamie was comfortable sitting at a table for two. Jackson reached forward a moved his token into the bedroom with Jamie’s. What Jackson would do finish this evening alone in Jamie’s room.

Damn. Whatever Eros had done to Jamie was effecting Jackson.

Jackson gasped, unsure how long since his last breath. He pulled his hands back and bolted upright.

“I’m gonna help Sophie!” he blurted and fled.

Jackson must’ve imagined a soft questioning “Ice?” as he ran through the house.

Jack barreled through the back door, halting at the deck’s railing like a man almost overboard. The frozen wood beneath his hands grounding him, much more real than he was.

“Jack?” asked Sophie, putting down her brush and approaching him, “You’re all white and blue again. Did something happen?”

“No, but I almost did something unforgivable.”

“What do you mean?”

“Eros told me it had ‘rewarded’ Jamie by making him attention grabbing. I got caught by whatever it meant.”

“Is this the curse Cupcake spotted?”

“I guess.”

“That sucks.”
They leant against the railing for a moment, Guardian and ward, side by side. The clear sky lit by stars and a gibbous moon.

“So are you going now? Pulling a Cinderella, and fleeing before midnight?”

“I don’t want to. Just not sure I can settle my nerves enough to cross back.” Jack sighed. “Maybe I’ll just hang around, least till the fireworks.”

“You’re not going to say goodbye to Jamie?”

“I’ll say it, even if he can’t hear me.”
Sophie snorted, and shoulder bumped Jack.

“It was his idea to invite you. The least you can do is get yourself together to say goodbye. Go do whatever you need to do. You’ve got fifteen minutes before the fireworks.” Sophie stood up and brushed her hands, “I’m going to go get your shoes, you’ll need them.”

Jack dismissed the idea of just flying away. Sophie was right. Jamie deserved better. He vaulted the railing and dropped down onto the barren flowerbed. No one would be looking for him down here. He just needed a moment.

Jack closed his eyes and centered himself. He smiled, the wave of New Year’s excitement was cresting over the eastern seaboard. Far to the west was another swell. All the early fireworks for the kids about to begin.

His clear skies were holding, though some were a touch colder than he might’ve intended. Jack took in the weather report and let it out. He took in the joy and let it out. He took his magic and folded it back up, just for a little while longer.

Jackson carefully half-stood, and crept towards the stairs. His step careful not to disturb the ice, even as it seeped into his socks. He ascended the steps nonchalantly. A ruse Jackson fumbled when he saw the deck was occupied.

Jamie turned from where he’d been leaning against the railing (just where Jack had been). The brunet managed a small but confused smile.

“It’s almost time.”

“Yep.”

Jackson didn’t think he was a naturally awkward person, but he sure as hell was now.

“I’m glad you came.”

“I’m glad you invited me.”

Jamie was stunning under the moonlight. *Ethereal*. Impossible to believe he was mortal and not some beguiling fae. When Jamie deigned to speak, Jackson couldn’t dare do anything but listen.

“I don’t understand you,” began Jamie, his gaze looking up at the stars, “your text said that’ll make sense once I get it. I’m sorry it’s taking me so long.

“But I trust you. I’d trust you with a lot of things. My family, my life. I can’t think of anything I wouldn’t trust you with, that I would entrust to anyone else. You — the words on my screen and ghost of my memories.
“Now I’ve seen you — seen you failing at acting cool — I think I believe you. I’d like to be your friend. Mom and Sophie have definitely already claimed you as family.

“I’m still righting myself, so I can’t promise to be a best friend. But I will be your friend.”

Jackson was for once speechless. Standing yards apart, he felt closer to his first light than he had in what felt like months. Jackson really wanted to kiss him.

Instead, Jackson retrieved his mobile and opened up their texts.

“I didn’t realise it until you invited me here, but the last of my texts didn’t send properly,” Jackson shrugged, “And then it felt weird to send it. Like it was too late. But I want you to see it.”

Jackson held out his little glowing rectangle like an offering under the moon’s light.

Jamie took it, the incidental brush of fingers almost burning Jackson’s.

“Believe yourself. Believe in your stories. Believe the message you’ve spent so much of your life spreading’ What does that mean?”

“You’ll have to figure it out for yourself,” Jackson non-answered, trying for a daring smirk, “But you’ve always been good at that.”

Jamie raised an eyebrow, “And what did you mean by naming my contact ‘Benne-boy Bee-bee-eff-eff’?”

Jackson was saved from answering by Sophie slamming her way out the back door.

“Jack! I have your shoes,” she announced before surveying the scene, “Jamie! Where are your shoes?”

Jackson took the opportunity of Jamie looking at his feet to grab his phone back and squirrel it away in his hoodie.

Sophie threw Jackson’s shoes at him, threw her hands in the air, and stomped off, grumbling, “both my brothers are idiots.”

Sophie’s dramatic exit was undermined by having to stop and hold open the door for Mrs Bennett.

“What did you two do now?” Mrs Bennett asked, depositing a tray on the table.

“Sure, I believe you. Now who wants sparklers?”

“Me! Me!”

Of course you do Jack.”

Sophie returned, running and yelling, “thirty seconds!”

Mrs Bennett distributed glasses and sparklers to everyone. She lit a couple of tea-light candles, while Jamie got the house-lights.

“Ten, nine, eight, seven…”
Jackson grinned, bouncing on the balls of his feet. He reveled in Jamie’s pleased little smile.

“…six. Five. Four.”

Sophie bumped Jackson, obviously trying to get him closer to Jamie. She met his reproaching look with another nudge.

“Three! Two!”

Everyone hovered their sparkler over the tea-lights.

“One!”

For a moment they could only hear the hissing of their own sparklers, as fireworks in the town square lit up the night. Then the pops and crackles reached them.

Meanwhile the family at the Bennett house just drew stars and hearts and circles in the air. Sophie and Jackson couldn’t contain themselves to the deck, and soon they were running across the yard.

Jackson stumbled to a stop when a voice whispered in his ear, “Not going to ask for a New Year’s kiss for good luck?”

His jubilant mood punctured, Jackson returned to the deck. He downed the rest of his fake champagne. He lit another sparkler, but just wandered up to the railing to wave it lazily in the air.

“Are you okay?”

Jackson looked askance at Jamie, and made a wobbly gesture with his sparkler.

“Yeah. Just an intrusive thought.”

Jamie made a noise of sympathetic understanding. The two of them just watched Sophie continue her sparkler dance — was that Tai Chi?

“This old woman is going to bed. The couch is made up for you Jack.”

“Thank you.”

Sophie made a last series of jumps, whirling a sparkler in each hand. She took a bow, sweeping the last of the sparklers wide. Jamie applauded, and Jackson cheered.

“I think I’m going to go too. Good night, Jack. Thank you for coming.”

“Thanks again for inviting me. I had a lot of fun.”

“Yeah, well, um, sweet dreams.”

“Don’t let the bed bugs bite.”

Jamie looked like he was going to say something, but just smiled and left.

Jackson let a sigh of relief. Without his first light right in front him, he could relax on resisting his allure.

“You’re both idiots,” drawled Sophie as she passed Jackson by.

Jackson swirled the last of his drink. Looked up and muttered to himself, “Just an idiot in love.”
There was song that they’d forgotten to sing. Jackson raised his voice, letting it gently wash out on the wind.

“Should auld acquaintance be forgot,  
and never brought to mind?  
Should auld acquaintance be forgot,  
and auld lang syne?"

“For auld lang syne, my dear,  
for auld lang syne,  
we’ll tak’ a cup o’ kindness yet,  
for the sake of auld lang syne.”

Jackson blew out the candles, and slipped inside. As if he’d pass on a sleepover.

---

Okay, ROoP, this is what you do. Invite your pushy friends over, get them all comfortable in front of a TV or something, make sure they’ve got notepads and pens, open the attached powerpoint and get them to read along.

For everyone else, the attached powerpoint is a template you can adapt to your own situations.

*Slide 1: Title: Getting [ROoP] to kiss [Cute Boy] (spots for pictures)*

*Slide 2: STOP DOING IT*

*Slide 3: REALLY IT’S NOT COOL*

*Slide 4: WE CAN WORK OUT IF WE WANT TO KISS FOR OURSELVES*

*Slide 5: WHETHER WE KISS IS OUR BUSINESS NOT YOURS*

*Slide 6: Thank You For Your Time, No Questions*

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Chapter End Notes

Next: Jamie’s got dreams to analysis, self-help books to flip through, and a website to check up on.

Hmm, I think Mrs B might believe Jack is a stoner now. Oops.
Journal to the Center of the Self

Chapter Summary

Jamie settles down to 'find his center' whatever that means. Hopefully it will make more sense than his dreams. Especially since his book broken.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Dear Uncle Jay,

You have to help. There’s this guy. And he’s stunning. Like I wouldn’t be surprised if he caused someone to drive into a telephone pole cause they were distracted by his handsomeness.

I don’t know if he’s changed something or if I just needed to see him with fresh eyes. Before he went away to college I thought he was date-worthy. I thought he’d do well even in a bigger pool. But now. Now he’s like a model or something. I can’t stop thinking about him.

I shouldn’t need help with getting his number or a date or anything. I know what I’m doing.

But I’m not I’m worthy of his attention. No one else in our hometown is. He’s one who managed to escape, is going to make something of himself. While I’m just a small-town girl, who played it safe and stuck with my family.

Should I take a chance? Or just make sure he doesn’t get trapped here again by someone?

Provincial Pin-Up Admirer

Jamie lifted up an iced pitcher full of aurora, and carried it over to where his guest was waiting patiently. Jamie stirred the jug, just to freshen the drink’s ionization, and filled three cups. Ribbons of green, blue, purple, and red poured out, meandering without care for gravity, down into the crystal glasses.

The cheerful golden-yellow man raised up his glass, cheers, and took a swig.

“Cheers, Sandy,” said Jamie, mimicking the gesture.

Jamie took a seat and surveyed his little gilded cage. A round room at the top of his tower. One side was just his bedroom rearranged along a round wall. But worn carpet abruptly became dark polished wood at the mid-line. The other side was unfamiliar and strange. A library of tomes, a chemistry laboratory of glass-ware, and a massive brass telescope. A detailed star-map covered the domed roof.

All the windows were shuttered and occasionally rattled. There were sounds of a storm outside — whistling wind, hail stones, and crackling. Intermittently a red flash would burst through the slits of the shutters.

“So how are things going with Luna?”

The golden yellow of Sandy’s cheeks deepened to orange. He puppeted sand into a tiny Sandy and Luna. Tiny Sandy crafted beautiful sculptures for her. They danced. He fell asleep on her lap. She showed him fantastic creatures.

“Glad to hear it.”

A question mark made of sand appeared above Sandy’s head, paired with a concerned expression. The question was obvious to Jamie, almost whispered in his ear.

How are you faring?

“Pretty good actually. Jack and I are friends again. Still working on the frost thing but, heh, I believe in myself. This new curse” Jamie paused while red lit the room, “is frustrating. Though I’m proud of Jack resisting.”

Sand coalesced into an arrow pierced heart.

Jamie looked down at the table, where an unfinished tarot card reading lay. A complete row of seven cards, only one upright proper, the rest reversed.

“Cupid’s working wasn’t very clean. Seven strikes, but he repeated himself. So I’m not sure if I need seven counters to undo it.”

Sandy shrugged. A wizard’s hat crossed out, I’m not a wizard, little z shaped clouds, just a dreamer.

“A bit more than that.”

The Devil upright. Then the Sun, the World, the Lovers, the Eight of Cups, the King of Cups, and the Ace of Cups, all reversed.

Jamie knew he knew what that spread of cards was trying to convey, but he just couldn’t grasp it. Cards reversed were bad. Cups was hearts was emotions?

There were only three cards in the second row, all upright.

Below the overturned World was the Page of Cups, depicted wearing a white t-shirt with red sleeves and a red ghost on his chest.

A prima ballerina, the Queen of Coins, countered the reversed Eight of Cups.

Strength, the flower girl and beast tamer, upright in face of the reversed King of Cups slouched in his throne.

A golden snowflake appeared, Jack Frost?

Jamie drew a card from the deck and smiled at it. The Fool — blue hoodie, white hair, no shoes, crook over his shoulder, about to walk off a cliff — smiled back. Jamie went to add it to the reading but frowned.

“Well, he’d be both of these two at least,” said Jamie, experimentally placing the Fool beneath the Sun and then the Lovers.

Streams of golden reached down and placed question marks on the Devil and the reversed Ace of Cups.

“The Devil would be Cupid but he’s dead. Not sure about the Ace of Cups. That was ‘no one’,
which could be the same as ‘can’t have anyone’,” said Jamie, tapping the World.

Darkness flooded the room, and an ominous rumble filled the space. Something was breathing warm and wet on the back of his neck. Jamie’s blood ran cold, he was going to be eaten.

Jamie rolled his eyes and snapped his fingers.

The darkness retreated to one corner with a slide-whistle. It settled into a trapdoor over where the room’s midline met the wall. It popped open, and a tall, black and gray spectre ascended into the room.

“I hate it went you do that.”

“I’m hardly a fan of mind-numbing terror. My world, my rules. Pitch, have a seat.”

“If I must.”

Pitch stalked over, crossing the space in two steps, and descended into the empty setting.

“Really, serving the King of Nightmares a memory of the northern lights. Not particularly hospitable.”

Pitch snorted, and twirled a blackened finger through glass of sparkling aurora. It fizzed and desaturated into inky blackness. He leaned forward and narrowed his eyes.


Jamie shrugged, and drew another card. An upside down drawing of him, in his starry robes and hat. He considered his options, and tested it below the Ace of Cups.


Sandy chimed, and sand drew two cards from the deck, slapping one on Pitch’s forehead.

Sandy held up the Star depicting him, and blew a raspberry at Pitch.

Pitch removed the Nine of Swords from his head, glanced at it and tossed it down. Pitch’s silhouette loomed in the background over the person catapulting out of their nightmare.

“The Moon would be a better fit for either of us.”

“Were you hoping for Death or the Tower?”

“I would be Emperor first. But why are you two going over all this again?” Pitch waved an arm over the tarot spread, and then at the rest of the room. “You’re not going to escape this cell without trying something new. I’d be happy to teach you an easy way of escaping.”

“No, Pitch. I’m not going to be your light-turned-to-darkness protege.” Jamie tapped his temple.

“The reason the revision is that we’ve got a watcher.”

Pitch leant forward, locking his yellow eyes with Jamie’s. After a chilling moment, the grey face retreated.

“Ah, I see. You’re hoping he’ll remember enough of this to do something useful?”
“Three steps in less than two weeks so far.”

Sandy chimed for their attention. Two mannequins with pistols paced apart, than crashed as jousting knights, a rapidly emptying hourglass.

You’re running out of time for the challenge.

Jamie shrugged. “Is there a time limit?”

“Your life-time I suppose,” drawled Pitch, “But even you have a breaking point.” Pitch nodded at Jamie, “I’d say his is sooner than you think. Especially under this targeted harassment.”

“Hopefully Jack will charm me quickly then.” Jamie downed the rest of his aurora, the plasma tickling his tongue. “But you two should go. Nothing’s going to happen if you keep me asleep.”

“This generation is so impatient,” scoffed Pitch, also finishing his drink, “Fine, I'll take my leave.”

Pitch stood and walked over to the trapdoor. He reached out with a clawed hand and the darkness leapt up into his hand. He threw the black blob at the wall where it splashed into an overly spiky gothic doorway. It opened a classic horror movie creak, revealing yet more darkness.

“Hurry up on sorting out this debacle. It’s no fun preying on you when you’re like this.”

Pitch whirled away and stalked into the darkness. The moment his robes disappeared the door closed with a thunderous bang.

Jamie made eye contact with Sandy for a beat. Then they were laughing. Pitch was so melodramatic.

A burning love heart. A chess board mid-game. A snowflake. A to do list.

“I've got the basics of a plan. I just need to ask light and life some questions.”

Sandy quirked an eyebrow.

Jamie waved his hands over the arrows on the table — where there definitely were tarot cards before.

Sandy frowned at the arrows. He poked at them. None were finished. Some where missing fletching, some their arrow head.

“It’s a work in progress.”

Sandy didn’t look impressed. He sighed, and floated out of his chair. He patted Jamie on the head and drifted over to where Pitch’s door had been.

Sandy knocked on the wall and the wall melted into a doorway for him. Beyond it were shifting golden sands under a starry sky.

Jamie waved. Sandy waved back and left. The door collapsing with a shush after him.

Then everything was dissolving, pouring like sand through Jamie’s fingers.

Jamie frowned at his alarm clock. The green glowing numbers told him nothing other than it was still twenty-three minutes until his alarm was actually set.

There was something he was meant to be doing. He’d just woken up from a dream about some tarot
cards and fizzy drinks. His dream journal!

Jamie flopped to the edge of his bed, and rummaged on the floor. His fingers found the pen and book he’d left there and yanked them up on to the bed.

He flipped the last page and scribbled everything he could remember from the dream.

The resulting page was a mess. Bedroom Library Yellow Grim Reaper Tarot Cards The Fool Lovers Rainbows Seven Five Three Two. A quick sketch of the two others - round and happy; sharp and testy.

Jamie’s pen trailed to a stop. He couldn’t remember anything else. He glanced at the page and didn’t even bother looking up what ever those jigsaw puzzles were meant to mean.

He had been dreaming similar dreams for the last several nights. He wasn’t going to solve them this morning before he’d had coffee.

Jamie got up and crossed his room. Carefully stepping only in the gaps of the colliding paper galaxies of his attempt to solve his life.

The house was silent and dark. The late dawn of winter hadn’t arrived. Jamie was confident he was the first one up.

Jamie padded down the stairs and past the living room. His gaze caught on the sheets and pillow waiting on the couch. Anticipating someone welcome to crash whenever.

Jamie tore his attention away, Jack was still a contentious topic for his equilibrium. Too confusing.

Jamie completed the ritual of divine caffeine and was rewarded with the energy to think.

The kitchen was quiet and pristine. He could do so much more with this than he could in his pokey dorm kitchenette. Pancakes? Waffles? No, no waffles. He meandered over and checked the fridge for inspiration.

Bacon and eggs? No Sophie’s a vegetarian. Maybe an omelette?

Jamie grabbed the box of eggs and some veggies. He got cracking, loosing himself in the rhythm of chopping and whisking. Jamie realised just after he’d poured the mixture into the pan, that he didn’t have a spatula.

Jamie turned to go grab one and saw he wasn’t alone.

“Good morning,” said his mom, raising her morning joe in a mocking salute.

“Morning. Did I wake you?”

“No, but the sounds of a cooked breakfast lured me from my warm cocoon.”

“Heh, it’ll be done soon.”

“And you? Did you sleep well?”

“Yeah, weird dreams though.”

“Hmm?”
“I think I invited a star and the night over for tea and a tarot reading?”

“Sounds quaint. Make a good picture book.”

Jamie sighed and turned back to the stove. The eggs were cooking nicely. He scattered the fillings over and once that was incorporated, folded the omelette and served it.

“Omelette?” croaked Sophie as she wandered over to the table and took a seat.

“Yes, omelette,” said Jamie, cutting it into thirds.

“Thank you.” / “Fankuu.”

It was nice, having breakfast as a family. One seat was conspicuously empty. Jamie supposed once you’d invited someone in, they never really left.

“What word when Jack will be back?”

“He thinks he might be able to stop by sometime later this week. Says he’s trying to organise a surprise.”

“Oh, Jack’s great at surprises.”

“Well, you wouldn’t want to spoil it for me, would you?”

Sophie snickered.

Jamie took one look at the mess of his room and decided on a new course of action. He retraced his steps to his desk, grabbed ‘Finding Your Center’ and fled back downstairs.

The book had been an idea Jamie just couldn’t ignore. Between kids in the street responding to the title with surety about what Jamie’s center was, to his psychiatrist advising him to go for it.

Jamie dropped into his favourite reading spot on the couch. Where the light was just right, the noise of everyone else in the house was dampened a touch, and he’d worn a dent into the cushions over the years.

It had been a while, so it felt a little odd. Like he didn’t quite fit. Like he had to rest his feet on the arms rather than just curl up. Maybe he was too tall for the couch now? Did it matter? The armrest under his ankles was very soft. Almost pillow like.

Jamie peeked under his book and saw why he was a little cramped. It was the pillow and sheets for Jack. After a moment’s consideration Jamie opted to compromise decency and effort, by kicking the pillow over to a different chair. It would be rude to get his feet all over where Jack was going to put his face.

Jamie shifted into a comfortable position and flipped through the book. A lot of it was empty. The first third was blocks of text scattered with exercises to fill. The last two thirds were just blank. Maybe an on-going journalling exercise?

Jamie shrugged and turned back to the introduction.

Someone’s center is the core of who they are. A short idea that summarises who they are and why they do what they do. What sentence epitomises a character? What few notes elicit a whole symphony?
This book is a guide to help you on your journey to recognise your own center.

It isn’t necessary to complete this process. Many — if not most — people live complete lives without taking time to exactly determine their centers.

Finding your center is the difference between being able to describe yourself in a paragraph and a sentence. It is about identifying what is important to you as a person. That might be your past, it might not.

You have layers. We all do. You may don different masks to deal with different people and situations. These are not your center. They may be distortions or reflections of it though.

You probably received this book from someone who completed this process. They may have taken it a step further to reducing their ‘sentence description’ to a single word. The problem with this is, they know what they mean, but you don’t hear that when they tell you it. If they proclaim their center is ‘wonder’, that could be ‘wonder and amazement thrill me’ or ‘I wonder what could’ve been’.

For our first exercise I would like you to write out as many compliments you can remember receiving.

Jamie nibbled on his mechanical pencil and started scribbling. He wasn’t sure where this was going. Most compliments he’d gotten were polite platitudes for doing his work. Or cat-calling. Jamie frowned but added it to the list.

Jamie continued with the next exercise — rating the compliments on whether they spoke to something he cared about. Whether they were true.

It was surprisingly easy to drop into working his way through the book. The language and examples were a little old fashioned, but the tasks were simple.

Jamie’s belly grumbled. He hadn’t realised how much time he’d spent working away at it. He went to bookmark his page before scrounging up some lunch to discover he was halfway through the book.

Halfway through a book which he was sure ran out of content at the one-third mark.

Jamie wandered into the kitchen flicking pages back and forth. Now that he was inspecting the book, Jamie saw that the type changed as the book progressed. It began as a standard serif font, but now it was starting to look like a bit like meticulous handwriting.

“What did that book do to get that face?” asked Sophie, startling Jamie.

Seeing she was armed with a peanut butter, jelly, and a knife, Jamie deposited the book where she could see it. He grabbed a plate and bread for himself.

“It’s broken.”

“How can a book be broken?”

“There’s more in it than when I started.”

“What, did you write in it?”
“Yes, but. Have a look for yourself.”

Sophie raised an eyebrow at Jamie but reached over and took the book.

“Fine. But you take over making lunch.”

She flicked through the tome, grinning at some of Jamie’s answers. She sped up at the halfway mark, but still stopped to scan the text every few pages.

Sophie reached the last page, paused, frowned, and began to laugh.

“What?”

Sophie stifled herself and started to read aloud, “Young lady. Stop reading this and hand it back. Time draws close.”

Sophie closed the book and examined the cover. “Who wrote this? Ambroz Salarich? Who’s that? Wait…”

She frowned and ran her fingers along the bindings. Her brow furrowed further and the tip of her tongue poked out. Then she laughed again.

“Trust you Jamie. Only you would get your hands on like a book like this.”

“What?”

“Hmmm, you’ll work it out. If you don’t, go ask Quintin at the library,” Sophie stood up on tip toes to pat Jamie on the head and grabbed her sandwich. “Maybe if you bribe me I’ll give you a hint.”

Then she left.

Leaving Jamie with a PB+J sandwich and more questions. He flipped open the book. Now it was filled. Jamie frowned and jumped to the last page.

Young lady. You know your center. Stop reading this and hand it back. Time draws close.

You should stop enabling the recipient of this book to sidestep their journey of self-discovery. It would be best to cease and desist before either of you suffer for it.

There is no reward for skipping to the end of this book. You have to complete the journey yourself.

Reader, I don’t mean to alarm, but you do need to finish what you’ve started.

Best of Luck!

What the heck.

Was he being pranked? By a book? How? Invisible ink that reacted on contact with air?

Jamie marched to the bottom of the stairs.

“Sophie!”

“What!?”
“Is this a prank!?”

“NO! Just finish the book Jamie!”

“You know what’s going on! Just tell me.”

Stomping preceded Sophie’s appearance leaning over the upper banister.

“Jamie! Finish the book and I’ll give you that hint. Just finish the book!”

“FINE!”

Jamie huffed and strode back into the kitchen. He grabbed his sandwich and stared down the book. Jamie took a chomp of his sandwich. Is this what he’d come to? Threatening books via vicious sandwich consumption?

“Okay, book. Let’s see what you’ve got.”

Jamie ate his sandwich and took the tome back to the living room. He didn’t curl up in the same spot. He sat as if he were at a library research desk. The self-help book had offended him now.

Now it was an irritating challenge that he had solve.

Jamie got to work. Next exercise: what do you do to recharge? He’d tell the book what he did to recharge. He solved stupid mysteries the world thought it could throw at him.

Jamie worked his way through the afternoon. The second half of the book slipped by under his fingers just as fast as the first.

The last tasks were not surprising. Writing a page about himself. Editing it down to a paragraph. And then a sentence.

The first step was easy. The second a little harder. But the last was frustrating. Jamie filled a whole page with different variations trying to find the one that worked.

I keep faith with storytelling.

Jamie frowned. That felt true. Not right grammatically but true semantically. But more for the person he’d been before he was attacked. He wasn’t really living out this sentiment right now, was he?

Well, he’d finished the book. Time to cash it in for that hint from Sophie.

Jamie weighed the book in his hands as he climbed. He wasn’t sure what to make of it. He’d talk it over with Doctor Joyce next session.

Jamie considered Sophie’s door for a moment. She was going to pester him about what he’d written in the book. If Jamie went to Mr Erty at the library instead he wouldn’t have reveal any of that.

Sophie opened her door, and crossed her arms.

“Were you going to knock? Or just lurk?”

“Um. I finished the book.”

“Good. My hint is: I am Lord Voldemort.”
“What? You’re not going to ask me to prove I did it?”

“Jamie. I’m your sister. I know you. You don’t like to lie.” She reached out and up into a lazy stretch. “Anyway, I have a pretty good idea what your center is.”

“Maybe what it would’ve been a month ago.”

Sophie paused with her hands interlaced over her head. She narrowed her eyes.

“Did you find a new center? I’d understand that after you being attacked. But I don’t think that’s true.”

Sophie just waited for Jamie formulate a response.

“I don’t have a ‘new’ one. It’s just, the final result doesn’t feel like me right now.”

“That’s okay.”

“Is it?”

Sophie twirled away, dropping her arms as she went. She spun to a stop and alighted on her bed. She raised her hand an beckoned Jamie.

“Hmm, I know you have mixed feelings about Jack and his friends.”

Jamie grunted. He stepped into Sophie room and crossed his arms.

“But, they are obsessed with this stuff. So I’ve talked with them about this once or twice. It takes something literally life-changing someone’s center.

“People lose their way sometimes. That’s okay. We still love them. They should love themselves.”

“Did these friends say how to fix it?”

“For them working out their centers was most of what they needed.”

“I’ve found my ‘center’ now but I don’t feel better.”

“Do you want to be the kind of person the you ended up describing?”

“I guess.”

“It’s simple then isn’t it?”

“What?”

“Just do your best. Whenever you have to choose, choose what would your old-center choose.”

“Yes. That’ll be easy.”

“But you have an idea now don’t you?” Sophie reached forward and booped Jamie on the nose, “Now. Get out of my room. I have secret angsty teenage girl things to do.”

Sophie ushered Jamie out of the room and pushed him across the threshold.

“Remember, we all love you. But you’re also allowed to love yourself.”
Then she softly closed her door.

Jamie stood in the upstairs hallway feeling untethered. He wasn’t sure what to do next. His autopilot guided him over to his bedroom door.

Jamie opened it and paused to survey the mess. It was almost terrifying. If a room reflected its owner’s state of mind, well.

There were drifts of papers, projects, and photos. Books of fiction and non-fiction. In the near corner, it would be hard to believe there was a laundry basket under the dirty floordrobe.

Cleaning his room seemed like a good idea. Simple too.

Jamie started picking up clothes and putting them where they belonged. A movement in the corner of his eye, caught Jamie’s attention.

It was his reflection on the mirror on the inside of his wardrobe’s door.

Jamie swung it full open to evaluate how he compared to his room. The results were not great. Jamie looked tired, and the late-afternoon pyjama look wasn’t the height of fashion.

“I’m allowed to love myself?” Jamie asked his reflection.

Jamie knew what the better versions of himself looked like. Why bother with this one? It would be easier to wait for him to get better.

But that’s not how it worked. He wasn’t alone. Even when Jamie’s grip on the ties holding him to other people slipped through his fingers, they held tight. Casting them back out, until Jamie was ready to catch them again.

Did that mean there was tether within himself that he needed to reconnect? It was a nice story.

*What would my old-center choose?*

Someone true to Jamie’s old-center would continue to offer a branch. And would grasp any extended towards them.

So Jamie needed to reconnect, to love himself. How did you do that? Give yourself a hug?

Jamie stared at his reflection, who looked equally confused. They shrugged. Self-affirmations were a thing.

“I love you. Even if you’re a little lost, I love you.”

That felt really stupid. But at least it was off his chest. Jamie almost imagined he could breathe easier.

Jamie looked past his reflection to the mess he had been mid-way through tidying. Once he was done with his clothes, was he just going to tetris pack away his sentimental treasures as well? Not finish what he started?

No.

Jamie had given himself the task of solving who Jack was and how they were tied together. He wasn’t going to give up on that.

Jamie’s reflection began to smirk. Maybe it was time to be a little less orthodox about the Three Jacks
Problem. Start from scratch, forget any thing could be impossible. Find the story that ties it altogether. The truth.

Jamie turned away from his reflection and looked down at the half-baked ideas of his past investigation.

Jamie had so many clues. Stories of Jack in the past and present. Jack’s words to his face, to his screen, and overheard. His mournful song.

As for impossible? Jamie had a book that wrote itself as he turned the page. He was the member of a witches’ coven. He had a GPA over 4 despite having no time to study due to over-reaching commitments.

Jamie used to locate bigfoot for fun. He could solve the mystery of Jack(son) Overland-Frost.

PPA,

Probably better not to idolise this guy too much. I assure you, he won’t be perfect. He probably leaves the toilet seat up; or talks during movies; or hogs the sheets; or something.

Take your chance. Maybe he’ll say yes. And if he ‘escaped’ once I doubt he’s going to be trapped again so easily. But maybe he’ll want to return home after seeing the world? I get to travel a lot but I could never settle down anywhere but my home-town.

Don’t try and make his decision for him. Don’t ‘protect’ him from people you thing are unworthy.

Now, about this college thing. Just because you didn’t go straight to college after high school isn’t the end of the world. You can start later, with a bit more life experience.

Or you could just not. I mean, I’m never going to college and that’s worked out so far. You don’t need to measure your worth based on what other people are doing. Staying to be with your family is great too.

Uncle Jack

Chapter End Notes

Next: Jamie has a theory. He just needs a few more data points. Luckily Jack wants to meet up to show him something. Less good is his website has been stolen.

Apologies for missing my Monday midnight deadline. Gotta pick up the pace as real-life things start up again.

Edit: Who’s worked out the real name of Ambroz Salarich?

Edit the Second: Regarding the Tarot Cards and their meanings. I’m no expert, so I’ll confess I relied on TVTropes Tarot Cards page.

I might have been too obtuse for my own good. Just a hint:
the first row of cards match what Cupid was cursing Jamie with when he stabbed him.

Pitch got the Nice of Swords just to deny him a major arcana card.
I Want to Believe

Chapter Summary

Jamie has an idea what's been happening. It's impossible, but so is his life right now. He just needs some questions answered. Jamie has a plan. He'll strike after they all go bowling.

Jack has a plan. He's only going to get one shot at it.

Chapter Notes

TW: Dealing with life-threatening injuries (finally). My advice, skip from just after "Did it work?" to the last couple of paragraphs before the Uncle Jack response.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Dear Uncle Jack,

How would you recommend dealing with unequal intensity (?) in a relationship. There’s a guy I’ve been getting to know. It’s really obvious that he would like for us to date. But he’s respecting my lack of interest.

After getting to know him, I think I could try dating him. I enjoy spending time with him in a way I don’t get with my other friends. But I’m afraid he’s gonna expect me to jump straight to going all in.

I think I’m ready to try moving to more than friends, but I’m less sure about standard romance things, and I’m definitely not ready for sexual things.

I’m concerned about whether there’s going to be a “give an inch, they’ll take a mile” situation.

Should I just let things continue as they are? Just let our friendship deepen and just accept people are going to think we’re dating even if we’re not? (yet)

Being Nervous Towards Joining Mismatched

Jamie had restored order to his room. Everything was neatly back in its place, just like before hurricane Jamie returned from college to look under every metaphorical rock.

The floor was bare of anything but a rug. The desk was neat and tidy. The shelves bursting with folklore had been dusted. It was still the bedroom of someone who hoarded everything of sentimental value, but it was a tidy one.

Comparing Jamie’s room now and when he returned two weeks ago there was an obvious spot-the-difference.
The poster board — previously covered in layers of Jamie’s past obsessions: posters, photos, drawings, and newspaper clippings - had been overhauled.

It mapped every piece of information Jamie had about the mystery of his amnesia, attacker, and Jack. Things he’d written, things he’d overheard, photos, questions — all linked with string.

At first glance it probably looked either like a shrine to Jack or an attempt to pin him with some unsolved murder. There were pictures of Jack, in and out of ‘character’, linked with every clue Jamie could extract out of his life.

Jamie had focused on two obviously impossible things that had happened. A photo of an icy hand-print Jack left when he fled the table on New Year’s Eve. And a photo of Finding Your Center. Jamie rued not getting before and after pictures of the book, but how was he supposed to know?

One could follow the strings and hopefully see the logical approach Jamie had taken to these illogical happenings.

Finding Your Center -> Ambroz Salarich -> Ombric Salazar -> Guardians of Childhood character

There were connections between Jack, the book, things people had said (both about Jack and Jamie), things Jamie had created in the past. Then some of the weirdos Jamie had met: the biker mall Santa, the hoon doctor who chauffeured Jamie as a favour to Jack.

There were questions tacked to the board. Some minor, some major. One was just ‘Waffles?’ scrawled in two inch tall letters.

Jamie had a theory. Maybe not even that. Jamie had an idea. An outlandish story about what could be going on, and who Jack really was. So far-fetched Jamie was afraid to say it aloud in case it sounded ridiculous even to himself.

Jamie had a problem though. The story tied everything up neatly, it just required one impossible thing to be true.

Common sense asserted that the truth was stranger than fiction. That rather than one simple explanation there was probably a dozen independent coincidences leading to the mystery of Jack.

Perhaps Jamie’s thoughts made Jack’s ears burn, because his phone chirped about a new message from Jack.

[Hi Jamie. I’ve been working on something to show you. I’m hoping it will make you happy, but I don’t want to ruin the surprise. Can we meet on Thursday?]

Jamie suppressed the irrational unease Jack’s contact picture churned in him. Jamie had decided he was going to trust Jack, treat him as a friend. Too bad his subconscious hadn’t got the memo.

[I wouldn’t mind hanging out. But do you mind if I invite Sophie and Cupcake along?]  

[Sure! I’m always happy to spend time with my Burgess besties.  
[Oh, I know! I’ll talk to them about the surprise. Get their approval of what I want to show you. That way you know it’s going to be good.]

Jamie’s nerves settled, Jack was defusing anxieties he hadn’t identified yet. Then flared because Jack was predicting his mood and knowing Jamie better than himself again. Jamie’s phone chirped, derailing that line of thinking.
[Can we go bowling?]

Jamie considered it. A bowling alley wasn’t too bad — hardly a huge crowd drawer. A little noisy maybe but they’d get a little territory to claim for their own. If Jamie’s social batteries ran out, well, everyone would understand.

[Okay, sounds fun.]

[Yay! :D I haven’t been bowling in so long.]

Jamie’s poster board proclaimed his hypothesis — encrypted in pinned evidence and string. Jack not having a chance to go bowling for a while was probably an understatement. Or he just never got a break from his charity work.

His phone buzzed some minor notification, yet another piece of spam filling his inbox. Jamie glanced at it intending to ignore it but the subject line caught his attention.

<J’aime Bien: New Post: Provincial Pin-Up Admirer >

Jamie frowned. That didn’t make any sense. He hadn’t posted anything to J’aime Bien in weeks. The last thing he’d posted was a closure notice.

Jamie plonked into his desk’s swivel chair and booted his laptop. He quickly discovered what had happened. ‘Uncle Jack’ had announced precisely what he’d done.

Jamie’s first impulse was to grab his phone to blast Jack with a rant. But he squashed that urge. What good would that do.

And Jack had been right. Jamie didn’t want to burn J’aime Bien to the virtual ground any more. But, Jamie was reluctant to pick up Uncle Jay’s pen. The site was probably safer in Jack’s hands.

He should check.

Utilising his training in cramming a week’s readings into an hour, Jamie made quick work of Jack’s additions to the site.

They were informative. Jack had hinted at personal details — both biographical and perhaps-parallels to his troubles with Jamie. Jamie remembered often choosing to answer questions that mirrored some difficulty he was dealing with.

They were also confusing. Jack wrote about difficulty with gift-giving (who teased him about it?) but then presented Jamie a beautiful gift that outclassed a lowly scarf. Jack chose to tackle over-sharing families. Did that mean Sophie told him something?

Some of the other topics didn’t immediately click as relevant. Long distance relationship advice had been perennial topic at J’aime Bien. Weddings were far from Jamie’s mind. Sex cults? Sounds fake. Cute powerpoint. Very tempting to download it to show Sophie.

Jamie copied down telling lines and articles, and added them to his poster board wall of truth. They reinforced connections Jamie had already made, and linked things he hadn’t been able to.

Jamie was most shocked by a post he’d written. His penultimate article before shutting down the site. One he’d forgotten completely.

It was both implicit and obvious the letter was about Jack and Jamie. Signed O’LAND? Quoting one
of Jack’s catch phrases? Childhood friendship turned long distance relationship. One in college, one
landing a nomadic job. It certainly sounded like Jack — an impulsive prankster.

Past Jamie’s response seemed knowing. Breaking his established abbreviations, hinting at Overland.
Present Jamie surmised that he’d written this after Jack approached him directly.

Given the positive tone of the letter, Jamie might have said yes to being Jack’s boyfriend.

Given the publication date being the same as his assault, Jamie had concerns.

So Jack and Jamie might’v been boyfriends of only one day when Jamie was assaulted and lost his
memory? Even asking himself the question it sounded ridiculous.

It would explain why Sophie felt the need tell Jamie that Jack would like to be his boyfriend. And
why Jamie was ‘Benne-boy BBFF’ in Jack’s phone.

Jamie wondered, if this whole might-be-boyfriends thing was true, were they still boyfriends? Did
Jamie want them to boyfriends?

Maybe Jamie should take his own advice: talk it out.

Jamie just needed a plan. After bowling? He’d get another afternoon to gauge his feelings about
Jack. Now, what did they need to talk about?

The early winter sunset arrived quickly, filling Jamie’s room with a brief faint orange, as the sun
ducked behind the mountains. Jamie looked down at the bright orange index card in his hand. It had
taken a few attempts but he was happy with this set of cues.

Finished with that, Jamie set about cleaning up before heading downstairs. His laptop still had a
bunch of J’aime Bien tabs open.

Jamie was struck by a whimsical notion. Jack had sent him a letter through the site, if they were
boyfriends, Jamie should probably do the same. Quickly drafting a note about his main concerns,
Jamie submitted it before he lost his nerve.

“Oh fuck off, shithead.”

The latest creep paused with his mouth open. He slid his leering from Jamie to Cupcake. The creep
gulped, raised his hands in surrender, and ran.

“Thank you.”

“You’re welcome.”

“It’s so weird,” said Sophie, “Maybe it’s cause I’m your sister, but how are you suddenly such a
head-turner that people keep being pushy idiots?”

“Gee, thanks Sophie.”

“Don’t look at me, I’m a lesbian. I don’t know what they see in you either.”

“Ouch.”
“It’s a matter of perspective, girls,” delicately sniped a new voice. “A mature eye can see James’ gifts.”

Mrs Robinson stopped her pram in front of them. She rested her forearms on the handles, angling her chest just so.

“Jay! Jay!” cheered Cornelius from the pram.

Jamie crouched and held up a hand for the kid to high-five. No need to punish the kid because his mom was being weird. Jamie stood and waved politely at Mrs Robinson.

“Nice to bump into you both, but we need to get going.”

“Oh, if you must. Are you still babysitting? I could use a hand at home.”

“Ma’am, I’ll be heading back to college next week.”

“What about a one night thing?”

Jamie tapped his watch, “We’ve gotta go, or we’ll be late.”

Jamie waved again, grabbed Sophie and Cupcake’s wrists, and started not-quite power-walking away.

“I’ll call you!”

Jamie walked faster. Girls kept pace, but were shaking with repressed laughter.

Burgess Bowl World was a timeless institution a couple blocks from main street. Atop a low functional box of a building, a giant fiberglass bowling ball careened towards skittles frozen mid-scatter.

There was no brown-haired boy waiting outside the entrance. This did not settle his nerves.

“Given how eager Jack is, I’d’ve expected him to be here already,” mused Sophie.

“Maybe he’s inside?” Jamie guessed.

“Jack, wasting time hiding from the snow? Unlikely.”

“Wait,” snapped Cupcake, holding up a hand, “Do you hear that?”

Jamie listened, and could hear a faint, but crescendoing, “whoooo”. They all turned to look up the road out of town and up into the hills. Someone in a blue hoodie was freewheeling down the hill towards them.

“Jack,” the trio chorused, variously amused, despairing, and unimpressed.

“Why is he like this?”

Jack was approaching them at speed. And he’d passed the point Jamie would’ve thought to begin braking.

The hooligan banked hard on screeching brakes to enter the carpark. And then the other way.

Jamie could tell Jack was aiming to emulate a hockey stop on a bike. A dramatic stop, broadside
throwing snow over them.

Jamie could also tell that wasn’t going to happen.

“Good afternoon my fa— oh shit.”

Jack’s bike didn’t stop, but kept spinning, throwing its rider into a snow bank. Jack laid there spread-eagled, staring at the cloudy sky, for a moment. He jackknifed himself to his feet.

“As I was saying, good afternoon my favourite Burgessites!”

Jamie rushed forward, asking “Are you okay?”

“I’m fine.”

Jack made a show of checking his range of motion. He stretched, and bent, and rolled his head around.

Jamie released a mixed sigh of relief and annoyance. He did poke Jack sharply in the side.

“Hey! I’m fine.”

“Just checking.”

“Your bike isn’t,” added Sophie.

The bike looked like it had been in a few battles. Dinged up, and blue paint scratched. But now both wheels were bent.

“I guess I’ll be walking then.” Jack waved dismissively, “I’ll sort it out. Let’s go bowling!”

Jack leant his broken bike against a rack, and hurried them in. By the time the quartet reached the counter, Jack had deftly drifted to the back.

Cupcake rolled her eyes, but took charge. Jack and Jamie hung back, standing awkwardly next to one another. Sophie kept looking over her shoulder at them, and refraining from saying anything.

When they collected their rental shoes, Jack’s hatred of footwear reared itself again.

“Size?” droned the cashier.

Jack squinted at the label inside his tennis shoes (he’d removed them ASAP). “Um, 11, 12, 45?”

“Try these.”

Jack accepted the shiny black, white and red shoes with a sneer of disgust.

“What are these? Why don’t we just strap wooden boards to our feet? Stupid waste of good leather. Scorching toe prisons.”

Jack’s pantomime of shoe related woe was attention grabbing. But then, from their first re-meeting Jamie had found Jack fascinating. It was hard to find someone grumbling about borrowed shoes but tying perfect bows to be too intimidating.

“Those are too big, aren’t they?”

“Jamie, they’re the same size as these,” said Jack, dangling his tennis shoes.
“Maybe those are the wrong size. Cause I can see a huge gap between you ankle and the shoe.”

Jamie could see Jack ready to quip, so Jamie kept talking.

“It’s gonna hurt when you’re sliding around and the edge cuts into your Achilles.”

“Always looking out for me, what would I do without you?”

Jack tore the laces open and headed up to counter to downsize.

A cleared throat caught Jamie’s attention. He looked up and saw a very smug looking little sister.

“Oh, don’t mind us. Pretend we’re not even here.”

Jamie quickly concluded that when Jack said he hadn’t been bowling “in so long” what he’d meant was “ever”.

Jack started the game with a throw that seemed to fly after the length of the lane before bouncing into the gutter. Jack refused any advice, swearing he’d figure it out on his own.

“Aw, bowling is weird,” whined Jack, heading back to his seat.

“You get a second go,” Sophie said, shooing Jack back to the ball return.

“Really? Cool!”

Jack’s second bowl still caught a lot of air but knocked over two pins.

Second on the board was Cupcake, who calmly opened with a strike.

Jamie stood. He collected his ball and walked over to his starting position. He lifted the ball and closed his eyes. As always Jamie blocked out everyone watching, just for a moment. It was just him, the ball, and the pins.

Jamie swung the ball back, stepped forward and bowled. A seven-ten split. Great.

“Woo! Go Jamie!”

Jamie blushed. He flailed, trying to shush Jack’s display. People were starting to look their way. Jack got the message, and after checking both ways, sunk into seat and zipped his lips shut.

The ball return coughed up Jamie’s ball, and he grabbed it. Focusing was more difficult, knowing that Jack was paying such close attention. Jamie bowled, but it sailed between the pins.

Sophie quirked an eyebrow at Jamie as he passed her. Why did he invite his pest of a little sister?

The game continued. Jack continued to ask questions — why did Cupcake not get a score? — and improve rapidly. Cupcake defended her lead with a series of spares and strikes. Jamie underperformed under pressure, but not too badly. Sophie was a wild card. She either scored a strike or nothing above five.

Conversation was light. Jamie didn’t make an effort to get Jack to talk about anything in particular, like he had at New Year’s Eve. He had a list, he’d ask them later. Today he was fine just going with the flow of friendly chatter. It was easy to see how Jamie’s unspoken hypothesis filled in the gaps of what Jack was saying.
Cupcake won, with Jack taking second place. Given Jack’s improvement the next game was going to be much closer. Jamie had just managed to keep third. Sophie claimed that her fourth place scores had numerological significance.

“You two guard our lane,” ordered Cupcake, “We’re going to get some snacks.”

Jack and Jamie nodded. Then sat in awkward silence once the girls were gone. Jamie one sear from the end, Jack two seats away where it curved.

Jamie wasn’t nauseated with Jack’s presence any more. But he had butterflies. Jamie was afraid to say anything, in case he just blurted everything.

Jack didn’t look any more composed. There was a faint pink on his cheeks, and redness around his eyes.

Catching Jack’s eyes drifting back to him, Jamie looked away.

Two guys draping themselves over the seats either side of Jamie were almost a welcome distraction.

“I see you’ve got game, wanna play with us?”

“Yeah, who wouldn’t want to hook a power stroker like you.”

Jamie froze. If he could, he’d just melt into a puddle and drain into the alley’s machinery. Things had been going so well. No weird propositions, no invitations to ‘babysit’ from pram-walking mothers. But, no, this was Jamie’s life now.

“Go away, he’s not interested.”

Jamie looked up from his shoes. Jack was standing there, looking ready for a fight.

“Are you his boyfriend? You little twink.”

“I don’t need to be his boyfriend to see he’s uncomfortable.”

“Well, why don’t we ask the man of the hour?”

“Yeah, brown eyes, don’t you think hoodie-guy is a being a buzzkill?”

Jamie stood. Not bothering to avoid clocking one of the guys with his shoulder. He stepped and turned, to stand with Jack.

“No,” said Jamie, crossing his arms and disdainfully looking down his nose at them.

“You’re buzzkills. Jack is fun. You two barged in where you’re not welcome. Go away.”

“Don’t be like that. We just wanted to show you a good time.”

“Which I was having before you showed up. Now go away before I get you thrown out.”

Jamie stared them down. He honestly did not have energy to spare for their feelings. After a moment they paled and left.

Jamie looked to his side to catch Jack staring at him. Jack’s blush deepened and he looked away.

“What did we miss?” asked Sophie, offering a tray of fries
“Nothing.”

“Right.” Jack clapped his hands. “Let’s get on with game two. Cupcake you better watch out! I’m gunning for ya.”

The second game was even more uneven than the first. Jamie took a few frames to get over the early interruption. And Jack’s non-answer to whether he was Jamie’s boyfriend.

In the end Jack just beat Cupcake in the low two-hundreds, while Jamie and Sophie fought for third around the one-fifty mark.

Jack beginning the day with a gutterball and ending it with three consecutive strikes was almost insulting. But Jack looked so pleased with himself every time. Like a kid begging to be told he did good.

Which was nothing compared to how pleased he was when Jamie scored a spare or strike.

“So, now what?” asked Sophie, “Are we going to go see your surprise?”

“Not yet,” Jack sing-songed, “It’s too early. Let’s check out the arcade!”

The quartet left the bowling alley laughing. The girls were alternating between gentling ribbing Jack about what his surprise show was and teasing them both about about the bundle of junk Jack had won Jamie.

Jamie rolled his eyes at their needling, more focused on gleaning clues to the surprise. He knew they knew what it was. Something about a rabbit?

Jamie was quiet as they walked back towards downtown. He needed a place for him and Jack to talk. There was a for-lease shop up ahead, with a little indent where the doors were. It was probably the closest they’d get to a private corner.

“What, Sophie, Cupcake, can Jack and I have some privacy?”

“Sure…” drawled Sophie.

She grabbed Cupcake’s hand and made a show of crossing the road to give Jack and Jamie some space. They were definitely examining the highly reflective window displays, and in no way attempting to eavesdrop.

Jamie shrugged, it was the best he could hope for. He turned back to Jack, who looked very nervous.

“You can relax,” said Jamie, “I just wanted to say something before your big surprise.”

Jamie pulled Jack along and in to the shop’s recessed doorstep. He held up a finger to preempt Jack talking. Jamie rummaged in his pocket and extracted a very dogeared index fluoro orange card.

“You wrote a speech?”

“No. Just a cue card.” Jamie exhaled and focused on the bullet points for a moment. “I want to apologise again for yelling at you that time you showed up after my archery practice.”

“I already forgave you. I should’ve known surprising you would hurt you.”

“How? I didn’t know I’d react like that.” Jamie waved his hands trying to dispel the distraction, “I said some things that hurt you too. Things have changed and I have more to say, but I don’t want to
hurt you. You’re my friend. You’re basically family.”

“Okay, I’m listening.”

“So ever since I got back from college I’ve been trying to figure out a bunch of stuff. What I’d forgotten. Our relationship. The increasingly weird farce that is my life.”

Jack was quiet, letting Jamie talk. Though he did blush to his ears when Jamie said ‘relationship’.

“At first I was throwing a theory together as I went, so I wasn’t getting anywhere. But, after dealing with a frustrating therapy book, I channelled that into starting from scratch.

“I have a theory, but I just need to ask you a couple questions to confirm it.”

“Ask me anything.”

Jamie checked his cue card. He’d covered everything in his intro. Now for question one.

“Have you been enjoying running J’aime Bien?”

Jack’s blush darkened, and his gaze dropped to his toes.

“Yes. I mean I don’t have a clue what I’m doing, and I’m pretty sure I talked someone into getting themselves arrested,” mumbled Jack, raising head as his rambling increased to a confident declaration, “but yes, I’m glad I kept it going when you shut it down.”

“I agree.”

“You do?”

“I mean, I’m still in no state to look after it, but you were I right. I put a lot of work into that site.”

“Cool.” Jack was bouncing just slightly. “Next question!”

“Were you O’LAND?”

Jack stopped bouncing.

“…yes.”

“Did you ask to be my boyfriend?”

“I did.”

“Did I say yes?”

“Yes.”

“Did you give me a hickey?”

“You gave me one first!” shouted Jack, pulling his collar open and pointing at a pristine spot halfway to his shoulder.

Across the street Sophie and Cupcake were most definitely not rolling on the ground laughing, what ever gave you that idea?

“I know I’ve said some horrible things — no don’t deny it — but did we ever actually break up?”
“…I guess we didn’t.”

“Do you want to break up?”

“No!”

“Even though I’m not ready for most things romantic, and anything sexual?”

“Jamie, I’m gray or demi or I dunno. It’s fine.”

“So do want to keep being boyfriends?”

“Yes.”

“Even though I’m a bit of tsundere right now?”

“Aw, Jamie you’re sweet.”

“But seriously,” Jamie deadpanned, “I’m going to be using you to push my own boundaries.”

“I know that,” said Jack with a roll of his eyes, “and honestly I’d be pretty jealous if you did it with anybody else.”

“Well, test number one. Kiss me?”

“Yes!” cried Jack, starting to leap forward.

Jamie caught Jack around the shoulders, preventing them crashing together.

“Small steps. No tongue”

“Okay.”

Jamie locked eyes with Jack and inched forward. Jamie was still nervous, almost nauseous, about kissing Jack. He knew there was no way a kiss was going to magically fix everything, but he was determined. Jamie just had to remind himself kissing wasn’t scary.

Jack’s irises were mesmerising. Almost with a snowflake overlaid on each honey brown eye.

Jamie had to close his eyes when proximity sent him cross-eyed. His nose bumped into Jack’s. After a short awkward shuffle and their lips met in a quick peck.

For a split second, Jamie’s lips felt rough colder lips, before they were gone.

Jamie leant back with a smile. That hadn’t been too bad. A little knot of dread in his chest loosened. It was little step, but it was important to him. Jamie opened his eyes.

Jack was gone.

“What the?” spluttered Jamie, whirling trying to spot Jack.

There was no sign of Jack. Not even footprints in the snow leading away from Jamie.

Jamie hadn’t expected kissing Jack to instantly fix his amnesia. But it wasn’t meant to make Jack disappear into thin air.

“Get back here Jack! I wasn’t finished. There’s another two bullet points here,” shouted Jamie,
waving his cue card.

Maybe Jamie imagined the deeper laughter echoing Sophie’s cackling, but he didn’t imagine his cue card slipping out of his grip. It didn’t flutter to the ground. Caught by a series of updrafts it bumbled down the street.

“You’re not going to get that?” asked Cupcake.

“Jack is more important than a stupid speech.”

“Aw, he’s touched,” managed Sophie between laughs, “I’m sure.”

Jamie’s phone vibrated in his pocket but he ignored it. He was a bit busy right now.

“Yeah, but he disappeared. Did you see where he went?”

“That way,” said Cupcake waving towards where the cue card had blown.

Jamie started walking down the street, looking for a trail to follow. He heard another distant buzz from one of the girls’ phones.

Sophie’s laughter stopped and she announced, “I got a text from Jack. He’s says check your phone.”

“Huh?”

Jamie did as requested and checked. The earlier buzz had been Jack. Oops.

[Sorry I vanished. U surprised me. I lost my cool. Can u go 2 the scout hall? [Please go. Thats were what I wanted to show u is [*where]

Jamie executed a close-cousin of the face-palm — applying his phone to his face. After a moment he continued walking and started crafting a reply.

[I’m going. I’m going. You better have a good explanation when I get there.]

[I do. I promise.]

Jamie pocketted his phone and strode up to where his fluoro orange card was embedded in the snow atop a newspaper box. Just before he reached it, a gust caught it and blew it further down the street.

“Very funny,” grouched Jamie.

Thus began a ridiculous parade. Jamie marching along, every few steps getting close enough to grab his cue card, only for the wind to steal it away. Sophie and Cupcake quickly caught up to flank him, and lightly tease him.

“Oh, close one.”

“Almost had it that time.”

“What do you think Jack wants to show you?” asked Sophie.

“How should I know? Maybe how he does his stupid hair.”

“Do you really think his hair is stupid?” pressed Cupcake, ruffling Jamie’s hair.
“Get off. His hair’s fine.”

“If it wasn’t the hair, why did you kiss him?”

Jamie didn’t answer. He just kept walking (and failed to grab the card again), hoping they would drop it. Maybe if Jack hadn’t literally disappeared after the kiss, Jamie would be more inclined to explain.

Sophie counted aloud down from twenty before continuing to wheedle, “Yeah, Jamie. What happened to ‘no one is kissing anyone’?”

“I just wanted to test something. Okay? I explained it to Jack.”

“Did he pass? Did he get the grade? Or will he have to apply for extra credit?”

Jamie stoically ignored his sister’s increasingly outlandish questions, and stared straight ahead. He couldn’t even manage a sigh of frustration when fluoro orange danced away from his fingertips.

“Did it make you feel better?” Cupcake asked after Sophie settled into a quiet sulk.

“Yeah, I suppose. Until I saw he’d disappeared.”

“I’m sure he’ll explain himself.”

“He better.”

Their procession was also starting to collect followers. Burgess wasn’t a large place. Over the mile from bowling alley to scout hall, a dozen or more kids decided to tag-along.

It began when Michael approached Jamie with the same challenging look he’d levelled at the Burgess Family Party. Michael did his best to be intimidating, even as his little legs forced Jamie to shorten his stride.

“What are you up to?”

“I’m walking.”

“Where?”

“The scout hall.”

“Why?”

“To see something.”

“What something?”

“I don’t know.”

“Why don’t you know?”

“Jack says it’s a surprise.”

“Jack!!” cheered Michael’s younger brother. Summoning more children.

Once Jack was mentioned it was impossible to get rid of the increasing horde. Except for the few who just ran off to the scout hall. Plus, even if Jamie refused to answer their questions, existing tag-
Jamie was much happier to answer the kids’ questions, than acknowledge any of the propositions from adult bystanders.

They walked down snowy streets, leaving Burgess’s modest built-up downtown, through the open areas of the school and parks. Some of the kids hung around the adults, pestering them with questions and guesses. Others took up the challenge of catching the fluoro orange card.

The card-chasing avant-garde turned the corner into the scout hall’s driveway first. With a cry of “Jack!”, they were running, forgetting their previous target.

Jamie rounded the corner and saw a bunch of kids crowded around the scout hall’s partially open doors. They had left a gap right of the doorstep, and were all clamouring for attention. The rest of the kids following them ran to join the group at the door.

Except Michael and Alex, who seemed to enjoy grilling Jamie. They looked from him to the door, shared a glance and shook their heads. Michael’s expression was pure annoyance. Alex looked more mildly concerned. They approached Jamie and hugged him.

“It’s going to be okay. Jack will fix it.”

“He wouldn’t be Jack if he didn’t try,” Jamie agreed.

“Jack will fix it,” stated Michael.

Jamie walked the last few dozen yards across the snowy carpark, flanked by two witches and two children.

“I don’t think Jack planned for this many witnesses,” said Cupcake.

“He’ll work it out,” said Alex.

Something fluttered and Jamie snatched it out of the air. It was his cue card. He stifled both a snort and reaction to the wind ruffling his hair.

“C’mon everyone,” shouted Sophie, “let Jamie through.”

The kids parted like the red sea, closing back together after Jamie had passed. Some grumbling about not getting to see the surprise.

Jamie felt like a celebrity’s plus one, not deserving of this level of attention. And like a sacrifice, not knowing what he was getting himself into.

Just as Jamie reached the door and for the handle, Cupcake and Sophie planted themselves like bouncers.

“This surprise is from Jack to Jamie,” explained Cupcake in her unquestionable teacher voice, “Jack asked that no one else go in. He promised to tell us afterwards, okay?”

Jamie slipped through the door and into the hall.

The first thing that grabbed Jamie’s attention inside the scout hall was a well-worn pink stuffed rabbit sitting at the center of the wooden floor.

“Oh?” Jamie asked no one in particular, fighting back a grin.
The second was the door banging closed behind him.

Otherwise the hall was simply empty. Just a pink stuffed rabbit, nothing else. Just patchy lines marked on the wooden floors and safety wire on the windows. The lights were off, only the last of the winter day’s sunlight illuminating the hall.

Jamie walked up to the rabbit and sat cross-legged in front of it.

“Okay, you’re a ways from home. Are you Jack’s surprise? Because I’ll confess, stealing a toy from my room is not a very good surprise.”

Jamie hummed thoughtfully. “He could do worse than you though. Speaking of confessions, Mr Bun-Bun, if I tell you something you won’t tell anyone right? Not even Jack if he takes you on an adventure?”

Mr Bun-Bun was silent. Jamie took it as agreement.

“I kissed a Jack. And I liked it.”

Mr Bun-Bun’s silence continued.

The sound of ice cracking caught Jamie’s ear. He looked left to see a circle of frost spreading.

“Huh?”

Designs traced themselves into the ice without cause. An egg. A rabbit. A present complete with bow.

Jamie knew this story. His younger self written and re-written it a hundred times. He'd read and re-read it dozens of times. He grinned and leant over to draw on the ice.

A simple snowflake. Three lines intersecting. A hexagon around. And prongs jutting out from the arms.

Jamie sat back and waited for whatever was next. He wasn’t disappointed. His simple snowflake was joined by two more. And all three peeled themselves off the frosted floor.

“Whoa.”

The snowflakes drifted up into the air above Jamie. He reached out to touch them, but they danced higher. Jamie stood, head tilted back, and reached up on tippy-toes.

The snowflakes whirled higher still. Blue and white striking against the faint orange seeping through the windows. They waltzed another moment longer and then crashed into each other. Bursting into a cloud of little snowflakes that fell.

“Indoor snow,” Jamie giggled at the glittery snow drifted down.

Snow fell around Jamie, and he stuck out a tongue to catch it. It tasted fizzy.

A soft icy bolt from the blue struck Jamie right between the eyes. He blinked and stared at the ceiling. The snowflakes were gone, but Jamie doubted he was alone.

“Jack,” began Jamie, testing the name on his tongue, “Frost.”

“Did it work?”
Jamie turned to the speaker. A blue hoodie that evoked warring love and loathing.

“Yes, Jack.”

They both lunged, pulling each other into a fierce embrace. There was nothing for Jamie besides the cold familiar presence wrapping himself around him.

Jamie and Jack kissed as if to catch up all the chances they’d missed. The kiss was nothing cautious, nothing like the experimental peck only half an hour ago. They held each other close and their lips locked until Jamie couldn’t breathe.

Jamie gasped as he broke the kiss for air. He couldn’t breathe, his chest hurt every time he tried. Jamie looked down.

Jack was back. And so was the arrow.

Jamie wavered, between the sparks of joy running down his nerves and the leaden despair attempting to flow from his heart. He just had to hold it. He could if Jack held him.

“Fuck,” eloquently summarised Jack, “The fucking lead arrow. What do we do?”

“Jack. Look at me,” said Jamie as steady as he could, “I thought this might happen.”

Jack’s grip tightened on Jamie’s shoulders. His bright blue eyes were frantic.

“What do we do? Get Apollo?”

“No time,” gasped Jamie, “True love’s kiss fixed the arrow. I can hold it. Not long.”

“It doesn’t look fixed.”

“Solid,” amended Jamie, “Now we’re gotta get it out.”

“How?”

“Step One.”

Jamie wrapped his right hand around the arrow’s razor fletching. Jamie reached his left hand up, careful not to jostle anything, and cupped Jack’s cheek. Jamie took a fraction of the love he saw and channelled it down into his grip. Jack was beautiful, lit by a golden glow from below.

Jamie twisted his wrist and snapped the arrow’s shaft. Pain lanced through him as punishment.

“Wait. Is step two pushing it through?”

“Not quite,” rasped Jamie, “Step two: kiss me.”

“What, like kiss it better?”

Jamie held Jack from going down to kiss his chest. The thought’s distraction knocked against his grip on the arrow’s poison. But Jamie held.

“No. On the lips.”

“Is this really the time Jamie?”

“I need a kiss. For step three.”
“If you insist, how could I deny you?”

Jamie smiled at Jack’s levity. Their lips met again, for a third time that day. This kiss was more controlled, less frantic. Jack was careful, obviously nervous about hurting Jamie. This kiss was about the future, about not letting go. Jamie reached his left arm around Jack’s waist to hug him love closer.

Jamie’s other arm searched behind him for the arrow. He found the arrowhead and started to tug. It was excruciating. Jamie couldn’t just pull it out in one smooth motion. The awkward angle left him shimmying it out a few inches at a time. When the arrow moved it scraped at his soul, and when it stuck it burned.

But kissing Jack was everything. Ice soothed burning. Fizzing joy powering Jamie’s determination.

After an eternity the broken end of the arrow was freed. Before it landed, Jamie was embracing Jack more fiercely with both arms.

Free of the lead’s poison, Jamie immersed himself in the kiss. Focusing on the feel of chapped lips, of both winning a game with their tongues, of sharing each other’s breath.

Jamie surfaced and dropped his head onto Jack’s shoulder.

“Third time’s the charm.”

_BNTJM,_

*Looking at the official Guide to J’aime Bien I received when I took control of [read: stole] the site, I’m going to refer to rules 1 through 5: communicate.*

*Everyone moves at their own speed. Taking things slow is good!*  
*If you explain all this to him, and he doesn’t get it. Well that save you some time. If you really think he’s going to take a mile, then don’t give him an inch. There are plenty of great people in the world who will be able to match your pace.*

_Uncle Jack_

_P.S. Also, I invite you to use the slide show I shared last week. Get any of your friends off your case._

**Chapter End Notes**

Next: The boys are back together! Time to start planning on how to deal with Eros.

Apologies for the delay, have an extra long chapter for you troubles. A couple of time-tabling announcements:

1) I’m going to move to a Wednesday weekly release schedule. Since I can't help but work right up til my midnight deadline and my Monday and Tuesday nights now have stuff.

2) I’m going to skip next week’s update. I’ll be travelling interstate for my grandpa’s 90th. So, not ideal writing conditions. And I need to actually plot/resolve dealing with
Eros. (Since I don't agree with the sketched plan from two years ago anymore) What of the Chekhov's Armory I've set-up am I going to use?
Chapter Summary

Jack has his Jamie back! He doesn't plan on letting him go anytime soon. Plus he has such a kissable face. Too bad all of his annoyances want to interrupt. Time for a council of war, a medical check-up, and a history lesson.

Jamie has a better idea.

Chapter Notes

CW: Jack and Jamie get up to some "heavy petting" (but not into each other's pants) under the influence. Also, Eros makes an appearance.

Dear Uncle Jack,

What is the accepted etiquette on chastising your sibling for inappropriate romantic behavior at the dinner table? I'm starting to think I need to buy a squirt bottle and treat them like naughty pets. Or maybe a foam bat.

I don't mind that they're in their honeymoon stage, but could they tone it down just a touch when we're trying to eat? Like enjoy the food, don't try to eat each other's face instead.

They'll be embarrassed for about two seconds. Then they start playing footsie or pattycake. Once they look at each other, there it again. And I have to break them up.

Any advice? I'd really like some authorization to hit them whenever they get out of line.

Seriously Inconvenienced Sister

Jack basked in Jamie’s embrace. Drifting in the love and joy they were feeding into each other. Jamie was solid and warm around him, anchoring Jack in the moment. Jack needed this since, with the sudden weight off his shoulders, him floating with joy probably wouldn’t be metaphorical.

The last hour had been a roller-coaster. Jack had already been nervous about his plan. Then Jamie kept throwing him curve-balls. Jamie had been so cute when he demanded Jack return.

After the whiplash of the lead arrow’s reappearance overturning the joy of Jamie Believing and remembering, Jack felt justified in just taking some time (like forever) in Jamie’s embrace to regain his bearings.

Maybe more kissing. Three was a nice magic number, but why stop there? Wait.
Jack shifted them so he could look Jamie in the eye.

“Third time’s the charm? Jamie, that’s not, you couldn’t, argh!” Jack buried his frustrated yell in his boyfriend’s shoulder. “It’s just… I love you and I thought I was going to lose you again after just getting you back.”

Jamie had gone stock still at Jack’s outburst, but softened with Jack’s murmuring. Jack could feel one hand playing with his hair, while the other arm tightened around him.

“I love you too.”

Jack didn’t just hear the words, he felt Jamie’s heart behind them. Jack had spent years learning the nuances of Jamie’s emotions. A secret knowledge just for him. There had always been a common pattern underneath — climate to whatever fickle emotions Jamie was weathering. Jack had thought it was just Jamie’s base personality, but now as it flooded Jack, the spirit had to reconsider.

“I can tell. How come you never said? Even before I asked you out… You never said that to me like you do to Sophie or your mom.”

What if this warmth of hot chocolate and marshmallows wasn’t just Jamie generally, but his feelings for Jack specifically?

Jamie’s hand paused then resumed running through Jack’s hair.

“I trained myself not to, I guess.”

“Why?”

“Story-confession-time. You’re easy to love Jack. I idolised you from the beginning, and I quickly loved you as my best friend and the best big brother in the world. Later on I worked out I like-liked you about the same I time I was old enough to consider all the ways it might not work. You being immortal, me aging. You being invisible to most people. The others forgetting you. You already gave me an unfairly large chunk of your time. You’re a Guardian, are you even allowed to have a boyfriend? All that.

“I was afraid. I decided to play it safe. I would be happy to have you in my life as my best friend forever. I’d say nothing, just let things stay as they were. Not make you have to decide. Then I stopped saying ‘I love you’ because I thought you might realise I meant a different kind of love than I had before. Besides I thought you’d know by everything else anyway.”

Jamie’s shoulders loosened from the tension they’d ratcheted up during his confession. Jack whined when Jamie stopped fidgeting with his hair, and trailed his hand down to cup Jack under the chin. Jack was gently lifted — despite some protest — off Jamie’s shoulder.

Jack’s vision was filled with Jamie’s chocolate eyes still glowing faintly with his golden magic. Jamie’s smile widened.

“I love you Jack Frost. I promise not to keep that a secret anymore.”

Jamie leant forward, and they were kissing again. Skipping over the chaste teasing, straight to full tongue battle and lip lock.

Jack pulled down on Jamie’s jacket zipper, so that he could pull open the collar. Jamie’s t-shirt collar didn’t have much give, but enough that Jack could suck at that spot that made Jamie shiver.
Jamie whined when Jack broke from the kiss, but made a happy little hum when Jack sucked on the crook of his neck.

The new spicy flavour on top of Jamie’s normal hot chocolate was more obvious now. It made Jack’s lips tingle. He sucked hard, trying to draw it in. Jamie tensed, and yanked on Jack’s hair. Jack hummed, and nibbled, making Jamie groan. Jack drew out the suck before letting go with a smack. Jamie panted over Jack’s neck, hands shaking in Jack’s hair.

After a moment Jamie’s hands firmly directed Jack back up to continue kissing. The kiss was bumpier because Jamie was blindly removing Jack’s scarf. Once that was gone, Jamie latched onto Jack’s pulse point and sucked. Jack felt a hand grab his behind and squeeze, lifting him onto the balls of his feet. Jack pressed into Jamie as the sucking strengthened, accidentally sending ice down Jamie’s back when Jamie bit him.

Jamie loosened his grip on Jack, who decided it was his turn again. Jack grabbed the jacket zipper to finish unwrapping his present. His first light was all his. Jack had reintroduced himself to the taste of Jamie’s skin, what other things could he sample? The zipper purred as Jack descended along with it.

“Wait, Jack, look at me.”

Jack did, pausing on his knees. He could feel the warmth of Jamie’s hard-on against his chest. Jack frowned, something about Jamie’s expression was wrong. His joy had cooled dramatically from the heat they’d been enjoying.

Jack flashed his most winsome grin, “Oh? Not sure that’s a good idea. I probably should keep my eye on the prize.”

“Jack, do you feel like you did at New Year’s?”

“Yeah. *Giddy* that I’m close to you again.”

“Stand up Jack.”

“I don’t wanna.”

Jamie squatted briefly, and lifted Jack under the armpits, huffing, “Up, Jack.”

“What’s wrong? I thought we were having fun.”

“Maybe, but you’re eyes are very bloodshot.”

“So?”

“And last time hickeys were followed by you sidetracking us to IHOP.”

“Yeah, well, I’m feeling a little braver.”

“No Jack, I think whatever glamour Eros put on me has caught you again.”

“I’m not mortal, I’m fine.”

“*Also*, an empty scout hall just isn’t setting the mood for me. Especially with a crowd of kids just outside.”

Jack flinched, and rubbed his face. “Oh, right.”
The kids would definitely be listening with their ears to the door. If not trying to look through the windows. Jack shuddered.

Jack bounced up onto his tip-toes and pecked Jamie on the nose. He spun himself out of their embrace towards the door.

“Given my unusual lack of mischief related vigilance, I’m gonna have to agree. Which is annoying. Even if it is just magnifying what I actually feel,” said Jack, throwing a wink over his shoulder, and dragging Jamie along with him, “Now, we should show you off to the kids, and send them home. Then we can get the gang together to plan about how to deal with the pink bastard.”

“And while we’re waiting we can talk about dealing with the glamour. ‘Cause your eyes were fine when we started kissing.”

“You flatterer, you just want me in your arms again.”

“Obviously.”

They reached the doors and Jack stopped dragging Jamie along. Jack grabbed him by the upper arms (hello biceps), and manhandled him into position. Jamie quirked an eyebrow but complied. A glance revealed Jamie looked a quite pleasantly disheveled. Jack pouted, but zipped Jamie’s jacket up to his chin. The hickey would be their little secret.

“Okay, it’s show time.”


Jack leveled his crook at the doors, and drew it back like a pool cue ready to bash them open. Then he rolled back on his heels and face-palmed. He raised a fist and banged on the door a couple of times.

“Step back everyone!”

Jack caught Jamie’s eye and whispered, “The important thing is that I didn’t knock some children over with outward swinging double doors.”

“Yes, that might’ve looked bad.”

Jack took Jamie’s hand and swept his crook in front of the door. A carefully crafted gust of wind blasted the doors open.

Only half the kids were looking at Jack and Jamie. The rest were looking back out to the carpark. Sophie and Cupcake stood between the crowd and the not-so-empty asphalt.

The shifting red-smoke figure of Eros was there.

“Oh heck no. Jamie, get the kids out of here.”

Jack vaulted over the crowd and stalked towards Eros. His protective fury coalescing into a freezing horseshoe of cloud between them and the children. This scene would not be child friendly.

He kept half an ear on his three adult believers attempting to coax the kids into being escorted home. Jack trusted them, he’d focus on the danger source.
“You are not welcome here. I told you. Burgess is under my protection. Stay away.”

“We’re not welcome here?” asked Eros, eyes wide in faux-surprise.

“No, you’re not!”

“But you and your paramour called to us. The tension of not appearing by your side was excruciating.” Eros arched its spine and shivered obscenely, before slouching. “And then he denied us sweet release!”

Jack reeled back.

“You were watching!?”

“Of course.”

“Not ‘of course’. Don’t do that, it’s creepy.” Jack shook his head, hoping to dislodge the images of Eros at the window. “And, any us between me and Jamie does not include you.”

“We’re lust,” Eros enunciated as if Jack were a child, “If you’re drawing pleasure from someone’s body we’re there.”

“And Jamie stopped me because he realised it was your curse mucking with my mind.”

Eros looked up at the stars contemplative, and ‘idly’ scratched its groin.

“It doesn’t make any sense. He had the one he loves on his knees. Why would he stop you from making you both happy?”

“Mindless lust doesn’t interest me.”

Jack glanced over his shoulder to see Jamie. His first light had a heavy dusting of ice crystals on his hair, and wisps of cloud trailed from him to the fog bank. Jamie was still in his mortal winter gear, but now he was armed. A dull grey wand in his left hand and something sharp poking out between the knuckles of his right.

The wary gaze Eros tracked Jamie’s weapons with confirmed what they were.

“We know who does,” crooned Eros, form settling into Jack’s. Except pink and red. It was not a good look. And he was not that short. It grinned his dare-you-to-join-me smirk. “Just think, you could have twice the fun.”

“What is with you and stealing people’s faces?”

“Like ah told ya Jackie,” drawled Bunny, emerging from behind a tree, idly juggling three grenades, “it doesn’t have a mug of its own.”

Eros nodded in Bunny’s direction but didn’t take its eyes off Jamie. It didn’t even react to Sophie dropping out of the sky on the other side. She bounced up into some martial arts stance. Sophie looked feral, teeth bared, hands clawed, grass forcing itself out of the asphalt under her feet.

“Life, how nice of you to join us. Oh, and your not-so-secret admirer, too.”

“Ah don’t suppose yah ready to accept a new Mantle bearer? It would save us all the hassle.”

“Never! We’re free!”
“And just how long do ya think ya can keep ya head together without a skull to put it in?”

“We don’t know what you’re implying.”

“Sure ya don’t.”

“Nevermind,” scoffed Eros, waving Bunny away.

Eros minced towards them. Jack raised his crook, letting it glow with power. Eros ignored it.

“Lover boy, are you enjoying my gift?”

Jamie’s poker face didn’t crack. Though his deadpan expression quite clearly told Jack what he thought of the ‘gift’. Judging by Eros’ pout, it had got the message too. Jamie wound-back his arm ready to throw the arrowhead.

“Eros, leave this place. Before I have to test your lead allergy.”

Eros huffed. It began to dissolve away from the ground up, its smoke blowing every which way.

“You can’t keep refusing us forever. You’ll yield to us, eventually. Hmm. We wonder how many of your admirers are out on the town tonight?” It cupped its hands around its mouth, and magically megaphoned, “Over here everyone! We found our pretty brown-eyed boy!”

Eros’ voice boomed across the park, echoing off nothing and refusing to fade at a normal rate. But when it did fall quiet, Jack could hear shouting and thundering feet.

“Time to go,” said Jack.

He wrapped an arm around Jamie’s waist — enjoying the way his boyfriend leant into the side hug — and swung his crook to summon the Wind.

“Where to, frostbite?” snarked Bunny, stomping a hole through the carpark asphalt with his foot, “Ya don’t have a properly warded nest.”

Jack refused to rise to the bait.

“He’s right. And,” added Jamie carefully, “we need to talk to Apollo too.”

“Okay. Fine,” Jack huffed, pantomiming his annoyance as required by his brand, “Did you get all the kids home safe?”

Jamie besides him was muttering some gibberish and tracing the seams of his cargo pants pockets with glowing fingers. Jack saw out the corner of his eye Jamie drop a two foot long arrow shaft into a six inch pocket.

“They’re fine,” said Sophie, hopping over to Bunny, “We sent them through Bunny’s tunnels.”

Jamie squeezed Jack’s hand, and added with a roll of his eyes, “Was about the only bribe they’d take to not see Guardian Jack in action. Even if you’d put up a big blank cloud.”

“Oh, right.”

Jack lifted his crook above his head and whirled it once, dismissing the already thinning cloud. The rumbling of footsteps jumped in loudness. Without the cloud blocking their view they could all see the dozens of people running towards them. Called by Eros to overwhelm Jamie.
“Definitely time to go!”

“Woo,” whooped Sophie, jumping into the tunnel, “Warren time!”

“Did anyone invite her?” Jack asked no one in particular.

“D’yah think anyone can stop the sheila?”

“Not us,” agreed Jamie, walking towards the tunnel, dragging Jack along. He looked up, “Cupcake, you coming with?”

Cupcake drifted down, sitting sidesaddle on the scout hall’s cheap plastic and metal broom.

“Nah. I’ll check everyone made it home safe. Plus, I’ll tell your mom you’re both staying over at my place.”

“You’re a lifesaver.”

“I try.”

“See you later!” shouted Jamie, jumping into the tunnel.

“Wait, Jamie! My crook!”

Jack was pulled down into the tunnel. Jack refused to let go of Jamie’s hand, and judging by his grip so did Jamie. Bunny’s tunnels generally made a fool of Jack, but the challenge of holding onto both Jamie and his crook was making it worse. He was spending most of the trip sliding backwards.

Jamie meanwhile was having a blast. As was Bunny, pointing and laughing at Jack.

After a few very bumpy minutes, they caught some air, and Jack took his chance. He twisted his body, and his arm over Jamie’s head. Succeeding in repositioning them with Jack hugging Jamie to his chest. Hooking his crook into his hoodie freed Jack’s other hand to complete the embrace.

Jamie turned his head and kissed Jack on the cheek. Before whooping as they went airborne again.

Jack cheered as well. Even as he could feel that tell-tale heat rushing up his cheeks and over his ears. He’d missed doing stupid adrenaline stuff with Jamie.

The tunnel enlarged and smoothed as they got closer to the Warren, the light at the end of the tunnel growing brighter too.

Jack and Jamie hollered together as the last incline of the tunnels threw them towards the Warren. During the weightless moment at the peak, Jack remembered that Jamie required softer landings.

Jack slipped out of gravity’s grip, and shifted Jamie into a bridal carry. Jamie giggled and ‘swooned’ in Jack’s arms as they drifted down. Jamie peeked out from under his arm to wink at Jack.

Applause greeted their touch-down. And a wolf whistle.

Jack broke his staring contest with Jamie, to see that Sophie wasn’t alone. Joining her in playing ‘welcoming party’ was Apollo. His obnoxious kimono had far too many yellow suns and black ravens.

“Alright, alright, let’s get this chinwag going then. Who wants a cuppa?”
“Oh, do you have that, like, pink stuff?”

Bunny ambled off towards his little home, Apollo bouncing after him.

“Ah do, but yah drink it faster than that plant grows.”

“Are you going to carry me all the way to Bunny’s cottage?”

Jack looked down and grinned at Jamie. The mortal looked so comfortable and right in his arms. Jamie didn’t look inclined to leave, just fiddling with one of Jack’s hoodie tassels.

“Maybe I will.”

“So…” Sophie’s drawn out tone and inflection asking a lot of questions, but she settled for one, “You two are back together?”

Jamie reached out and flicked her on the nose.

“Don’t act like you weren’t eavesdropping earlier in the street.”

“Well I’m glad. Jack got really mopey without you.”

“You weren’t meant to tell him that.”

“Yeah Sophie,” agreed Jamie, “You’re only meant to tell us good things about ourselves. Our egos are fragile, we need reassurance.”

“No, you two are idiots and perfect for each other. I’m going to go talk to Bunny.”

Sophie sprinted off, bouncing of the warren’s hills and statues to quickly catch up to her favourite Guardian.

Jack just kept walking. There was a lot to talk about but in the peaceful Warren there wasn’t any push to do so. Instead he just enjoyed the sights — both the landscaping and the boy in his arms.

Jamie reached up and brushed a thumb across Jack’s cheek, his face alight with joy and fondness. The mortal’s living warmth igniting more of Jack’s blush.

“Sorry I made you mope. But I’m back now. And I don’t plan on going away.”

“I know. Also, if you thought I was clinging after the stunt with the dragon, you don’t know anything.”

“Jack you literally haven’t put me down for the last five minutes.”

“Yeah, well. This is just the beginning.”

“Well, I don’t want the first threshold you bridal carry me across to be Bunny’s front door, so you’re gonna have to put me down.”


“Did you just propose?”

“Not if that’s how you’re gonna react I didn’t,” grumbled Jamie as he got to his feet.
Jack retracted his pointer figure, but wasn’t sure what to do. He really would like to grab Jamie back up in both arms, but well, he might have lost the right to do that.

“Sorry..?”

Jamie rolled his eyes. “You’re forgiven. Now stay still.”

Jamie reached around Jack with one hand, but didn’t pull him into a hug. Instead Jack’s hoodie shifted as Jamie unhitched his crook and brought it around. Jamie’s other hand trailed down Jack’s front, to hold the hoodie pouch open wide. A quick movement later, and Jack’s crook was hidden away.

“All better.” Jamie grinned, holding hands with Jack. “Now, do you want to walk arms around each other or piggybacking?”

Jack muted his smile, stood up straight, and looked down his nose at Jamie. His boyfriend didn’t appear swayed by Jack’s serious expression.

“We are mature adults, capable of arriving at a meeting with our colleagues in respectable fashion. What do you think?”

“Watch your head!”

Jack ducked his head, and cuddled closer to Jamie’s back. There was hardly a need to. Bunny was a tall guy, and had plenty of space to carve out for his warren. But well, Jack said he was going to be clingy, so koala time.

Jamie giggled as Jack puffed air across the back of his ears.

“Oh look what the cat brought in, take a seat yah drongos.”

Bunny was nursing two kettles (one big, one small) on the stove with a serious — even by Bunny standards — expression. On the kitchen bench was an eclectic collection of different cups and mugs. Jack recognised one as crafted just for him. Which was nice. The painted World’s #1 Jackaroo* was less nice.

Sophie and Apollo were already seated, arguing about magical girl anime. Jamie approached the table and halted with a thoughtful hum. Jack saw the issue — individual chairs spaced apart as per the normal rules of interior decorating. Jack sighed and released his koala grip, sliding down to stand on his own to two feet.

Jamie took off his jacket, hung it over the back of his seat and sat. He seemed unfairly amused at Jack’s indecision about whether to sit where he was ‘meant’ to or just settle in Jamie’s lap. Bunny meanwhile in the background looked like he was just daring Jack to be Jack.

So Jack did just that, dropping into sideways Jamie’s lap and resting his feet on ‘his’ chair.

“Oh, you’re going to be one of those couples.”

“Sorry not sorry sis. And don’t act like you weren’t intently match-making us.”

Bunny forestalled the sibling argument, by plonking a tray of mugs and carrot cake on the table. Bunny then served everyone their personal cups. A chipped and repaired child’s fairy tea cup for Sophie. Apollo got a one-person tea pot and handle-less cup, with ornate golden lines on white.
Another shiny mug, but glitter on black, for Jamie.

Bunny feint-placed Jack’s mug in front of him, before setting it down on the coaster in front of the seat he wasn’t sitting in.

Jack huffed. For extra insult, Bunny had left the *for a seppo side facing him. Jack leant forward and could just reach it to pull it towards him. Bunny might have made a mildly insulting mug, but he made good tea.

“So if we’re gonna have a war meeting, ah suppose we check everyone’s up to speed.”

“Yeah, like, what actually happened the night Cupid went cray-cray?”

“We had just completed my task for the week when Cupid teleported us away from Jack, back to my room…”

Jamie recounted his last couple of weeks, but Jack only half listened to Jamie’s words. There was much more being channeled through what wasn’t said, through the tightening of his grip around Jack, and in the whirl of emotions under his skin. Jack didn’t miss that Jamie was skirting around sharing anything like the angsty screaming confessions he’d delivered.

“…and then with Jack’s help I removed the arrow. And we found Eros outside.”

“Wait! How did you, like, deal with lead arrow so fast?”

“Well, I guess we need to go back a bit. When I felt the arrow poisoning me, I tried putting myself in a magical coma.”

“Heh,” snorted Sophie into her tea, “Like Snow White waiting for Jack’s TLK?”

“I guess,” Jamie sighed, throwing a piece of carrot cake at Sophie. “I didn’t plan for me to wake up and stop Believing. So most of me had to deal with the waking world without my memories of the spirit world. The bit of me that Believed was reduced to a mostly ignored conscience.

“Dealing with it so fast was mostly luck. Attempting to hide from the curse meant there was a bit of me not affected, so I was able to reciprocate True Love’s Kiss if it happened. And I know a lot of people who loved me even if I was being prickly.”

“Prickly?” mocked Sophie, “Try cliche moody teen.”

Jamie continued over her, “And Cupid fractured the arrow’s magic by using it to ban seven things. But unevenly. He really didn’t want me and Jack together. So I could just start with non-romance non-sexual loves like family and friends first.

“By the time we went bowling today, I’d already cured four of seven. Jack provided the last three, forcing the arrow out of me.”

“Okay, but as your, like, godly doctor, I want to give you a check up.”

“Yeah, and dealing with the other curse.” Jamie waved Apollo sit back down, and hugged Jack tight.

“But later, I’m comfy right now.

“Jamie’s been talking for a while, so maybe we should catch him up on what we’ve been doing?”

“Like what,” huffed Bunny, “I’m behind sched—”
“Tadashi and I went on a date! Oh, and Solstice worked out! You were right, I was ranting to, like, the wrong person! Hiro took surprisingly little convincing…”

Apollo prattling was nice soothing nonsense to ignore while they drank their tea. His gesturing with a cup of boiling water was a tad concerning though. After a little while Jamie lifted his head out of Jack’s hair and even started nodding along.

“…but yeah, Hiro thinks I’m a super, but not a god. Which kinda sucks. Still haven’t cracked Tadashi either. And like, Aunt Cass gave the scariest ‘don’t you hurt my babies’ speech. Like, would’ve done Demeter proud.”

“Ah think that’s enough yakking yah wog. We should get back on topic. How’re we gonna deal with Eros?”

“Like, there’s been some hiccups, but like, my plan can still work. You’re the rightful heir to the Mantle. You were, like, trained and then tested. I mean, trial by combat is probably, like, thematically questionable. But all’s fair in love and war, right?”

Jamie’s eyes were narrowed and his brow furrowed. His eyes flickered across something only he could see.

“Not right,” Jamie disagreed, “Besides, if that were the case, I’d already have the Mantle. Eros is free, how was it bound in the past?”

“Like, the original mortal to bind Eros didn’t really tame it. He was, like, a sex addict, just travelling around, trying as many, like,” Apollo made an obscene knot with his fingers, “experiences as he could. He caught Eros’ attention and they had like a friends with benefits thing going for a while.

“The tale I was told by a later Cupid was that one night they had sex and became ‘one flesh’. But after a while it became like obvious the mortal’s self was disappearing. So that’s how it went for a while. Some new sexual hedonist would seduce what was left of the previous Eros, they’d blend, sometimes take up the name Anteros. But, like, Eros would always eventually consume them.

“We tried to divide and conquer Eros with the Erotes but it didn’t take. After a while they just fell for each other and, like, merged.

“My nephew — the first Cupid — was the first to be a, like, stable Mantle bearer. And it was, like, an accident! He was just a demi-god willing to take Eros’ power for a few extra decades of life. But then the whole Psyche affair happened, and he found his true love.”

Jamie snorted. “Don’t act like your oracle wasn’t involved.”

“Hush. Anyway! With the power of true love, Cupid was able to resist losing himself. Then our pantheon started losing belief and, like, Psyche grew old and died. Grief-stricken, Cupid found a successor in the Saint Valentine, said his goodbyes and went to join his wife in Hades.”

“Ah don’t think we can wait for Eros to find some new shag, even if there are billions of ya these days.”

“Plus, it doesn’t sound like it would be anyone responsible,” said Jack.

“And your a real paragon of virtue Snowball, aren’t ya? Oi!”

Bunny got a piece of carrot cake to the nose for that comment.
“Behave, Bunny,” ordered Sophie, taking a regal sip of her tea, while brushing crumbs off her fingers.

“Back on topic,” said Jamie, “what do think I should do?”

“Yah still got the lead arrow? The red bastard looked pretty wary of them.”

“Right here.”

Jamie retrieved the broken lead arrow shaft and head from his pockets, and placed them on the table. The dull grey was heavy on the eye, and Jack’s joy-dar hated it. He wanted the pieces gone. Or just to hiss at them. But he made do with ignoring them.

“Yeah! You could, like, still defeat Eros with the arrow. After you fix it. You can even, like, use my bow! Weaken it so you could take its Mantle.”

Jamie hummed, and declared, “No. That’s a terrible idea. Putting a lead arrow of aversion and hatred into the embodiment of the planet’s sexual desire?

“But Sandy’s advice was similar. He was coaching me to craft some new golden arrows out of positive ideals.”

“Oooo, can we see?” Sophie braced her palms on the table and leant over as if Jamie was hiding a quiver beside him or something.

“I guess.”

Jamie shrugged and reached over his shoulder. A light flashed behind him, and he pulled a quiver from nowhere. He gently poured its contents out. A bundle of golden arrow shafts and a dozen arrow heads spilled out. Not a single arrow was fully finished.

“Oh, I knew I was right about you, little light. Golden arrows would still be, like, poetic.”

The others at the table started picking up the pieces and examining them. Reading whatever was inscribed on them, or trying to join them together.

Jack was more interested in Jamie mumbling indistinctly to himself. His chocolate eyes were distant again, as Jamie mulled over things.

Jack was the only one watching to see Jamie’s eyes spark as he reached a conclusion. Jamie’s gaze refocused on Jack and he grinned. Jack’s face flushed and if he wasn’t securely in Jamie’s arms he might have fallen out of the chair.

“I think I know what we need to do,” whispered Jamie, leaning up close. “I love you.”

Kissing Jamie was still awesome. The strain of twisting when Jack was sitting on Jamie’s thigh wasn’t. Jack turned in Jamie’s lap, sitting ‘backwards’ but importantly facing Jamie.

Jack didn’t have much experience, but it was all with Jamie. They were quickly lost in nibbling on each other’s lips and curling tongues together. Hands wandered, searching for the best grip to pull them even closer.

Jack smirked into the kiss. Their embrace was placing delightful pressure on his dick, trapped in between them. He should return the favour. Jack hooked his heels around their chair’s legs, and ground down. Jamie moaned and bliss poured through his lips into Jack.
Something bopped Jack on the back of the head.

“Really guys? Get a room.”

Jack broke the kiss without letting go of Jamie. He twisted his neck and looked across the table to see Sophie ready with another lump of carrot cake. Jack squeaked when Jamie caressed his ears.

“Damn, you’re all red again,” said Jamie, who was plenty red himself, “We really need to get this glamour thing sorted out. Off you get.”

Jack whined but complied, shifting into the chair manners said he should’ve been using this whole time. He reached across the table, out of his seat, and swiped the last slice of carrot cake. Jack threw himself back into his seat and sulkily chomped on his consolation.

“Drama queen,” Jamie chuckled, before standing, “I suppose it’s time for that check up.”

“Right!” chirped Apollo, toppling his chair in his excitement, “Do you want to, like, just do it here?”

“Ah do have a lab if you’d prefer.”

“I doubt this’ll take long,” Jamie said with a shrug, “I’m not bleeding or anything.”

“You had an arrow through your chest half an hour ago!” cried Jack.

“It wasn’t really real.”

“It’s on the table!”

“Look, I’m fine,” stressed Jamie.

Jack utilised his finest ‘I’m unimpressed with your decisions’ look. Jamie sighed. He grabbed the bottom hem of his shirt and just pulled it up and off.

Jamie was fine. And he was Jamie rather than some ideal figure. He had a nice amount of muscle. Enough that Jack could see the curves and cords of them, without so much that he looked like a cartoon character. Jack’s eye caught on the little things. (All the things Eros had offered to erase.) The small handful of hair between his pecs. (The constellation of scars over his heart.) Jamie’s cute little potbelly, that made the best pillow. The hickeys blooming wherever Jack could reach.

Jack had always been able to see what made people attractive — even if others disagreed — but it had never made him thirst before. Not like Jamie did now. Jack had seen Jamie shirtless before, but had never really thought much of it. Now though, he wanted very little more than to go back to kissing every inch of his boyfriend.

The worst part was Jack couldn’t be sure if it was Eros’ influence or not. Jack and Jamie had only just begun exploring this new aspect to their relationship when everything went to shit. But Jack had been pretty eager with the kissing and the hickeys. He just got overwhelmed.

Apollo hummed as he poked, prodded and hover-touched Jamie’s torso. Another piece of cake knocked Jack out of the possessive growl he’d been making. After a far too long short while, Apollo stepped back and gestured for Jamie to redress.

Jack was both pleased and annoyed. He wasn’t enjoying this irrationality.

“Okay, like, curse is not quite the right word. Eros just, like, covered your aura in its essence. So no matter what you’re, like, projecting, it gets polarized to, like, ‘I’m interested’. And, um…” chatterbox
Apollo actually seemed lost for words, “judging by that earlier… show, you should be aware, that you’re, like, affected too. Unless you normally make out with your boyfriends in front of your sister like that.”

Jamie’s almost faded blush returned in full force.

“How do we fix it?”

“I suppose a wash in a sacred fountain — Delphi, Lourdes, yadda yadda — whichever you Believe in the powers of. Like, that would be enough.”

“Does it have to be a fountain others Believe in? Or is personal Belief going to be enough?”

“I guess, like, water is water, and is, like, doing most of the work, like, elementally. So yeah, personal would work.”

“I can think of a place then.” Jamie clapped his hands. “Let’s review this meeting. Eros is free, and was only bound by accident the first time. And a long-term solution was also only found by accident. We can’t leave things to just happen ‘naturally’. All the advice I’ve heard is to use an arrow on Eros.

“My options are lead arrows and golden arrows? I don’t like those options, so I’m going to take a third.” Jamie grinned and Jack choked. “I have a better plan. I’m going to get rid of this glamour, and then, Jack. We’re going on a date.”

Well SIS, I suppose honeymoons don’t last forever. I’m sure they’ll calm down after a while. Unless they’re just doing it to rile you up. Who knows?

As a “professional” offering advice I must tell you not to resort to violence.

As a someone with no qualifications, and disavowing any responsibility for your actions, the squirter bottle sounds hilarious. I wouldn’t go for the foam bat. Too much chance of breaking something.

Happy kiss-blocking!

Chapter End Notes

Next: Jamie takes Jack on a date. Anyone want to guess where? Plus, a couple of discussions the couple should have before going any further.

Once again apologies for being 48+ hours late. I got nothing done on my week away (driving leaves me brainless). And then I was battling with this chapter until mid-Wednesday when I actually started listening to Jamie’s objections.

He basically refuses to head towards my previously sketched ending. Just gonna leave a bunch of threads and characters hanging.

When I started this story (way back when) the climax was something of a battle royale, with Jamie armed with the lead arrows. He’d realise in the moment that wasn’t a great idea and which to the golden ones.
But now. He’s got a better plan.

Next chapter is a date chapter and those basically write themselves!
Questions and Aquariums

Chapter Summary

Jack and Jamie are going on a date. Jamie thinks they need to talk. But first Jamie has to go take a very cold bath.

Jack keeps having difficulty concentration because of Jamie's surprises.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Dear Uncle Jack,

My boyfriend wants to drop out of his pharmacology degree to study animation and game design. He’s asked me for my opinion and I haven’t given him anything clear-cut yet. He’s smart, he’s got good grades and a good sense for pharmacy. But I can see he’s running out of motivation. I’m sure he’s smart enough to make animation work.

Anyway. I’ve been arguing both sides, and saying whatever he chooses I’ll support. And I will. We can manage whichever he chooses.

Recently he’s started pushing for me to make up my mind and tell him. I don’t know what to do. I think I know what he wants to choose. But sometimes I get the feeling he wants me to talk him out of it. Like he wants to be responsible but not responsible for being responsible.

What should I do?
Be a cheerleader or Jiminy Cricket?

“I can’t believe you almost choked to death because I invited you on a date,” grouched Jamie.

Jamie didn’t get a reply from Jack, only snickers from Sophie. The trio were walking from the nearest park to Cupcake’s house. Jack and Jamie were walking hand in hand. Jack’s was channelling his worry through fidgeting with his crook in his other hand. The streets were quiet and still, just the snow crunching under their feet. It was long after the town of Burgess’s bedtime — no windows glowed, and only a few streetlights shone. Far above the nearly full moon provided ample light to guide their steps.

After a couple more swings of their joined hands, Jack grumbled, “I wasn’t ready for you to be sultry.”

“Sultry?” the Bennett siblings chorused. With Sophie descending into further giggling.

“Shut up. And you didn’t invite me. You just declared it was happening.”

Jamie’s declaration of taking a third option had belly-flopped when Jack fell into a hacking fit. A frantic few thumps resolved that. It took many many evasive answers for Jamie to convince everyone
he had a plan. And that he was confident it would work. And that he shouldn’t tell them what it was.

“I’m sorry. Next time I’m ad-libbing a dramatic speech I’ll make sure to end in a question.”

Apollo had opted to check the future for himself. The god dropped into a trance — his eyes glowing, hair shining like the sun. He rambled about faithful ships, pancakes in the sky, and worker wasps. When Apollo returned to normal he grinned and started backing Jamie.

“How do I do this?” scoffed Sophie, “you said like twenty words.”

Jack just swung their hands a little higher. He raised an eyebrow at Jamie.

“I am sorry to have been presumptuous earlier, Mister Frost. Would you grace me with your delightful presence for a romantic expedition on the morrow?” Jamie flourished his free hand and pulled his captured one to his lips.

“Just let me check my calendar. I am a very busy man,” Jack whipped out his phone and almost certainly blinded himself. “Why yes, I think I could slot in a short afternoon tea tomorrow. Where should I meet you?”

“I do wish to show you the magnificent sights of the ocean depths, without getting our loafers wet, so to speak. And another treat afterwards, that I must confess, I have yet to make arrangements for.”

“Enough you dorks, we’re here.”

Sophie reached for the door, which opened before her touch. Revealing Cupcake, in a very fluffy dressing gown, nursing a mug.

“Shush. Everyone in, quiet. If you wake my little sis you’re sleeping in the basement.”

The trio filed in, but Jamie didn’t join Sophie in removing his shoes or jacket.

“Actually Cupcake, could I grab a few things from your kitchen and garden? Jack and I need to go do a thing before we sleep.”

The moment the door closed, Jack grabbed Jamie’s hand and started running. At first the wind blew in their faces, but quickly turned to lift them into the air.

“How are we doing this?” asked Jack as they circled above Burgess.

“Your pond?”

“My pond is not a sacred fountain.”

“It’s the most magical to me.”

“You sap.”

“Your sap.”

Jack groaned, but judging by the way they were falling towards the frozen pond, Jamie had got his way. They landed gently at the shore of the pond. Jack was tense and kept looking for intruders. Jamie couldn’t see anyone, but a level of paranoia was understandable.

“Okay, all clear. How are we doing this?”
“You’re gonna break the ice, and I’m gonna wash this curse off.”

Jack looked at the pond. Jamie frowned because Jack was frowning. Maybe he’d overstepped. Jamie should’ve just requested a lift to some other spirit’s fountain. But Jack’s pond was important to him. Jamie tugged on their still joined hands to get Jack to look at him.

“We don’t have to use your pond if you don’t want to. But there aren’t any kids here to get in trouble, and we’ll re-freeze it before we go.” Seeing Jack was still unconvinced Jamie pressed on. “I’m bathing not swimming. I only need to get up to my shins. I’ll be fine. And you’ll be here.”

Jack’s worried eyes hardened to a determined gleam. The spirit released Jamie’s hand and ruffled the mortal’s hair. Jack walked out onto the ice, and shifted his crook to hold it at the bottom quarter. Facing away from Jamie, Jack lowered the crook’s tip and twisted his whole body. He paused for a moment, crook just at the pond’s edge, and grinned at Jamie.

If Jamie didn’t know better, he might believe Jack was attempting a butt-and-boobs fan-service pose.

Jack released his pose, spinning back the other way. His crook followed, scouring an arc in the ice. Jack leapt back to the shore, causing the newly formed ice circle to rock. He slipped his crook under it, and flouted physics to lift it up flat. Jack thrust it out on the rest of the frozen pond.

Jack turned back to Jamie, twirled his crook, and gestured to the newly uncovered water.

“You’re bath, sir.”

“Thank you.” Jamie crouched and started undoing his shoe-laces. “Now, I gotta state the obvious. The responsible thing would be for you stand guard and not watch me wash away the lust magic.” Jamie shrugged. “But it’s your lake.”

Jamie left the teasing at that. Jack was a grown man, he could make his own decisions. Besides, the curse only seemed to really affect Jack Frost once they were already making out. Unlike poor awkward Jackson.

Jamie got undressed without any performance. Despite the heat on skin itching him to perform. He toed his shoes off, then tucked his socks inside. He took off his jacket, and piled everything else on top of it. Just like he was getting ready to go swimming or take a bath.

Jamie grabbed the bundle of herbs he’d thrown together at Cupcake’s. He waded into the pond. And swore.

It was cold. That shouldn’t have been a surprise. It was a should-be frozen lake in January. But Jamie had been walking around with winter’s blessing for years. Standing skyclad on the shore, he’d felt no different to someone naked in their own home.

“This is the worst bath ever,” grumbled Jamie as he continued. He ignored the laughter from the shore.

When the water tickled at the back of his knees, he took a moment to brace himself. Might as well go all in. It was too shallow to dive, so he had to make do with basically crouching and falling over. It was not dignified.

Jamie surfaced with a gasp and shook icy water out of his hair. Sitting on the pond-bed, water lapping at his waist, it was basically a normal bath.

His impromptu witch’s garden herb loofah was very rough and scratchy, but smelt nice at least. He
probably should’ve asked one of the girls to double check it for him, but he just wanted to get this done. So he’d just grabbed everything he remembered having relevant properties.

Jamie refocused his eyes to look at his aura. His skin glowed with seductive red. Channelling his intent through his loofah, it scrubbed one arm. Scratches appeared in the red, showing his true aura underneath. This was going to take a while. Jamie scrubbed himself thoroughly, top to toe. Scouring away the heat that had been sticking to his skin. He kept his back to the shore, trying to get as much done sitting down.

Soon Jamie had to stand to finish his cleanse. He did his best to be casual and not make a spectacle — one way or the other — of himself. Not that a guy scrubbing his legs with a bundle of twigs was all that sexy to most people. Thankfully the scratchiness of the loofah counteracted the icy water’s effect on Jamie.

Jamie got the last bits between his toes and waded out of the water. Jack was standing guard next to the pile of discarded clothes. The spirit had his back to the pond, but Jamie had felt eyes on him too much during his bath to believe Jack hadn’t peeked. Plus, Jack’s aura looked fairly guilty.

“Don’t look yet,” teased Jamie, before pressing a kiss to the nape of Jack’s neck.

“I didn’t look!” squeaked Jack.

“Really now?”

Jamie quickly dried himself off with magic. He started getting dressed, but spoke before he was finished.

“I’m decent.”

Jack turned around and crossed his arms. “You’re shirtless.”

“Yep. We need to check I was successful in removing the curse.”

Jamie could see amusement hidden behind Jack’s poker face.

“I’m not sure if it’s kissing or hickeys that were causing it to affect you, so…”

“Jamie this is the most long-winded request for a make-out session ever.”

Jamie draped his arms over Jack’s shoulders, bringing their faces close.

“But you’ll help me, right?”

“Of course.”

A while later Jack and Jamie had very bruised lips, and a couple new hickeys each. But no bloodshot eyes, and no cursed urge to continue. Things might have carried on, if Jamie hadn’t taken a massive yawn.

“Right,” said Jack with a clap, “Bedtime.”

Jamie wasn’t given time to argue — and barely enough time to grab his still not donned shirt and jacket — before Jack swept them up into the sky.

They landed in Cupcake’s back garden. They skulked their way up the path to the unlocked door and through to the living room.
“That couch is going to be snug,” whispered Jack.

Jamie had to agree. But he was tired, so he’d couldn’t bring himself to care. It took most of his energy to not be a total slob about leaving his shoes and jeans wherever they fell. Jamie flopped down on the couch, and wriggled as close to the back as he could. He looked up at Jack and patted the cushion in front of him.

Jack looked down, and then over at the window. Jamie internally pouted. He just got his boyfriend back, he didn’t want to spend the night alone.

Jamie let out a sleepy cheer when Jack propped his crook in a corner and hung his hoodie off it.

Jack chuckled and crouched down to give Jamie quick kiss. Then he rolled onto the couch as well.

“Good night, sweet dreams, love you,” Jamie mumbled into Jack’s nape.

“Love you too.”

The couch was too small, even with them spooning together. So Jamie had to hold Jack tight lest he fall off. Jack didn’t seem to mind.

Jamie was woken by someone tugging on him. Or more accurately trying to steal something out of his grip. He just grumbled and pulled it tighter to him. His prize shook… with laughter?

Jamie blinked his eyes open to see white. White hair. Jack’s hair.

“Jack!” demanded a young voice, “Get up and play with me.”

“I can’t. I’m being held captive by a ferocious monster. You have to rescue me, Princess Fairycake.”

Jamie was awake enough to guess how Fairycake might decide to defeat the ‘ferocious monster’. He caught himself yawning and hammed it into a roar.

Just as Fairycake jumped off the back of the couch onto his side. Jamie’s death rattle was more than half honest. A confusing tumble of limbs fell off the couch, with Jamie somehow under both Jack and Fairycake. Who celebrated their victory and ran off.

“Honeymoon’s over?” asked Sophie, poking Jamie in the side with her toe.

Jamie groaned. He reached for a pillow. Maybe if he went back to sleep, the second wake up would be nicer. Sophie kicked him.

“Get up. You have a date.”

Jamie catapulted upright.

“You better not put Cupcake and my work to waste.”

That sounded ominous.

Jamie stepped off the footpath onto his home’s garden path and froze. Stumbling as Jack and Sophie walked into him.

“Oh no,” he breathed.
“What?” asked Sophie.

“Mom’s going to be insufferable.”

“Why?” asked Jack.

“She’s been telling me to ask you out for years.”

They both were overcome with laughing fits, leaning on Jamie for support. Jack recovered from his laughter first, but didn’t take his weight off Jamie.

“You don’t have to tell her. I haven’t made myself visible to your mom yet.”

“I promised, yesterday, that I wasn’t keeping you a secret.”

“Correction: you promised not to keep your love for me a secret.”

“Jack…”

“Fine, fine. But, you could fail to tell her until you’re running out the door.”

Sophie cleared her throat, “And how will you be buying my silence?”

Jamie considered his sister and what it would cost. He turned and strode up to the door.

“Nope. I’ll confess. Jack, you can arrive later to ‘pick me up’. Let’s get this over with.”

Jamie unlocked the door and held the door for Jack and Sophie. Closing and locking it, he turned and wasn’t surprised to see his mom waiting. Sophie was running up the stairs, dragging Jack behind her. His mom was leaning on the balustrade, arms crossed and toe tapping. Jamie could see her stern demeanour was all a facade.

Jamie’s counter deadpan was heartfelt. His mom was going to tease him forever, but maybe he could delay it. He held up three fingers.

“I’ll answer three questions now. You’ll have to save the rest of the interrogation for later. I have to get ready for a date with Jack.”

“You asked him out?”

“I asked this time.” Jamie lowered a finger.

“This time?”

“This will be our second date. Jack asked me for the first.”

Jamie’s mom began to ask a third question and paused. Then she grinned.

“Are you two using protection?”

Jamie heard Jack bark upstairs.

“Oh my god mom. That’s what you use your third question for”

“I’m not letting you upstairs until you answer me.”

“We’ve been on one date. Yes mom, I promise we’ll use protection.”
Jamie’s mom was far too smug, but she stepped aside to let him go upstairs. Jamie climbed the stairs and glared at Jack perched on the balustrade.

“Don’t say anything.”

Jack zipped his lips and threw away the key. Jamie walked past him and into his room, trailing a winter spirit behind him.

Jamie grabbed the handle on his closet and paused. He needed to get ready. He just wasn’t sure what he was going to wear. And Jamie could hardly do a fashion show to himself with Jack sitting right there. Or could he?

Jamie opened the closet and grabbed a couple of shirts. He faced Jack and held them up one after another.

“What are you doing? You’re holding up two shirts. Red one. Green one. Wait a second. Are you asking me for fashion advice? The flying ice zombie who’s still wearing the pants he died in three centuries ago? Don’t frown like that. It’s the truth. You want help? Tell me where we’re going.”

“It’s meant to be a surprise.”

“Fine. But can you tell me indoors, outdoors? Warmer, colder?” Jack frowned. “Will I need a tie?”

“You’ll need shoes.”

“Date’s off then.”

“Only for the first half. Family attraction, mostly outdoors in New York. We might get wet.”

Jack narrowed his eyes, and nodded, “I can work with that. Those shirts are too stuffy. Next! Too dark. Too loose. Too fluoro. Too seventies.”

“I’m starting to think you’re not going to approve anything.”

“I like that.”

Jamie looked down at the shirt he was holding. Just a simple, wide striped, long sleeved shirt. Jamie had probably worn it a dozen times in front of Jack.

“This isn’t anything special.”

“It’s very Jamie.”

“Okay, if you say so. I’m going to shower and stuff. Amuse yourself for a bit.”

Jamie grabbed his chosen outfit and locked himself in the bathroom. He looked at himself in the mirror and made a face. Jamie had shaved yesterday before going bowling, but he still had circles under his eyes from a couple of weeks bad sleep.

Jamie wasn’t normally one to fuss about preparing for a date. But Jack deserved more than a token effort. Jamie pursed his lips. He’d done a pretty average job of shaving yesterday, so he’d fix that. Jamie could do something with his hair. At least to amuse Jack before travelling by wind destroyed it. On the topic of hair, Jamie looked down. Should he shave? Had Jack ever said anything about body hair? Aside from playfully teasing Jamie that he only had a “cute little patch”? Jamie supposed that answered that. He’d neaten things up though.
Naturally Jamie’s mind wandered while he was showering. To Jack of course. They should go skinny dipping in his pond just for fun sometime soon. Jamie knew Jack had been peeking.

And now Jamie had an erection. He sighed. While Jack had been a fantasy before, now he was Jamie’s boyfriend. And waiting for him to return from showering. Jamie turned the water as hot as it would go. His version of a cold shower.

When Jamie returned to his room Jack was gone. He wasn’t in Sophie’s room either when he checked. Then the doorbell rang.

“Oooh, I’ll get it,” called his mom, her tone full of mischief.

She probably expected it was Jack. Except Jack was already in the house. She was going to be disappointed when it was delivery or—

“Jack! Oh, you look handsome. Jamie’s still getting ready. Wait, here he comes.”

Jamie ran down the stairs, just a little panicking about whether it was Jack or something stealing his face. Jamie halted abruptly at the bottom of the stairs. Before approaching Jack.

Jamie had never seen Jack like this before. Jack’s was not only brown, but the windswept rats-nest had been tamed. The hoodie had been replaced with a blazer. And,

“You brought me roses?”

“Yep,” said Jack, offering a dozen roses in red, yellow, white, “Just red seemed boring, so I got some colours for us too.”

Jamie took the bouquet and inhaled its scent. The shutter-noise of his mom’s phone camera ruined the moment though.

“What? Photos. I need photos.”

Jamie submitted to being posed by his mom. Jack did too, with a bemused smile. His mom wasn’t happy with them just standing next to each other — they were made to hold hands, relax with arms over each other’s shoulders, even a picture of Jamie dipping Jack.

“Mom, you’re taking this way more seriously than my prom photos”

“Well,” she said with a shrug, moving them to stand back to back finger guns at the ready, “We all knew you and Pippa weren’t going to work out.”

“Wow, mom. Harsh.”

Jack and Jamie escaped after a few more photos and promises to tell her everything. They walked down the street and around the corner, very aware of Jamie’s mom tracking them with her camera.

“Where did all this come from? Jamie asked, “And where is your hoodie?”

“Here!” chirped Jack, plucking it off a neighbour’s hedge. He looked both ways and relaxed, turning back to his white-haired self.

“And what are we meant to with it?”

“I don’t know, you can wear it? I’m getting cold looking at you.”
Jamie snickered but did so. He wasn’t going to pass on a chance to steal Jack’s hoodie. Jamie must have not hidden his eagerness at all, consider how much Jack laughed.

“Where did you get flowers, anyway? I took my eyes off you for like ten minutes.”

“Sophie and Cupcake had ideas,” Jack said with a shrug. “Where are we going?”

“New York, New York.”

“You heard him Wind, take us away!”

The Wind swept them down around the city and deposited them in an alley near the southern end of Brooklyn. In a city like New York it was almost pointless to try and be discrete about the supernatural. Everyone was too busy to notice something as minor as two men appearing out of the sky.

Jamie checked the alley anyway before dropping his veil. He turned to Jack, who held up a hand. Jack hid his crook away into the hoodie pouch that Jamie was wearing. It was a strange experience to see several feet of frozen wood get buried in your gut and disappear.

Jack closed his eyes, and his breath slowed. Jamie quietened his own breathing, intensely curious about how Jack made himself visible to mortals.

The change wasn’t gradual. Jack would just change from white-hair and pale to brunet and lightly flushed. The first couple of flickers lasted barely a blink, but soon Jack settled into his brown-haired look. Except, the trip had ruined Sophie’s work on taming Jack’s hair entirely.

“Now, remember my grip on this isn’t great. If you shock me I might lose it.”

Jamie pouted, “but I wanted the date to be a surprise.”

“Is it as big a surprise as still-arrowed you asking for a kiss?”

“No.”

“Okay, fine,” huffed Jack, “I’ll close my eyes and you can lead me to whatever it is.”

Jamie held up a hand, “First Jack, I have a confession to make.”

“Hmm?”

“I have an ulterior motive for demanding we go on a date.”

“Really?”

“I don’t like to just dump this conversation out of no where but we need to talk about boundaries and expectations. I’m assuming we’re exclusive and very long term.”

“Yeah, we’re best-friends now boyfriends. What else is there?”

“Our plan for the future, and to be crass — our sex lives.”

Jack spluttered and flickered back to blue eyed and white haired.

“Jamie! I said not to shock me.”
“I’m sorry. When we first got together I planned to ease into this over a few weeks, not just drop it on you. I like sex but it’s not necessary. But with,” and Jamie made a vague wave, “that I think we need to be clear sooner rather than later.”

“Damm red smoke monster. What do we need to discuss?”

“What’s a comfortable pace for you and how far, I guess. Anything that’s off limits. That kind of thing.” Jamie held up a hand to forestall Jack just saying first answers of the top of his head. “I didn’t mean to have this discussion in a New York alleyway. Let’s enjoy our date and have the conversations when they happen. They’re an ulterior motive. My main motive was I wanted to have you all to myself for a day.”

“Well I can give you that. But are you planning any other shocks to my system? No? Good.”

Jack donned his mortal guise much faster this time. Jamie got a brief glimpse of brown eyes before Jack dramatically covered his eyes with one hand and placed his other in Jamie’s.

“I am yours to lead.”

Jamie rolled his eyes, but obliged. Walking Jack the short distance to their destination.

“You can open your eyes now.”

Jack did and his laughter redoubled.

“An aquarium?”

“We’ve never been.”

“True.”

Getting Jack into the aquarium was an adventure in itself. Jamie’s boyfriend had very little experience waiting in lines or crowds, and once he got his hands on a visitor map he was bouncing with excitement about the exhibits.

They wandered through the indoor areas, looking at the tanks full of colorful fish. Jack refused to move on from any tank without finding every resident listed on the panel. The octopus kept Jack searching for fifteen minutes.

Jack and Jamie next stalled in the under-the-sea walk. The couple had settled in a corner, watching the show. Most of the crowd kept moving, from side to side and along the path. Few were still. The closest was a pair — the short blond signing eagerly to tall red head exuberantly proud of everything he was hearing. It was tooth-rotting.

“I think you’re beautiful but I don’t think you’re sexy.”

“That not a nice thing to tell a shark.”

“I was talking to you, darling.”

“Ouch.”

“Don’t be a dick. It’s more I don’t see anyone as sexy? Pretty yes. But I don’t ever feel the need to touch.”

“So, aesthetic attraction, check.”
“If you say so,” said Jack with a shrug.

“What about romantic and sexual attraction, then?”

“I asked you out, didn’t I? And I’ve had crushes in the past. On people who are nice to me. But I don’t get the whole sex focus thing.”

“Is that why you stopped us that first morning, to go for waffles? Do you not like sex stuff?”

Jack scratched the back of his head, and spoke more to Jamie’s reflection in the tank’s glass. “No, I just got a little overwhelmed. And, um, I wasn’t sure how the next bit was going to work. I was gonna do some research.”

“Oh really, research?” teased Jamie, bumping shoulders with Jack.

“Shut up. Not that. Just read some guides and stuff. Plus, I knew you’d want to have this conversation at some point, so I needed to work myself out. Then, well, everything went to shit.”

Jamie pecked Jack on the cheek and pulled him along to the next tank.

“I commend you for your planned preparedness. But mechanics isn’t what we need to focus on. Did you want to do more?”

“I did, I do. But I wanted to know the right words to explain it, because I don’t think I work like a normal person.”

“Jack, do not bring normal into this. You’re not abnormal. Maybe the flying ice zombie stuff, but that’s more extraordinary.”

“I give, I give, I won’t use the normal word. Anyway, I don’t have an ‘appetite’, I don’t get ‘hungry’ or ‘thirsty’. But I like. I’ve enjoyed what we’ve done so far. Kissing is awesome and you taste really good.”

“Jack, too much.”

“What I’m trying to say is… it’s not something I think about nor— most of the time, but with you it’s a lot of fun.”

“High praise from the Guardian of Fun.” Jamie watched the predators sedately cruise past above them. He confessed, “Just to be clear, I do find you very sexy. In ways that I’m too embarrassed to reveal before a fifth date.”

“Like kissing ice cubes?”

“Oh look, it’s otter feeding time.”

Jack quirked an eyebrow but followed Jamie. It was worth it. Otters are adorable. Running on their little paws, all bunching up together begging.

They continued through a few more halls before taking a break for lunch. The couple sat overlooking the sea, boxes of overpriced fish and chips in the laps.

“We’ve done the sex talk,” Jack informed the seagulls watching them.

Jamie choked and was rescued by a heavy thump on his back. After they were both sure he was fine, Jack bumped shoulders with him
“I think that makes us even for your ‘crass’ comment earlier.”

“Sure.”

“You wanted to talk about our futures? What about them?”

“The biggest question right now is should I even be trying to become the new Cupid?”

“Wait. That’s a question?”

Jamie stole a chip from Jack, “It should be. It doesn’t have to be me.”

“It doesn’t?” asked Jack, stealing a chip himself, “I thought Apollo was calling you ‘rightful heir’ and stuff.”

“I never agreed to that. Last thing I told Cupid was no. Three times.” Jamie tapped a chip against his lips. “I guess Cupid’s once a week sentence could still be in effect.”

“If not you, who?”

“One of the other love deities. Maybe Inanna? She’s back and building a cult. According to the letter her high priest sent you.”

“Wait. You think that was real?”

“Could be her,” said Jamie with a shrug, “But the thing is. Eros won’t be bound in a place or a prison, but in a person. Is me becoming a Mantle bearer, a host, something we want to happen?”

They sat in silence for a moment. Listening to the sounds of the gulls and children playing.

“My ma and pa would have different advice for you.”

“Oh?”

“Pa would get you weigh cost and value.”

“I get immortality but I might lose my self. Which is why we needed to chat. What if I becoming a Mantle bearer makes me unbearable? There are other ways of extending my time with you.”

Jamie was pulled sideways into a hug, Jack’s arm firm around him.

“I get it I see now what you’re talking about. But only now that I’m practising crossing back across the veil. When I’m like this, I can’t think of myself as Jack Frost. I’m Jackson Overland. I’m different. But I’m still me. If that makes sense?”

Jamie hummed agreement. Jack was different like this. His accent was rougher. He was more grounded. But he was still Jack.

“Should I be calling you Jackson then?”

The shoulder beneath Jamie’s head shrugged.

“It’s up to you. I’ve been called Jack my whole life. I was only called Jackson when I was in trouble.”

“And how often was that?”
“Enough about me. If I can stay myself after being chosen without my knowledge and living for three centuries without my memories, do you think you my brilliant boyfriend who has a plan is going to lose himself? Whatever your decision, I’ll stand with you.”

Their conversation lulled again. Jamie’s chips had gone cold, so he took to throwing them at the seagulls. And magically teasing the birds. Just a little.

“What would have been your Ma’s advice?”

Jack(son?) laughed, “Ma would tell you to flip a coin. You’d know the moment it landed what you really wanted.”

Jamie reached into his pockets and retrieved a quarter.

“Heads I take the mantle, tails I don’t.”

Jamie flicked it into the air, snatched it out of the sky, and covered it on the back of his hand.

“Which is it?”

Jamie sneaked a look.

“I think I should go for it.”

Jack smushed his remaining chips into a potato snow ball and threw it over out of the park. It bobbed for a moment before seagulls descended on it.

“What is your plan?”

BaCoJC

I’ve had to be my boyfriend's conscience once or twice (he’s been mine much more often). So I have a lot of thoughts about this. Too many. In fact, I’ve put some in a p.s. because they may help some other readers.

You plan to support him whatever his choice? Then do that. Tell him to chase his dream, and have fun. I can’t tell you to tell him to keep bashing his head against something that doesn’t make him happy.

Finally: I have received advice from an expert that: “pragmatic course of action (if he’s already collecting that sweet student debt) is to finish his pharmacology degree and use it to support learning-by-doing”.

Uncle Jack

P.S. Just as a first thought: we often ask these kind of questions hoping that saying them aloud will make our decision clear. Though I suppose if this conversation has been repeating then he’s probably past this stage.

P.P.S If he becomes a pop culture dictating genius could he make a version of the Easter Bunny who’s got a stick up his butt?

Chapter End Notes
Next: Where will the date go after the aquarium? What is Jamie’s plan? Will Jack approve? What is light-hearted date conversation?

One day I will publish a holiday special on the holiday. This Valentine’s was not it.

I had the date scenes (and most of next chapter’s). It was the earlier stuff that was like pulling teeth. And the Uncle Jack letter. Always the letters.

(Also I finally got around to seeing *The Shape of Water* so I’ve fallen sideways into a new ship vortex and I can’t escape. Guess which?)
Anchors Before Sails

Chapter Summary

Jack and Jamie finished their date and important talks. Jack gets his treat. Jamie gets embarrassed.

Jack wants to have some fun.

Chapter Notes

Apologies for sudden appearance of a bunch of props I totally could’ve mentioned earlier if I’d been a better plotter.

CW: glancing reference to past eating disorder

Dear Uncle Jack,

My boyfriend is in the most transparent closet ever. In fact, he’s come out to pretty much everyone. Except his parents. But I’m certain they know too. They know I’m gay.

Despite this, every time we visit we can’t say we’re dating. We’re just “really good friends”. This is the phrase he and his parents use, and they are definitely being a little sarcastic. I think I’ve even talked about my boyfriend “Rob” who is totally not their son “Bob”.

I don’t know why he won’t tell them. I’ve asked, but he deflects.

Frankly, I’d like to propose soon, and that’s going to be hard if I can’t tell my beau’s parents that we’re dating. Like, can you imagine: “here’s an invitation for a little get together, dress up a bit, you might want to have speech ready, but there’ll be cake!”

What is the ethical way of helping kick your boyfriend out of the closet his parents can see through?

Tapping On My Boyfriend’s Transparent Glass Closet

“That’s a terrible plan.” Jack nearly shouted, leaping up to stand in front of Jamie, “That’s not even a plan at all!”

“It’s basically a better version of what’s worked in the past,” said Jamie, hoping he sounded confident rather than begrudging.

“Okay, fine,” said Jack, crossing his arms and leaning back against the rail, “convince me this plan is a better plan than weakening Eros is some way.”
“Eros already has a weak sense of self compared to me. It’s not a person. It’s a hunger.”

“Then what’s to stop it consuming you?”

“The same blessings I used to break the lead arrow’s hold.”

Jack quirked an eyebrow, “You almost died, and for almost a month I thought I’d lost you.”

“This time I’ll be collecting them in advance.”

“So why aren’t we doing that right now?”

Jack stepped forward, reaching out for Jamie, more specifically his hoodie pouch. Jamie grabbed Jack’s wrist, preventing the sprite from retrieving his crook.

“Jack, you give me like half a dozen of them.”

“What?”

Jamie released Jack’s wrist and started counting on his fingers.

“Philia, storge? Amor, ludus, mania, pragma.”

“Is that a spell?”

“No Jack,” said Jamie, “They’re types of love. Basically English lumps a bunch of stuff together as ‘love’ and then everyone disagrees about how to pull it apart.”

Jack nodded along, and sat cross legged on the ground in front of Jamie. He then made a show of sitting on his hands.

“Okay, I’ll let you try and convince me for real this time. What were all the names you called me?”

Jamie rolled his eyes.

“I’m gonna run through them quickly as I think of them. Because there are so many differing opinions about what’s what.

“Philia is friendship-love and we’re BFFs. Storge is family-love and we’ve been brothers-by-choice for years.

“Amor is romantic-love, which I guess we’re just getting started with. Do you think our next date should be a candlelight dinner with a violin in the corner, or winning stuffed animals at the fair?”

Jack and Jamie held each other’s gaze for a beat before laughing.

“And I’ll get you two dozen roses all red next time.”

“And that would be ludus, playful-love. Attempting to get each other to blush, footsie under the table, that kind of thing.

“Mania is obsessive-love, and Jack you can pretend we haven’t both obsessed over each other.”

Jack ducked his head and waved for Jamie to continue.

“Pragma is pragmatic-love. It’s about choosing a partner for more practical reasons. Like we have a bunch of shared interests and I think we complement each other.”
“Is that all of them? Isn’t Eros one of them?”

“Yes, sexual-love,” agreed Jamie with an eyebrow waggle, “I didn’t list it about us, for a couple of reasons. We’ve really only just started with it. And it’s definitely not the point of our relationship. I was serious earlier, if you told me you didn’t like sex I’d be fine. I’d probably just do embarrassing things with the freezer while you’re at work.”

“You’d see another ice maker?” gasped Jack, leaning back in shock, “In our kitchen? In our home?”

“Yes,” Jamie deadpanned, “if I can’t have your white-goods I will have to turn to our household white-goods.”

Jack frowned, then fell back covering his hands on his face. “Jamie! We’re in public, don’t say stuff like that!”

“Anyway, what else is there? There’s self-love, philautia, which is pretty much self-esteem. So I suppose you can help me with that but it’s mostly an internal thing. Agape is the other big one, it’s selfless love for strangers, basically how you are about kids even before they believe in you.”

Jack had sat back up and was nodding along.

“Apollo mentioned Anteros?”

“The myths say he was Eros’ brother. He was the god of requited love, and went about punishing infidelity.”

“Okay. So you got a big list of types of love besides Eros. How’s that going to help you with your ‘plan’?”

“Basically they’ll anchor me. Think of them as armour I guess. I’m planning on enchanting some tokens with everyone. So I have something a little more permanent than kisses.”

“What kind of token?”

“Something sentimental, a gift” said Jamie with a shrug, pulling up a sleeve to reveal the charm bracelet from Sophie, “something like this. I was just going to ask people to hold it while thinking about me.”

Jack narrowed his eyes, and sprung to his feet.

“Or like this?” he asked, pulling a golden chain out from under his collar. Dangling on the chain were a few little pieces of gold-plated brass. A snow-flake, a candle-flame, and half a heart.

“Exactly.”

Jamie extracted his matching necklace, and offered it up to Jack. The currently brown-haired spirit enfolded it in his hands and scrunched his eyes in thought. Jamie bit his lip, Jack looked adorably determined. Jamie wrapped his hands around Jack’s, and closed his eyes.

Jamie hadn’t had much chance to train his magic since this all began, but he knew enough for this. Jamie didn’t want to change Jack’s emotions, he wanted to capture them as they were. All the types of love Jamie had talked about, but also Jack’s faith in him, the comfort Jack found in him, and so many other warm feelings. But also behind them, the fear of losing Jamie, the anxiety of screwing up. The many facets to their relationship which almost distracted Jamie from his task. Jamie wove his magic around their hands, pushing everything Jack was pouring into charms, imbuing the metal with
his love.

“All done.”

Jamie loosened his hands, and let them cup Jack’s. Jack opened his to reveal the now enchanted charm necklace. At the height of the magic, it had felt like furnace, but the necklace was only subtly different. The gold shimmered with a faint rainbow, glittering in their palms.

“Oh! Do mine!”

Jamie chuckled but obliged. He clasped his hands around Jack’s necklace and focused on his feelings for his icy boyfriend. How much he’d idolised Jack, how much he strove to help, how amazingly lucky he felt that Jack had asked to be his boyfriend. Jamie took all of that and alloyed it into the charms. He released the necklace and it twisted in the sunlight now rainbow glossed.

“There you go,” said Jamie, tucking the necklace back under Jack’s shirt. “I love you, so much.”

“I love you too,” said Jack, returning the gesture.

Jack pulled his hands back and Jamie followed. Jamie looped his arms around Jack’s shoulders. He leant in close, and tilted his head to lightly kiss Jack. A kiss which was just getting good when some passerby cleared their throat. The separated with a shared sheepish glance.

“Now what?”

“We could wrap up this part of the date and get to the extra treat I organised?”

“Oh! But first,” Jack declared, pointing across the park, “the gift shop!”

The frigid north Wind swept down onto a secret Louisiana beach. Jack and Jamie descended hand in hand. Jack landed lightly, his bare feet dancing across the sand. Jamie stumbled, lost his grip, and fell on his face.

Jack only laughed twice before hauling Jamie to his feet. Then Jack stepped back and spun around.

“It’s a beach. In the middle of nowhere. Where’s my treat?”

“Give me a moment.”

Jamie slipped off his shoes and socks. He glanced out over the ocean and shrugged, before dropping his trousers too. Jamie ignored Jack’s sputtering behind him, and retrieved from his backpack a little wooden toy boat loaded with treats. Jamie waded out into the gulf and gently placed it into the water. He turned away and whistled for the Wind to blow it out to sea.

“What’s that all about?”

“Turn around Jack. It’s disrespectful to watch.”

“Look at those picturesque, I’m not sure, marshes? Those are marshes right?”

“I suppose they might be bayou? I don’t know.”

“Can I look at the pretty ocean now?”

“Jack we can’t look until we hear the signal.”
“What’s the signal?”

A distinctive clicking whistle rang out behind them, followed by a splash.

“That would be the signal.”

Jack turned and squealed, “Dolphins!” Then pivoted back to Jamie. “Is the treat skinny dipping with dolphins?”

Jamie buried his face in his hands, rather than the ever so tempting sand.

“Our swim trunks are in my backpack.”

“Okay then!”

The whirlwind that was Jack stormed over Jamie’s backpack and left a trail of clothes towards the sea.

“The girls are gonna be annoyed you threw away all their work.”

“Don’t be a tattletale!” yelled Jack, as he crashed into the waves.

Jamie chuckled and stuffed the clothes into the backpack, safe from the Wind’s mischief. Jamie quickly changed into swim trunks and wandered down to the sea.

Jack was standing stock-still, water up to his knees, with two dolphins circling him. He was reaching out but never quite able to touch them.

Jamie waded up to Jack, and was herded into the circle. Chuckling at Jack’s impression of a kid frozen when they actually get a pony, Jamie took Jack’s hand and reached out.

“It’s so soft.”

The dolphin twisted away almost immediately. Jack began to whine, but the second dolphin nudging his hand made him squeal.

“Can you speak dolphin?”

“Can you?”

“My accent is terrible. Now, are you coming swimming?”

Jamie tipped himself sideways, falling into the ocean with a splash. He floated next to Jack. Jamie flailed when a dolphin nosed him in the side.

Jack snorted, but did a little duck-dive into the surf. He surfaced a little further out, and splashed at Jamie.

“How did you organise this anyway?”

“I know a loa,” joked Jamie, splashing back.

They played around with the dolphins until the sun was a hand above the horizon. Jack had overcome his shyness very quickly, and was soon doing tricks with the dolphins. Getting pulled along, using them like roller-blades, being thrown into the air.
Their fun came to an abrupt end when the dolphins carried them back to shallow waters.

“Aw, is it over?”

“I guess.”

Jack waved until the dolphins had leapt over the horizon and out of sight. Jack turned back to Jamie, and pulled him into a spinning hug.

“That was fun. What have you got planned next?”

“Well, it depends. Are you up to going mortal again for dinner?”

“Yeah, if you promise not to surprise me.”

“I promise. Can’t promise the others won’t.”

“Others?”

“I thought you might like a home-cooked dinner.”

Jack narrowed his eyes. “James Bennett are you using me to avoid your mother’s questions?”

“No. I’m use her cooking to bribe you into backing me up.”

“That sounds like something a naughty lister would say.”

Jamie shrugged, “Maybe you’ve finally tempted me over to the dark side. Or do you want to go out for dinner too?”

“And miss out on Missus B’s cooking? No way! Wind, take us to Burgess!”

“Belay that!” yelped Jamie, “I haven’t put my shirt back on.”

“Oh. Right.”

“And neither have you.”

“I wondered what that breeze was.”

Jamie paused with one arm re-clothed before deciding it wasn’t worth confirming whether Jack had really forgotten his own state of undress. Better to just get his own pants on.

After Jamie was ready to go back to civilisation he approached Jack and bumped shoulders. Jack looked away from the sunset and frowned.

“One last thing before we go. I’m not an idiot, and you’re not either,” said Jack, poking Jamie in the chest, “I can guess the steps in your plan you omitted.”

“What steps?”

“Jamie, I froze to death when I was ‘volunteered’ the Mantle of Winter. It’s not hard to guess the kind of things you might have to do for the Mantle of Sex.”

Jamie blushed and ducked his head. Jack was right. Jamie had been avoiding the elephant in the living room.
“I was hoping I wouldn’t have to do any of that.”

Jack lifted Jamie’s chin, and Jamie saw a soft smile.

“No, you were hoping to spare me worrying about it.”

“…Yeah.”

Jack leaned in to whisper, “It may come as a surprise but I’m really bad at paying attention to my magic theory lessons with North.” Once he’d coaxed a snort out of Jamie, Jack stepped back to tell the whole world, “Unless it’s the kind of stuff that appeals to teenage boys — so sex and death. I paid attention to those bits. So I know that this kind of primordial bullshit is probably going to need one or the other.”

“You’re right. I shouldn’t try for the mantle.”

“What? I didn’t say that.”

“No. But that’s where this conversation ends up. I don’t want to use sex to deal with Eros, but it’s likely to happen. And we agreed to be exclusive.” Jamie kicked the sand, “It’s like the cheating version of drunk driving, I might not plan to have an ‘accident’ but it’s totally my fault if I do.”

“Jamie, Jamie, back up a few steps. I’m not telling you to do not go for the Mantle. I think you’d be a great Cupid.” Jack held Jamie’s shoulders, ensuring Jamie saw the honesty in his eyes. “I know you, you were going to do this because it needs doing and you can do it. I’m bringing it up because if you’re plan went iffy and you had to do ‘the sex’ you would — you’re not one to leave something unfinished. But you’re also terrible with secrets. You wouldn’t tell me, and it would fester. Until I wheedled it out of you and we worked it out.”

Jamie gulped. Jack was right. Jamie had kept secrets from Jack in the past, which had literally eaten away at him, leading to Jamie’s referral to Doctor Joyce.

“So this is me getting in before all that. If the ancient magicks,” Jack rolled his eyes, “require you to do stuff, that’s not cheating. That’s saving the world.” Jack nipped Jamie’s nose. “I believe you can do it better than any spirit going for a revival way past their prime.”

“Thank you Jack.”

“No problem. Any other things we need to talk about? For real, this time?”

“Just what our cover story is at dinner. We can’t exactly tell my mom we went to New York City and Louisiana all in one day.”

Jack smirked, “I mean we could, let her imagination invent a lie for us.”

“She’ll guess movie and snowball fight.”

“Or maybe that we rented a motel room for the day and got busy.”

“Jack you are the worst.”

“But you love me,” teased Jack, linking arms with Jamie.

“I do, so much,” agreed Jamie, placing a kiss on Jack’s cheek.

“We can smooth out the kinks on the way back, Wind!”
“I take it back,” deadpanned Jamie, even as the Wind lifted them into the sky.

“Jack! Jamie! You’re back!”

Jamie’s mom ushered the couple through the front door before closing. The warmth of home wrapped around them, bringing with it the smell of deliciousness.

“Why are you so surprised? I told you we’d be coming back, mom,” said Jamie, kicking off his shoes.

“Bringing your new boyfriend home for family dinner on the second date is a pretty bold move.”

“That’s my boyfriend,” said Jack, with a single fist-pump, “bold.”

“Moving right along, what’s for dinner?”

“Meat, and more than three questions.”

“Doesn’t smell like it.”

“Okay, it’s not just meat. Jack deserves better than that.”

“You’re playing favourites again, mom.”

“Oh am I?”

Jamie shivered when Jack leaned close to stage whisper, “I don’t think she’s playing.”

“Well, you’re only her favourite because she hasn’t had to live with you.”

“Sophie!” yelled Mom up the stairs, dodging questions of favouritism, “The boys are back! Dinner time!”

Jamie’s mom pulled them each by the wrist to the dinner table, and sat them down. Thundering steps betrayed Sophie’s eagerness to pester them about their date. She careened into the kitchen, and into her seat.

“How did it go? What was Jamie’s surprise? Tell me everything.”

“Calm down Sophie,” said Mom, delivering dinner to the table, “Grace first. Then interrogations, beginning with how did you get together finally?”

“Final—”

“It’s Cupcake and Sophie’s fault. I told one of Fairycake’s friends that Jamie wasn’t my boyfriend…”

Jamie went straight to his bed and flopped face-first into it. Tempting as letting his pillow suffocate him was, Jamie turned his head so it didn’t. Upside was he could now see Jack sauntering in without a care in the world.

“That was mortifying,” grumbled Jamie.

“It wasn’t that bad.”
Jack perched on the bed next to Jamie and patronisingly patted him on the head. Jack reached over and grabbed something from behind Jamie.

“This however…” Jack teased, waving a box of condoms.

“Oh my god Mom!” screamed Jamie, turning back face-down to muffle it in his pillow.

A faint “You’re welcome!” drifted in from downstairs.

Jamie waved a hand blindly at his bedroom door, magically slamming it shut.

“Did you bring up to your room just to sulk Jamie? Because that sounds boring and not fun.”

Jamie tried to maintain his grumpy demeanour. But well, Jack wasn’t the person he was annoyed with. Jack was the person tracing cold designs on his back, and probably only seconds away from tickling him.

Jamie rolled over, and was rewarded with Jack dropping his back-to-white-haired head onto his belly. Jamie was half-winded, but now he could play with Jack’s hair. He’d call it a win.

“So what are you thinking?”

“We could netflix and chill.”

Jamie’s fingers hitched, “I suppose we missed a few movie nights.”

Jack’s expression flickered and he bounced up to retrieve Jamie’s laptop. Jack nestled in under Jamie’s arm, with the laptop perched across their knees.

Jamie lost the ability to focus within minutes. His fingers had found themselves in Jack’s frosty hair, and Jamie was hyper-aware of Jack’s breath over his collarbone. Jack had curled into his side and kept poking Jamie with his cold fingers.

“You’re not watching the show,” Jamie pointed out.

“Neither are you.”

“Would you rather be doing something else?”

“Maybe,” murmured Jack, nibbling the crook of Jamie’s neck.

“Message received.” Jamie reached forward, closed the laptop, and moved it off the bed. As best he could without jostling Jack. The laptop ended up falling a few inches. “And for our privacy.” Jamie intoned a string of Latin, causing the room to flash gold. “Now we can be loud as we like.”

“Privacy is good,” Jack agreed, swinging around to straddle Jamie’s lap. The winter spirit fumbled with his shirt before pouting at Jamie. “I’m no good with buttons, would you help me out?”

Jamie rolled his eyes, but obliged. He undid the first button, and leaned in to kiss at the revealed notch between Jack’s collarbones.

“Now, how far are we going?” asked Jamie, while he undid the next button.

“My whole shirt, silly.”

Another button.
“You know what I meant.”

Another. Jamie could see all of Jack’s sternum now.

“But I don’t know. I know that I enjoy you enjoying it.”

Jamie drew out fiddling with the next button, uncomfortable continuing without clarity.

“Then we’ll get to have fun discovering what you like. Because it can be pretty unpredictable. For exact opposite example, I hate touches on the insides of my elbows. Don’t know why. I just don’t. Back of my knees too sorta, but only if you keep holding onto them. Bodies are weird.” Jamie shrugged, and then smirked, “I’m not gonna just tell you what I like though.”

“I bet it’s hair related.”

“What?”

“Epic poker face fail. Also I think you have a fetish for my hair.”

“Jack, you are many of my fetishes, you know this.”

“But how do you like your hair being played with?”

Jack slid his hands into Jamie’s hair. Jamie suppressed a groan, and became aware once again how tight his pants were. Jack hummed, and curled his fingers. Jamie did his best to focus on Jack’s face rather than his hands. Jack narrowed his eyes, and tested tightening his grip making Jamie’s hips buck. After a moment, Jack tried again.

“You’re like a puppet.”

“Congrats on pulling my strings. Back to the serious talk,” said Jamie, tapping Jack’s breastbone, “I don’t think we’ll get that far, but I’m saying no to anything that needs prep.”

“Like?”

“Butt sex.”

Jack gasped, and fanned himself.

“Such vulgar language.”

“Hardly. Any other questions?”

“Nope. You’re the one with all the questions. I’m just the virgin.”

Jamie rolled his eyes, and undid the next button.

“I like this, kinda feels like I’m unwrapping a present,” murmured Jamie, as he undid the last button.

“Oh? Should I get North to wrap me up next time? Or jump out of a cake?”

“Cuffs.”

“Handcuffs?” Jack teased, holding up his wrists.

Jamie undid the last buttons, and trailed his hands up Jack’s sleeves to his collar. Jamie went to nudge it back over Jack’s shoulders, but Jack just shed his shirt. Gravity dragged it down onto the
“This isn’t fair.”

“What isn’t?”

“You don’t have any buttons for me play with.”

“I thought buttons were too difficult for you.”

“Arms in the air, smart ass.”

Jamie did as he was told. Jack didn’t tease him, just pulled Jamie’s shirt up and over his head before throwing it away.

“Okay, I’m stumped, Mister Not a Virgin. How do we get our pants off if I’m sitting in your lap?”

TOMBTRGC,

My guess is that if it isn’t well hidden bigotry, there’s probably some bet or dare you don’t know about that your boyfriend doesn’t want to complete. The other likely option is that he’s out of the grandparents will if he’s gay.

I’ve consulted with my brains’ trust and our advice is not to out your boyfriend. Here are some ideas:

- Try asking your boyfriend why again. Include that you want to propose but it’s going to be too awkward.
- Just propose. Maybe that’ll be enough pressure for him to come out. [my consultants disagree with this]
- A risky solution. Talk with his parents about the situation indirectly. Is there a sibling you could hypothetically be discussing? Maybe advice about bringing home “Rob” to your parents.

I hope it’s the bet and the results are hilarious.

Uncle Jack

Chapter End Notes

Next: They work out how to get naked. And then... well you should be able to figure it out.

Only partial apologies for keeping Jamie's plan secret from you in hopes of preserving some narrative tension. Though I think I've probably given enough hints in the comments for you to work it out.

Hopefully I'll be able to get the next chapter out before uni semester starts back up and summer is over.
Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!