The Golden Age That Never Was

by not_poignant

Summary

Soldier in training Jack Overland is approaching the day of his initiation, finally he’ll learn how to fight back against the living darkness and serve the Tsar and Tsarina Lunanoff. More importantly, maybe it will get him closer to Royal Admiral Kozmotis Pitchiner, Jack’s hero, champion of the people. If only anything ever worked out the way it should.

Notes

Please read the tags! Not everything tagged for is there yet (this fic will earn it's explicit rating though, you know me...), but I'm warning for what I think will be in there. Apologies for the title. Titles are not my strong suit. e.e
Currently choosing not to use archive warnings because I have no idea what to warn for, since I'm winging the story (much like I did with From the Darkness We Rise). Yes, this will be multi-chaptered. Can't promise regular updates, but I'm excited to be working with these characters again in new ways! A lot of this worldbuilding is based on stuff I headcanoned back in the SALverse, and it's absolutely not necessary to have read any of that. Sorry for what I do to the movie and book canon in the process of this story. Did I mention this is an AU? It totally is.

Also I think technically this is Goldenfrost? Because the new kids on the block broke down a ship name into a lot of other ship names? I don't even know. I just remember when it was all lumped under Blackice, so that's what I'll be calling it.
We Stand on Ceremony

Jack shifted uncomfortably in his ceremonial soldier’s uniform. Unlike the comfortable, workable one he wore in his day to day training, this one seemed designed to chafe and pinch. Just because the gold buttons were shiny and the trimming was pretty, didn’t mean that he had to like standing there dressed up like some toy that some kid in a creche would use when playing games of soldiers versus shadows.

‘Stop it,’ Jamie hissed under his breath. ‘We all have to wear it. It’s not just you, you know.’

‘Yeah, yeah,’ Jack muttered, forcing himself to stare ahead. His body was at attention, legs slightly spread, arms behind his back and thumb hooked over his other thumb. By his side, a decorative smallsword. It wasn’t even his. He couldn’t afford proper ceremonial gear, almost none of the uninitiated soldiers in training could. Everything they were given was secondary or tertiary hand-me-downs from soldiers that had been killed in the war. Except for his uniform. That held the starched stiffness of something new sewed by someone who didn’t really care about their job anymore.

He stood on a huge hanging platform of black marble swimming with gold striations that gleamed like stars. He, like hundreds of other soldiers, watched as attentively as possible as the real warriors – the ones on the opposite side of the platform – climbed a spindly golden spiral staircase to a gleaming smaller platform lifted by magic and engineering both. There, two thrones carved of goldstone, crusted in carbuncles, and the Tsar and Tsarina Lunanoff themselves. The Tsarina covered in so much embroidered red and gold fabric that she looked as round as a pincushion, and the Tsar in a many-layered suit, and a cape, and some neck-collar that looked impractical – he could have been decapitated and resurrected and no one would know because his neck wasn’t even visible.

Jack sighed, rolled his eyes. He hated the ceremonies. There was only one thing that made them worthwhile, and that one thing was nowhere to be seen.

‘Oh look,’ Jamie said, sotto voce. ‘It’s your hero.’

Jack didn’t move his head, but his eyes slid sideways and he caught a glimpse of Royal Admiral Kozmotis Pitchiner. Angular face and brilliant gold eyes – not that that was such a rarity amongst the Golden Warriors – and hair that stood stiff and slicked back, giving him a sense of movement even when he was standing still. The Royal Admiral approached the golden staircase and Jack watched, his heart leaping in his chest. All of them had someone they wanted to be like, to admire. Most of the soldiers in training modelled themselves on heroes long dead.

But Jack wanted to be like the Royal Admiral. Someone to be feared and reckoned with, who commanded almost as much – if not more – respect than the Tsar and Tsarina. His tall, lithe body made its way gracefully up the staircase. Strapped to his back was a sword that was not ceremonial, that had blistered through so many legions of Darkness that he was already legendary. On his exquisitely tailored black and gold ceremonial attire, were shining shoulder sleeve insignia. On both sides of his coat, numerous medals and badges, some that had been invented entirely for the Royal Admiral himself. Jack knew what every one of them meant.

He managed to hide his hero-worship from everyone except his roommate, Jamie. To his credit, Jamie didn’t mock Jack mercilessly, so much as playfully make fun while still respecting him. Not that Jack ever minded. Without Jamie, Jack would never have been able to see through even his most basic training. No one else believed he would make it.
'He’s looking handsome today, isn’t he?’ Jamie murmured.

‘Shut up,’ Jack whispered.

‘So fine,’ Jamie said.

A few other soldiers around them hissed in displeasure. Even though Jack and Jamie were talking too quietly for their lieutenant to hear them, the soldiers around them could still hear the murmurs, and were trying to be – as far as Jack was concerned – far too serious and sombre.

Might as well scrap the motto from: *To conquer fear, you must become fear,* and change it to: *Serious and sombre all day, every day.*

The Royal Admiral was up there in front of the Tsar and Tsarina, smiling politely, exchanging words that made the Tsarina laugh before covering her mouth with a heavily painted fan. The Tsar held the Royal Admiral’s hands warmly. They were like family. The formality of the ceremony was still present, but even from such a distance, Jack could tell that the Tsar pinned the new medal to Royal Admiral Kozmotis Pitchiner’s uniform like a father might give a reward to a son.

The Royal Admiral descended the steps after bowing deeply. There was polite applause and the sound of a single horn being blown. As soon as the Royal Admiral disappeared out of sight, Jack let his mind drift. He wondered what this medal was for? No doubt for recent services rendered. Everyone knew that their Golden Age was being increasingly threatened by the Darkness. Only a week ago, an entire platoon of soldiers had been overcome and destroyed by fearlings and nightmare men, and that hadn’t been on another planet, it had been right here on Lune – a place that Jack had mistakenly assumed would remain safe almost all his life.

Another person was now ascending the steps for a medal, a Commander Jack didn’t care about.

‘How much longer do we need to stand here?’ Jamie said, echoing Jack’s thoughts.

‘A thousand years,’ Jack muttered, droll.

‘And lo,’ Jamie said, making himself sound like one of their golden priests, ‘when the Darkness came, it was shocked to find that the soldiers had already fossilised from boredom, and so they defeated the Light.’

Someone next to Jamie snorted, someone in front laughed under their breath.

Not so serious and sombre after all, yeah?

Jack smirked, but refused to move his head. The last time he’d shifted and fidgeted too much in the ceremonial rows before the Tsar and Tsarina, his lieutenant had sent him for fifty lashes. *Fifty.* It would be disproportionate for any other soldier in training. But his lieutenant had it out for him, and that was that.

His back was ruined with scars now, because they’d even refused him the golden healing light. To teach him a lesson. Almost unheard of for fifty lashes.

Even the idea of looking sideways made his back crawl. But he still couldn’t make himself shut up, and none of the soldiers around him would rat him out.

*Here’s hoping.*

Minutes turned into half an hour, turned into an hour. Commanders were still walking up to see the
Tsar and the Tsarina. Occasionally there would be a burst of applause – the soldiers in training weren’t allowed to clap, so it all came from the lieutenants and the Warriors and noblesse on the other side – and even more rarely, a scattering of ceremonial music from a small orchestra nearby. Jack pretended he was meditating, while he was sure that many of the soldiers around him were actually meditating. After all, their exercises in stillness and inner focus were a big part of their training.

Jack had thought a lot of his training would be waving swords around and vanquishing foes, but no, a lot of it was literally just standing or sitting or lying still and listening to some priest drone on and on and on and on.

Jack bet that the Royal Admiral didn’t have to worry about those kinds of things. He probably understood – like Jack did – how useless it was to practice all those lessons of stillness.

Pretending to meditate involved daydreaming. He imagined himself stabbing the Darkness with his meteorite sword – not the grand thing that the Royal Admiral used, but something more suited to his size. He saw himself on one of the great space clippers, chasing down the cloudswarms of evil as the golden figurehead on the front of the ship looked impassively on. He imagined the Royal Admiral standing next to him, looking down at him with pride and camaraderie, putting a hand on his shoulder and then stroking down his back, just enough to be inappropriate. Enough to get Jack’s heart thumping hard in his chest, make his eyelashes flutter against his cheeks.

Inevitably, he daydreamed about other things that he wouldn’t tell the others. How many of them wanted to jerk off to their heroes?

Well, maybe not many, but definitely more than zero.

He was so deep in his own thoughts that when a deep bass thud shook the entire platform, he tuned it out.

The second thud came, shaking him like an earthquake. His eyes flew open. Several of the soldiers around him lost their footing. Jack looked around quickly, and the lieutenants looked just as confused. Across the platform on the other side, the Golden Warriors were withdrawing their weapons. The Royal Admiral had his sword out, holding it in one hand and pointing to the Tsar and Tsarina with the other, in the middle of shouting a warning, clipped orders following.

So many of them stayed frozen. This was the Royal Arena. Protected on all sides by the military. Perhaps the engineering helping to keep the platform in space was failing, but if that was the case, the magic would pick up the slack.

But then why would their weapons be out?

Jack’s hand drifted to the hilt of a smallsword he’d never used in battle before.

‘I have a bad feeling…” Jamie whispered.

Jack swallowed, because he could feel it too. They’d read so many books about it. It was even enshrined in their mythology.

First, the Children of Lune would feel the hair of their arms stand on end. Second, the Children of Lune would feel a cold sickness roll up their throats like an unwanted wave. Third, the Children of Lune would feel the icy stare of the Dark at the back of their heads and they would turn. Even if no shadow was there, the Darkness was upon them.

The fable that Jack had listened to all his life became a series of instincts. First his skin crawled,
then he felt nauseated, then he spun like so many of the other soldiers and there was nothing there. No Darkness.

‘Defensive stance!’ One of the lieutenants shouted. ‘A ring around the Tsar and Tsarina!’

‘No!’ the Royal Admiral shouted. ‘No! Leave a path clear, if you please.’

The Golden Warriors were flanking the platform at the bottom of the stairs, others already escorting the Tsar and Tsarina down the stairs themselves. The Tsarina herself was holding a stiletto knife in her hand, and the Tsar was armed with a rapier.

Another boom, this one even louder than the others. Jack staggered sideways. Lines of rank broke apart completely as several soldiers in training were shaken off their feet. The Tsar on the staircase slipped down a handful of steps before righting himself with a hand clinging to the railing. The Royal Admiral and the Commanders were all there, protecting their royalty. Jack withdrew his smallsword, Jamie looked at him and then did the same.

‘Oi! Overland! Get your sword back in your sheath and wait for orders! I’m not above sending you to the whipping stand again.’

Jack stared at his lieutenant, incredulous, sheathing his sword and stepping back, and that was when he saw it.

In the corner of the platform, where sculptures stood, Darkness was beginning to swarm. Jack spun and looked at the other corners, saw the ropey amorphous masses of Darkness beginning to separate and sprawl at every corner. Turning from a hideous, huge mass of blackness, to individual beings with hungry maws and empty eyes. They were surrounded. Another platform-shaking boom, and the crossing that connected the platform to Lune itself – a bridge that looked as though it was made of starlight – disintegrated and fell away.

It wasn’t chaos. Not at first. The Golden Warriors formed two circles around the Tsar and Tsarina, and the rest – including the Royal Admiral – launched themselves to each of the corners, unleashing their golden light. It looked like they would get the upper hand quickly. And since none of the higher ups were asking for help from the soldiers in training – and why would they? Soldiers in training couldn’t make the golden light that vanquished the shadows – the lieutenants were snapping for everyone to stay in place, hold still.

It felt so wrong. Jack couldn’t stand at attention like the others. Even Jamie was managing it, though it was obvious he was finding it difficult, swearing under his breath.

‘How did this even happen?’ Jamie whispered.

‘Complacency,’ another soldier in training said, and Jack rolled his eyes.

It happened because they were in a war. They were always in it. Jack knew that better than anyone. But no one could live constantly on guard either. Hypervigilance was just as dangerous as the living Darkness. It made people jump at shadows that weren’t alive, suspect the Darkness where there was only regular night. It dumped people into labyrinths in their minds and left them hospitalised and unable to function.

Shouting, the visceral shrills, shrieks, moans and grumbles of the Darkness, and then a scream as one of the Commanders was enfolded into black goop and disappeared. The south-west corner was overwhelmed, shadows oozing over the marble.

Another Commander lost as Jack stared on in horror. This was another battle between the Darkness
and the Light, and their lieutenants would just have them stand there?

Just because he couldn’t make the golden light, didn’t mean he couldn’t be useful. A meteorite smallsword could at least repel the shadows, even if it couldn’t kill them.

He sprang out of line and ran to the south-west corner, even as his lieutenant screamed at him, Jamie shouting his name.

But it was worth a few more stripes upon his back, wasn’t it? He hated seeing the Disciplinarian, but being alive to live through the pain of a whipping was better than just standing there.

The Golden Warriors around the Tsar and Tsarina had made an impenetrable ball of golden light around their royalty, escorting them towards small winged gableboats that had shown up near the edges of the platform that were least threatened by shadows. Evacuation by air was necessary, they wouldn’t be able to rebuild the bridge in time.

Jack saw several other soldiers in training join him, each of them with their ceremonial smallswords out, running in shoes too tight or too big, in clothing that swam or stifled. Lieutenant Ashnikov, not of his order, had ordered her own soldiers in training to break rank and join in.

Reading about fighting off the Darkness was nothing like the reality. Unlike so many of the other soldiers in training who were now balking and chanting hysterically to themselves, even turning and fleeing and losing their mettle, Jack knew what he was dealing with.

Knew because he’d dealt with it before. Understood how quickly the Darkness could take away the Light.

He didn’t want to see the look on his sister’s face as she’d been yanked away from him, one minute there, the next gone. He didn’t want to see it as he charged at the Darkness and drove it back with a tiny metal point, gritting his teeth together and pressing forwards where others were falling back.

But the Darkness evoked fear in everyone, and it shook loose memories in Jack’s head that he’d rather not see again.

He heard a voice he didn’t want to hear:

‘Jack! Jack, please! I’ll do anything! Don’t hurt me!’

The first three words had been hers, the last belonged to the Darkness that could – and did – puppet the voices of all loved ones. The Golden Warriors knew how to ignore it, but Jack’s eyes burned and he screamed wetly even as he felt soldiers in training around him get taken in, enfolded, drawn away. Their screams for help, their shouts of despair – would he hear them in the future when he confronted the Darkness again?

‘We are the Light,’ Jack whispered to himself, ‘and we do not fail. We are the Light and we do not fail. We are the Light and we do not fail.’

He felt a horrid sensation at his feet and looked down to see a nightmare man with its disfigured hand around him. Jack stumbled backwards into a falling soldier and turned around and realised that it was chaos, everywhere.

He backed away from the shadows and looked for Jamie, eyes wide, mouth open, sword swinging. In a moment it was like he’d forgotten almost all of his training, all of the formal movements. He only remembered instincts now. Only knew to keep the smallsword near him.
Absently, he picked another one up from the ground where it had been dropped by someone who wasn’t there to reclaim it. Two was better than one, wasn’t it?

‘Jamie!’ Jack shouted, looking at the fallen, the ones that the Darkness hadn’t claimed because they’d died before they could be overtaken. Saw bursts of golden light everywhere. Two gableboats rapidly flew away and Jack hoped that the Tsar and the Tsarina were on them.

Then the high pitched whine of an engine as North himself showed up on a speedy little hydrofoil, holding onto the metal sail with one hand and gripping his sabre in the other. He didn’t land on the platform but instead swooped beneath it. Another huge boom, and Jack realised that the bulk of the Darkness might not even be on top of the platform yet, but beneath it, clinging where almost no one would see it.

‘We are the Light,’ Jack whispered frantically, feeling like a child trying to soothe himself after a nightmare. ‘Jamie!’

The smell of blood filled the air, then something like char even though he couldn’t see anything burning. The golden light came again and again, and this was a siege, Jack realised. It was a proper siege. This wasn’t some small skirmish. This was- How much had the Darkness managed to infiltrate their planet? How bad were things really?

‘We are the Light,’ Jack reminded himself, before jumping towards an errant fearling that was harassing a soldier in training who seemed to have forgotten that she could fight back. She’d lost her smallsword.

‘Here!’ Jack said, thrusting the spare one at her, using his other to keep the fearling at bay. ‘Use it! We are the Light, remember?’

The soldier in training stared at him for long moments. Jack had no idea who she was. Their lieutenants didn’t like them to learn too many names while in training. Some years, hardly anyone passed the initiations, and a lot of those people were never sound enough to return to Lune society on the rare occasions they survived and had still failed.

She gripped the hilt of the sword and her eyebrows pulled together, her eyes narrowed and she allowed herself the smallest smile.

‘We are the Light,’ she echoed, and then she pushed herself up to her knees and swiped at the fearling with the sword. It fell back, and she stood up where it lost power. She pulled strength towards herself, and Jack ran off, feeling like he’d done a good thing, having no idea if she would live.

‘Jamie, where are you, I swear on the Light itself if I can’t find you I’m going to-’

‘Jack!’ Jamie shouted. ‘Jack!’

Jack whirled around and saw Jamie staring at him, surrounded by fearlings and nightmare men and then he felt his heart drop through his gut when Jamie disappeared into the Darkness. Just like that. One moment staring at Jack with a light of hope in his eyes and the next-

It was happening again.

Happening all over again.

‘No,’ Jack said under his breath, not even aware of talking as he sprinted towards the darkness. ‘No it’s not happening again. It’s not.’
Jack shrieked as he brought the smallsword down into the writhing darkness, avoiding the true mass of it where Jamie’s body was. The darkness recoiled, but dragged Jamie back with it. And Jack couldn’t even see him anymore, he was just a shadowy lump, and he’d die soon if Jack didn’t do something. He had to do something.

He stabbed again and again, but the darkness only flinched back, refusing to let go of its quarry.

‘Let him go! Let him go you bastards!’ Jack shouted, fury fighting with the terror inside of him. Above him, the shadows had formed a wave and were going to crash down on all of them. ‘Jamie! Jamie you hang in there! You hang in there!’

Jack swung his smallsword as viciously as he could, and then a burst of golden light smashed into the shadows. Jack stared at his sword in amazement, then was shoved out of the way by a heavy, brutal force. He skidded metres across the marble, looked up to see the Royal Admiral himself, a sword that should be used by two hands only held in one, and his hand around Jamie’s collar, dragging him back from the darkness.

Jack hadn’t made the golden light, the Royal Admiral had. Jack stared at him in shock, and then watched in amazement as the Royal Admiral tore Jamie free from the Darkness and flung him away.

*By the Light, he’s amazing.*

Staggering to his feet, Jack could think of nothing better than to fight by his side, especially when it was obvious that Jamie was alive and doing okay. Jamie was already pushing himself upright, he’d lost his smallsword, but he found another one on the marble and armed himself, offering Jack a shaky grin.

But as soon as Jack stood by the Royal Admiral’s side, he was picked up by the upper arm and thrown backwards, the Royal Admiral snarling at him as though he was not a royal champion, but a beast.

‘Do keep out of my way,’ the Royal Admiral snapped with a voice that was too smooth for the carnage around them. ‘I’m not a babysitter. I’m the Admiral.’

And with that the Royal Admiral moved on, creating the golden light and leaving Jack standing Shakily on the marble platform, breathing hard from everything that had just happened.

Jamie walked to him and leaned against him, and they both supported each other with their own weight, looking around.

The Golden Warriors were finally gaining the upper hand, but Jack thought that at least a quarter of the soldiers in training were missing. And the Golden Warriors didn’t look as fleshed out as normal. The orchestra was gone. Instruments cluttering the ground, broken and untended.

‘What a shit show,’ Jamie said quietly. ‘I don’t know if I’m cut out for this soldier stuff.’

‘Don’t say that,’ Jack said, looking at the Royal Admiral and feeling annoyed and…disillusioned. ‘They need us.’

‘Sure they do,’ Jamie said. ‘Maybe in ten years. But right now? We’re nothing more than a liability. Aren’t we?’
Jack looked around and thought about the initiation that was meant to be coming up at the end of the year. If he could just…prove himself enough to make it through to the other side. Even if he did make it to the other side, it would take so much intensive training just to be able to make the golden light. He was already known for not being the best, not being the brightest, and always being written up for discipline.

But Jack had passed a lot of the tests, and where he’d stumbled, Jamie had used his family’s influence to see Jack through to the next stage, and the stage after that.

Jack needed Jamie.

‘We are the Light,’ Jamie said, ‘and we do not fail.’ Then he sighed. ‘I can’t decide if my parents are going to be happy or really pissed. But I know one thing, they’re not going to let me leave.’

‘Yeah,’ Jack said, seeing that the soldiers in training really did get in the way, no matter how hard they were trying to help. ‘Guess not.’

‘I’m really glad you’re here with me,’ Jamie said. ‘If it wasn’t for you…I don’t know what I’d do. Desert, probably.’

‘Nah,’ Jack said, pulling away from Jamie and squeezing his elbow. ‘You’re no deserter, Jamie.’

But Jamie didn’t look so sure, and Jack wasn’t certain either. Perhaps the truth was that they both needed each other to stay in the royal military. Maybe it meant that neither of them belonged there.

‘He looked at me like I was nothing,’ Jack said, eyes finding the Royal Admiral and staying on him. ‘Well, I’m not nothing. And I’m going to prove it.’

‘That’s the spirit,’ Jamie said tiredly. ‘I think I need a healer now. Or one of the priests.’

‘What?’ Jack said.

He turned around just in time to see Jamie pass out.
Jamie was asleep in one of the healing beds, and the priest had left a few hours ago. Shadow-sickness they said. Not too serious. He’d be fine in a week or two, but no more training until then. And he’d have to ease back into it.

No one really knew exactly what shadow-sickness was, and it manifested in different people in different ways. In Jamie, it just seemed to make him weak and tired. That was how it affected most people. But some were driven to acute acts of malice and hatred and anger. Yet others would become catatonic, and never eat or drink or move again. So Jamie was lucky, they said, because he’d not been consumed by Darkness for that long. After the priest ran a gentle golden light through Jamie’s body, he’d smiled at Jack’s anxiety and explained that his friend would be just fine.

*Just fine.*

Jack stared at him and then drew the blankets up to his chin, and then drew them down again because he remembered that Jamie actually hated blankets that touched his face and preferred not to be completely covered. He resettled the blankets by his shoulders and looked around the creamy room, painted in tones of brightness and warmth.

He rubbed at the back of his head and walked down the corridor, still wearing his stupid ceremonial garb. There were quite a few others like him in the healing precinct, those that had been injured, or needed to be checked over for shadow-sickness, or were watching over friends or peers. In Jack’s pocket, a slip of parchment saying that he was to report to the Disciplinarian for ten lashes before the day’s end.

Even with the stupid war going on, he hadn’t escaped it. His lieutenant had it out for him. But then…he couldn’t get the look on the Royal Admiral’s face out of his head when he’d thrown Jack out of the way. Like seeing Jack there ready to fight beside him was like finding one of the spindle spiders on the back of his hand. He’d seemed not just angry, but actually revolted.

Jack went and stood outside of the building – a tall, white-cream stone edifice that stretched up to a golden spire in the sky. He walked around to the side of the building, a more sheltered place of overgrown gnarled trees with red leaves, and shrubs with flowers of gold and auburn upon them. There he stopped in surprise, when he saw the Royal Spymaster.

‘Uh,’ he said, eloquently.

Spymaster Toothiana looked over at him, raising manicured eyebrows. She raised the cigarette holder to her lips and then blew out a thin wisp of smoke. She leaned back against the wall.
was garbed in ceremonial attire too, though instead of the black and gold favoured by the military, she was in her own colours. Those of the Spymaster, blue and violet and green. The suit was a fierce blue, the tailcoat flaring out and embroidered heavily in lunar alphabet charms in iridescent violet. At her head she wore a metallic green earpiece, spelled to let her receive the communications of her spies; the Little Fangs. Or as she called them, her Little Teeth.

They called her the Fangs of the Kingdom. Whenever military offense wasn’t called for, she would be there, sinking her metaphorical teeth into the situation and tearing the jugular out of whatever might threaten them.

‘I’ll just go,’ Jack said.

He was surprised at the way she smiled at him, eyes crinkling. Then she beckoned him over, brown fingers ending in nails that were painted in a blue pearl and sharpened to points.

‘Hello there, little soldier,’ Lady Toothiana said. ‘Have you just been discharged from the healing tower?’

‘No,’ Jack said, shaking his head. ‘A friend…he’s got the shadow-sickness. Not badly though.’

‘Oh yes,’ Toothiana said, nodding and taking another drag from her long cigarette holder. It was made of jade, carved delicately. ‘I, too, am here for a friend. North has the shadow-sickness as well. Not badly.’

‘Should you…even be telling me that?’

‘It’s not a state secret,’ Toothiana laughed. ‘Lovely that my reputation precedes me though. That silly Nikolai pushed himself too hard to save the platform. But, he does love his inventions and machinery, so it was inevitable.’

Jack stared at her. North was the Engineer. The Golden Warrior that retired his sabres from the frontlines to make the very best ships and hydrofoils and engines and large scale weapons. Everyone knew he was the Engineer of Wonders, a good-natured but brusque celebrity. The soldiers in training could only dream of piloting one of his ships one day.

‘But he’s North,’ Jack said. ‘How could he get shadow-sickness?’

‘He’s had it before, my dear one, and he’ll have it again. Nothing to fear except fear itself, yes? You shouldn’t trouble yourself! And you? What’s your name?’

‘Jackson Overland, ma’am,’ Jack said. ‘But everyone calls me Jack.’

‘Jack,’ she said, looking up at the trees. ‘What a nice, solid name. You can depend on a Jack. I’m not sure you can depend on a Jackson Overland. You’re the one that’s constantly getting written up, aren’t you?’

Jack stared at her, and she gazed back at him. Her opalescent violet eyes saw far too much.

‘You’ve heard of me?’ Jack said.

‘Of course!’ Toothiana said, smiling broadly. ‘I make it my business to hear of anyone who sticks out from a crowd. Good or bad.’

‘You couldn’t by any chance get me out of a lashing, could you?’
Toothiana raised her eyebrows at him, then she bent down and stubbed the cigarette out against the damp earth. When she leaned back into the wall, she crossed one leg over the other. Her boots were an oily blue. If it weren’t for the fact that the Lords and Ladies of the royal and adjunct houses were even more impressively dressed, he’d think that she stood out. Weren’t Spymasters meant to be subtle?

‘What did you do this time?’

‘I fought back,’ Jack said, ‘against the shadows! I did what we’re supposed to do.’

‘Ah ah,’ Toothiana said, raising her hand. ‘What does the slip say?’

‘Oh,’ Jack said, and then rolled his eyes. ‘That I broke rank, ignored a direct order, ignored another direct order – I didn’t hear them – and that I…interfered with the ability of the Golden Warriors to function or some…crap.’

‘How many lashes?’

‘Ten,’ Jack said.

‘Little soldier,’ Toothiana said quietly, ‘it could be a lot worse. That many rules broken? On your record? It’s amazing you have any skin left on that back of yours at all.’

‘Thanks,’ Jack said, staring at her. She only smiled at him like he’d meant it as actual gratitude. Jack felt the scar tissue without even touching it. He didn’t really have much skin left as it was.

‘Well, my rebellious Jack, I’m going to get a move on and check up on North. I do hope Jamie recovers nicely. Farewell.’

It was only once she’d left that he realised he hadn’t mentioned Jamie’s name once.

He decided that as nice as she seemed, she was kind of creepy.

*  

There was no point putting off his discipline. Besides, he didn’t want to make Jamie feel obligated to care for him while he was still recovering, so if Jack did it now, then Jamie would be in the hospital and couldn’t do anything else except rest. And besides, ten lashes weren’t as bad as fifty, and they sometimes put a salve on the cuts afterwards anyway. When he was allowed, when Crossholt hadn’t put No Healing in big letters on the slip. He’d be fine. It’d hurt, but he’d survived the siege where so many others hadn’t, so he’d be fine.

That’s what he kept telling himself as he mounted the spiralling steps to the Disciplinarian’s tower. At least the lashes wouldn’t be public. That sort of punishment was saved for thieves and other criminals, not soldiers in training, even the really bad ones. No matter how much his lieutenant would love to stand there and watch him suffer.

A lot of soldiers in training hadn’t made it through the battle. Jack kept telling himself that he was being unrealistically upset, that the sadness and fear in his gut was irrational. They were meant to lose a lot of the soldiers in training. Less than a quarter made it through to the other side of the initiation! They weren’t supposed to get too attached. Not yet. That came later.

But Jack thought of all the screaming, all that Darkness, and he was struggling to keep his eyes clear of tears. Everyone else was walking around with their heads up, talking in the chants that they were taught, and none of it offered any solace to Jack. He’d never been one for the prayers and the
chants anyway. It wasn’t like saying them had ever brought his sister back, or stopped her from being taken away. Just because he believed in the power of the Light to vanquish the Darkness, didn’t mean he believed that words alone would stop the war.

The others clung to the priests and their words where Jack broke away. And he supposed that was some fundamental flaw inside himself. Because none of them were walking up the dark, damp steps with him. He walked to the Disciplinarian tower alone, parchment clutched in a sweaty hand, still wearing his ceremonial dress. He hadn’t seen the point in returning to barracks. Might as well get a uniform that didn’t fit properly stained bloody. Not his proper clothing.

When he reached the top of the staircase, he stared at the engineered landing and thought again of how the Darkness had stuck itself to the bottom of that platform. He looked up at the dark stone blocks making the tower and sighed. The walkway to the large arched door was wide, his footsteps dull. He knocked on the wood and blinked when the Disciplinarian himself opened the door.

‘Mate,’ the Disciplinarian said, ‘I really didn’t want to have to see anyone, today of all days. Why did it have to be you?’

Jack swallowed and handed the slip over. ‘Can one of your other servants just do it? Like the last times?’

‘Everyone’s off today,’ the Disciplinarian said. ‘And I don’t get a day off, because this is where I bleedin’ live, isn’t it? Come on then.’

Jack followed him into the tower, looking around with as much awe that had found him every other time he’d visited. This wasn’t originally intended to be a Disciplinarian tower, but a tower of Alchemy. But when E. Aster Bunnymund moved in, it became both, until finally the soldiers really only thought of it as a place of punishment. The reality was that the air always smelled metallic and sharp and a bit sulphurous here. There were always wisps of coloured smokes hanging about the place; violet and pink, red and green. The tall walls were splattered with the remnants of explosions, gouged out in some places, looking like yellow or silver paint had been flung upon them in others. Bits of lunar alphabet and lunar glyphs were painted upon almost every surface.

The Disciplinarian muttered under his breath as he read over the slip, leading Jack past all the rooms and spaces that didn’t belong to anyone else but E. Aster Bunnymund when he was an Alchemist. All the discipline was doled out in a wide outdoor area at the back of the tower. Jack remembered. His shoulders itched. He knew from experience that the Disciplinarian had a fierce and brutal whip hand. The saying went: ‘Ten lashes from him might as well be a hundred from another.’

‘Well,’ Jack said, ‘you know if you want a day off, you could just pretend you…’

The look that he was given was enough to kill the voice in the back of his throat.

‘Eleven,’ the Disciplinarian said. ‘I’ll add the reason why to your record myself.’

*Lunar Light, I guess he’s not someone to negotiate with then. Damn it all.*

‘Yeah,’ Jack said, his voice weak.

‘I told you last time that I didn’t want to see you again, didn’t I?’ The creature didn’t even turn around. He didn’t come from Lune, like many of the other citizens. He came from a distant planet of Phookas that had been destroyed by the Darkness a long time before. Refugees had spilled out into the rest of the world. There weren’t many of the rabbit eared alchemists left.
‘Yeah,’ Jack said, stepping down porch steps onto grass that seemed a little too cheerfully green to really belong to what was about to happen. His gut clenched and he looked at the wooden cross balefully.

‘Strip off the top half,’ the Disciplinarian said abruptly.

‘Not everything?’ Jack said, looking over his shoulder.

‘You won’t bleed as much this time,’ the Disciplinarian said, reaching for a coiled whip from a rack of instruments. ‘A towel will catch the rest. Go on then, you little scamp, let’s get this over and done with. The longer you wait, the worse it’ll be.’

‘Uh huh,’ Jack said sceptically. It was going to be bad either way. In about ten or twenty minutes, he’d be swimming in enough pain that he might not care as much about everything that had happened. Jamie being sick. The fact that he’d left Jamie there on the stone to go fight with his hero, who had flung him away like garbage.

Jack stripped off as quickly as possible in fabric that fought him. He hung the coat with its golden buttons on the hook provided, stripped off a white shirt that marked his status for what it was. Then he walked over to the cross before the Disciplinarian even ordered him there. There were two leather loops for him to hold onto, because they wouldn’t tie him down. Not unless they had to. But it would mean a black mark on his record, another one, if he needed to be tied down for it.

E. Aster Bunnymund walked around with the thick, cylindrical piece of leather, holding it up for Jack to bite down into it, in order to stop him from breaking his own teeth or biting through his lips or tongue.

The stern man looked at Jack down his nose, holding the whip in his hand, grey green eyes holding no malicious love for his job. It made it easier somehow, knowing that they both weren’t going to enjoy themselves.

‘You’re not even going to learn a thing from this, are you?’ the Disciplinarian said, sighing. ‘There’s some that just don’t take to learning from the whip. It’s not a good thing either, young man. You’d bloody well better find a way to learn and learn fast, or the shadows will eat you up, and that’s worse than this, trust me.’

Jack believed that much was true, but he didn’t nod when Bunnymund walked behind him. He gripped the leather loops harder, bit down on the leather. It tasted of soap, and there were no previous indentations in it, but he knew they reused them. Maybe it was the one he’d bitten into last time. Then, they’d had to tie it in place around his face, because they knew he wouldn’t be able to keep his jaw locked long enough through fifty lashes.

Fingers tucked a towel into the hem at the back of his pants, to catch any trickles of blood and prevent his clothing from being soiled.

He jerked when he felt fingertips cased in leather touch the scars on his back carefully. A few more touches, and then an index finger lingered at a spot that made Jack have to fight himself to stop from cringing.

‘I’ll try and avoid this bit here,’ Bunnymund said musingly. ‘This all healed terribly. Bet you didn’t lie still like you were told, going off like a frog in a sock instead.’

Jack managed a shrug, exhaling hard through his nostrils.

‘Yep, just like I thought. Rightio, brace yourself.’
His fingers were burning on the leather, he forced his eyes open and stared out into the open afternoon, thinking of Jamie lying in the hospital bed. Even if he didn’t agree with his lieutenant, he felt like he deserved this somehow, like he’d failed.

The leather slicing through the air made his guts feel like they were liquefying, and then the cold shock of it cut across his back. There was always a few moments, a few seconds where the pain didn’t register. Icy sweat broke out over his body, his heart seemed to beat in space, and behind it followed a heavy blaze of pain that punched all the way through to the front of his ribcage. He wheezed, but he held onto the loops, bit down, stayed focused.

But the head Disciplinarian hit harder than the others. His strokes were precise, but each one felt like it was going to slice him in half. By the seventh, he was making choked sounds he couldn’t stop, and he was shaking so hard he thought his arms would give out. Fifty lashes administered by Bunnymund would probably kill him.

But Bunnymund didn’t stop, didn’t show him sympathy, which was for the best really. Jack was certain that if someone touched his shoulder, or said a kind word, he’d just start crying and he wouldn’t even really understand why. But kept as an indifferent transaction, he could bear it.

And so he did, all the way to the eleventh stroke.

Jack felt blood oozing down the flare of fire and pain on his back. Felt it collect warmly before seeping into the towel, where it turned cold instead.

‘Hang tight a minute longer,’ Bunnymund said, keeping his voice professional.

Jack cried out at the scratchy wet cloth used to mop the worst of the blood away. The leather bit rolled out of his mouth and dropped to the floor, and he bit his lower lip to stop himself apologising. He wouldn’t even know what he was apologising for.

‘Get your feet underneath you properly,’ Bunnymund said crisply.

The command was a relief, and Jack focused on it. Trying to imagine that he had legs stronger than they felt. Forcing himself to breathe through the worst of the pain. Every exhale stretched his skin, and it didn’t matter that he’d been through worse, it still wasn’t easy to deal with. It left him dizzy and floating, like Bunnymund could tie a string to his ankle and he’d just ride the pain all the way up to the sky. He didn’t like the sensation and focused on the ground instead. The scratchy cloth.

Then a spray misted liberally over his back. It would help the blood to coagulate faster, stop the bleeding. And then Bunnymund applied the salve with fingers that were no longer covered in leather. It didn’t take the pain away, but it helped the skin to heal at an accelerated pace. He realised he didn’t have any extra stocks of food to deal with the increased metabolism that would come from this.

No golden healing light this time either. But Jack had grown used to that.

Eventually, he let go of one of the leather loops and shifted his weight. He could stand. He could walk down the stairs. He’d be fine. He let go of the other loop. Bunnymund wasn’t even looking at him, but tossing the bloodied whip into an empty sink where it would presumably be cleaned. Jack turned and walked with as much steadiness as he could muster to his clothing. He wouldn’t be able to put it on now.

He’d have to cross the cobbled streets with a bare back, and everyone would know.

Though a lot of people wouldn’t care.
He wiped quickly at his eyes, blowing out a few heavier exhales while he got used to his skin stretching and shifting as he walked. He’d just lie down when he got back to barracks. Hopefully. If only he could make himself feel less like a balloon, but eventually he’d come back to himself. He always did.

He walked back through the tower itself, his coat and shirt folded over one arm. Bunnymund was already behind his counter, writing logs in Lunar Alphabet shorthand, which involved a whole lot of glyphs that Jack didn’t know. Outside of the basic alphabet, there was too much to learn and understand. Only linguists, nobles and alchemists understood most of it.

‘I don’t want to see you here again,’ Bunnymund said, but his eyes weren’t hard or angry, even if the tone of his voice was. ‘Kids like you shouldn’t be visiting me.’

‘I’m pretty sure kids like me are meant to be visiting you way more often,’ Jack laughed, and then thought the better of it, strangling off into silence. ‘I mean, you know…pretty sure my lieutenant wants to send me here every day.’

Bunnymund’s brow furrowed and he picked up the report that Jack had given him.

‘Lieutenant Crossholt? You need to report him for any reason?’

Jack stared at him, certain it was a trap. Then he realised that maybe it wasn’t, and he shook his head nervously.

‘No, man, I really am just that awful.’ Jack offered a game smile, and Bunnymund’s frown deepened. He looked like he wanted to say something else for several moments, and Jack stood there trying not to tremble, and hoping his legs would manage the stairs down. Because it would be embarrassing to need assistance. Just because it had been a long day, it was no excuse. Fighting the Darkness would be worse than a simple lashing, he needed to buckle up.

‘Get off with you then,’ Bunnymund said. ‘Go rest now.’

‘Sure,’ Jack said. ‘Ah…thanks.’

Bunnymund flicked his ears to indicate that anything else Jack said was now purely irritating, and so Jack made his way out of the doors and down the walkway and looked at the stairs and decided that it could be worse – he could be in a hospital with shadow-sickness. With that thought in mind, he made his way down, only stopping to pause every five minutes or so, trying not to heave for breath and stretch the shallow wounds on his back.

No one mocked him on his way back. People hardly noticed him. They were all too concerned with the attack on the Tsar and Tsarina. There were extra guards everywhere, and even they didn’t have time for him. There wasn’t even much eye contact, he might as well have been invisible.

Jack wanted to go back to the hospital just to be sure Jamie was fine, but made himself head to barracks.

Once there, he had to pass the lieutenant’s rooms on the way to the corridor and stopped when he heard a sharp:

‘Overland, halt!’

Jack stood still, rolled his eyes where no one could see him, and then turned around and attempted to stand loosely at attention. He couldn’t put his hands behind his back, but otherwise, he tried to look respectful.
‘Oh yes,’ Crossholt drawled, noting his bared torso, ‘at least you didn’t put it off.’

Jack looked blankly ahead as Crossholt circled him. He wore his dress uniform still. He looked tired. His moustache and beard looked wilder than usual, there were bags under his eyes. Jack secretly thought Crossholt was a washed up Warrior who had never attained the kind of heroism he’d dreamed of. He was relegated to lieutenant of soldiers in training far too early, and needed someone to dump all his resentment and world weariness onto. Jack seemed to have volunteered for the job without knowing.

‘You got some good licks there, brat,’ Crossholt said. ‘Maybe that’ll teach you.’

Jack said nothing at all. If Crossholt thought that being lashed would stop him from trying to help out, he was mistaken.

‘Since you missed the warm-down after the event, I want you to give me five laps around the complex. Now.’

Jack blinked as he tried to parse it. Five laps. The complex? All the barracks. Hundreds of soldiers. At least thirty buildings. Jack stared at him in shock and Crossholt grinned like someone who was very happy to have his punching bag back.

‘I can do double tomorrow, Sir,’ Jack said slowly.

‘For insubordination, you can do five now and double tomorrow. Any more instincts for haggling in that miniscule brain of yours?’

‘No, Sir,’ Jack said, thinking about how these wounds were going to scar too.

‘Then off you go.’

Jack nodded, he turned, and then hesitated.

‘May I put my clothing back in my room first, Sir?’

‘Yes, but be quick about it. I’ll be watching for you, so you’d best not shirk. Get a move on.’

Jack nodded again, wishing that the exhaustion hadn’t set in until later. He walked back to his room and put his shirt and coat down carefully, and then drank a cup of water before walking outside into the frigid chill.

He’d used up all the post-whipping adrenaline on getting down the stairs and walking home. Now, it was dark and he knew that if he didn’t run the laps properly, he’d be sent back to the Disciplinarian. Or worse, they’d try and eject him from the barracks again. And this time he wouldn’t even have Jamie around to help him out.

*Just do it, and don’t say anything, and you’ll be back to your old self in no time. It’ll be a story for Jamie. And he loves your stories. Remember?*

But it was hard to hold onto that, as he started to run.
Feedback is love! And meanwhile, oh man, why do I put Jack through these things. *stares out into the universe and puts him through them anyway.*

‘I bet this is a story,’ Jamie said, smiling at him tiredly.

Jack grunted from the hospital bed, then started laughing.

‘It kinda is?’ he kept laughing and then his back hurt too much and he groaned and distracted himself by looking at Jamie some more. Jamie looked better at least. Not nearly as wan and clammy as before.

‘Crossholt again?’ Jamie said. When Jack did nothing but grimace and wave his fingers around vaguely, Jamie groaned. ‘Jack, come on…we talked about this.’

‘Yeah,’ Jack said, clearing his throat, which felt scratchy. The fever was already abating. And the infection wasn’t even a problem anymore. But his throat still hurt.

He’d run the laps. Or, to be more accurate, he’d run three of the laps and then collapsed during the fourth. He hadn’t been right outside Crossholt’s window when he’d fallen, and it was dark, so no one found him for a long time. All that time in the cold, and eventually he’d been taken to the healer’s and Crossholt had blamed it on Jack’s need to overzealously apply to himself even though Crossholt himself had apparently begged Jack to take a break.

Or at least, that’s what it said on Jack’s admission record. Jack having read the whole thing – awkwardly contorting his still-healing back – while a healer was looking in the other direction.

He’d been out cold for three days, and they’d wheeled him into Jamie’s ward – even though Jack didn’t have shadow-sickness – because Jamie wanted to discharge himself to find out where Jack had gone. That’s what the healer had told him, smiling mischievously. She didn’t seem too bothered to be wheeling his bed somewhere else, and she’d given him the nice juice that came from the rare citrus fruits of Ozorne, instead of the generic stuff that was grown hydroponically on Lune.

Apparently he could charm anyone except the people it would benefit him to charm.

‘He just had it out for me,’ Jack said, rubbing his face.

‘You’d better get it together,’ Jamie said, frowning. ‘With initiation in only a month, and we’re not even ready yet…’

‘Wait,’ Jack said, frowning. ‘Your memory a bit scrambled there? It’s end of the year, remember? Eight months away?’

‘Oh,’ Jamie said, blinking at him. ‘Man, I know they said you were out for three days but I thought…’
‘Wait, what?’ Jack said, trying to push himself upright and absurdly grateful when Jamie gently placed a hand on his shoulder to stop him.

‘Because of the latest attack,’ Jamie said, ‘they want to rush through the new recruits.’

‘That’s- But-’

‘They said there’s a risk of losing more of us to the initiation, but that it was necessary. I dunno, Jack. It’s the first time they’ve ever broken the timing of the ritual.’

‘But the Solstice is when the Light is strongest! If they do it in a month, doesn’t that mean- What does that mean?’

‘There’s flyers everywhere saying it’s special, you know. Special timing. A special ‘event year’ that no one has ever heard of until – mysteriously – only a day or two after that attack. And you know what I think about-’

‘You’re paranoid,’ Jack said, closing his eyes.

‘The Tsar and the Tsarina are getting desperate. They’re not keeping on top of it anymore.’

‘Paranoid,’ Jack muttered again.

Deep down, his gut churned. Too many of the higher ups thought he wouldn’t survive an initiation even when it was supposed to be scheduled in eight months. Even with the benefit of all that extra training and meditation and preparation to go up against the Darkness and come out the other side. To confront the enemy and take it into oneself and somehow – out of that – learn how to make the golden light; the greatest miracle of the citizens of Lune, they said. That they could literally make light from darkness and turn back the tide.

How could he survive it in a month? And Jamie might still be ill by then, how would they both survive it?

Jack reached out blindly and Jamie took his hand, squeezing it.

‘We are the Light,’ Jamie said, his tone lacklustre.

‘And we do not fail,’ Jack finished for him.

Jamie laughed once, the sound flat. Jack followed suit, and they stayed by each other’s side until the nurse came to separate them to make sure Jamie kept getting the rest he needed to heal.

* 

That night, Jack couldn’t sleep properly. As though three days of being barely lucid had stocked him up on enough sleep that he didn’t need it anymore. He knew that wasn’t possible, his body was tired and sore, but staying in bed made him anxious and bored.

He wandered out of his room after checking in on a soundly sleeping Jamie.

The robes he wore were light and loose, but they’d cut the panels away from his back so that the open air touched his wounds. At least his rear was covered.

Small mercies, Jack thought.

They dimmed the lights in this ward after dark. It seemed strange, since this was where everyone
who had shadow-sickness was taken. Wouldn’t they be more afraid of the dark? Wouldn’t a well-lit environment be better for them? But he supposed this wasn’t the malignant Darkness that plagued them now; just regular shadow, regular night. Still, after a lifetime of being told to fear the Darkness, walking around a building at night always seemed daring. Adventurous.

He kept to the side of the corridor, occasionally peeping into rooms. He saw a single nurse who opened her mouth to say something and then closed it, rolling her eyes, disappearing around a corner. Her robes pale gold and covered in Lunar alphabet sigils, charms about her body to assist with healing. She was the one who had bought him the nice juice, and she seemed to live in the building, unlike many of the others who worked in shifts.

Almost everyone was sleeping. He saw one hook-nosed man with his knees up in a hospital bed, reading a book by candlelight. Otherwise, people slept in their beds. Some healing. Some slowly succumbing to the shadow-sickness. Those that didn’t make it would die, or worse, be taken to one of the Asylums of Darkness. No one returned from those.

Jack stole a dark pink mandarin from a fruit bowl and dropped the pieces of peel into a vase – no one was around to see him – eating the small, juicy pieces. He never usually had access to fruit like this, and he made a note to take more of the fruits. He turned down one corridor, then another, then veered past an emergency exit into a section of the ward that looked far fancier than the others. Here, even the curtains and the fabric on the hospital beds were heavily covered in gold Lunar sigils.

He heard voices, drifted towards them quietly, stealing along the side of the wall.

‘It is being too soon, Tooth. You should have-’

‘Try negotiating with the Tsar when he’s on a tear,’ another responded. Jack’s eyes widened when he realised that was the Spymaster Toothiana. Which meant – she’d said North had the shadow-sickness too. Had he stumbled across them? He inched closer towards a room filled with flickering golden light and didn’t dare peek inside.

‘Let me see him,’ North said, his voice heavily accented. He’d come from peasant stock, still had the thick accent of those who lived on the far outskirts. A rough, strident voice that was loud even when he was trying to be soft-spoken. ‘I am well enough. We will lose too many. Too many.’

‘Perhaps if you could speak to him…’ Toothiana said, appeal in her voice.

Jack was confused for a moment – hadn’t North just said he’d see him? – when a new voice interjected, this one smooth and rich and so familiar that Jack forgot to breathe.

‘My dear,’ said Royal Admiral Pitchiner, ‘I signed off on it. I’m hardly going to approach the Tsar now to tell him that I’ve changed my mind. My signature means more than that. You’ll just have to work harder to scratch and scrabble for the ones you can save.’

‘Of course you are being no help,’ North muttered, tone black and so obviously disrespectful that Jack’s eyes were starting to sting from how wide they were. ‘You’re not one of us. You are not caring for them. Go then, to your fame and glory.’

‘Oh, I do apologise. While you were busy getting infected by the Darkness in your useless silver contraption, I was actually turning back the tide. Hm. Funny that. Why did you even call me here, Spymaster?’

‘If I had not flown beneath the platform,’ North said, his voice strident enough now that it would
certainly be loud enough to wake others, ‘they would be in the city of Lune. You think you champion the Light, but you are nothing more than arrogance in a uniform. Get out.’

‘Gladly,’ Royal Admiral Pitchiner snarled.

Jack was hurriedly backing away when the Royal Admiral himself emerged from the room – wearing the long black coat of his day to day uniform. Of course he spotted Jack immediately, and Jack froze, staring.

Don’t rat me out, don’t rat me out, don’t rat me out.

Pitchiner himself seemed cloaked in darkness as he moved smoothly towards Jack.

Jack backed away, scuffed down the corridor until he was well away from North’s room and his back hit the wall. He hissed, but the wounds on his back were closed, and a knock against cold, polished stone wasn’t going to open them again.

Pitchiner was tall, glowered down at him with gold eyes that seemed to glitter from within.

‘Eavesdropping is not as delightful a habit as you seem to think. How much did you hear?’


Pitchiner’s eyes narrowed. His pupils expanded, the black drowning out the gold.

A shift in Jack’s gut and his vision tunneled, darkness surrounding the edges. He tried to close his eyes, knowing that Pitchiner was turning Jack’s own fears against him, rifling through them to get what he needed. Not all the Golden Warriors could do it, and Jack had only experienced it once before – when he’d first applied to the military academy and they’d put him through this test to see whether he really wanted to be a soldier or not.

Now, his body broke out into a cold sweat, causing his still healing back to ache. He couldn’t look away from the Royal Admiral’s eyes, losing his concentration as he began to shake. His teeth clenched, his body tensed in preparation to flee or fight. His heart was hammering so hard he could almost taste it, his throat more sore now than ever before, heat pushing into the corners of his mind, he was-

With a single, slow blink, the Royal Admiral released him from that paralysing, fear-evoking grip. Jack’s hands pressed flat to the wall and he tried to push himself upright, annoyed that he’d sagged back against it.

‘You’re so certain you’re going to die at the Initiation, aren’t you?’ Royal Admiral Pitchiner said, his forehead furrowing. ‘That sort of attitude almost guarantees it.’

‘Thanks,’ Jack muttered. ‘Really.’

‘My pleasure,’ the Royal Admiral said, smiling. ‘Really. You can either die during the initiation and get it over and done with, or be troublesome and get in my way if you graduate. And then die. There’s really only two options. I’d rather it be the first.’

‘Seriously?’ Jack said, staring at him. ‘I get there’s arrogance, but who- who in the Darkness do you think you are? You can’t just- I mean-’

A single fingertip touched Jack’s shoulder, a fingernail digging in through the thin hospital gown. Pitchiner’s expression was dark, all amusement having vanished.
‘I have seen far too many soldiers rise up through the ranks only to be cut down during their first battle. I am not arrogant, I am realistic. I have lived through the experience of the amateurs thinking they are ready to face down the Darkness, only to wet themselves or loosen their bowels during a real battle. At least they are likely to turn tail and run. It’s maladjusted twerps like you who will stand and think they have the skill to drive back the Darkness, when really – you only ever get in our way.’

‘I used to think you were…’ Jack shook his head and his lips thinned. ‘I looked up to you.’

Royal Admiral Pitchiner lifted his chin and looked down his nose.

‘As you should,’ he said crisply. ‘I’m one of the very reasons you have a community to live in, a planet to live upon. My personality matters not. I get the job done. Now, excuse me, I have far more important things to do with my time, like – ah, just about anything at all.’

With that, Royal Admiral Kozmotis Pitchiner seemed to glide through the darkness away from Jack, his coat fluttering in a non-existent breeze.

The shaking got worse as soon as he’d disappeared, like Jack’s body had been saving it up until he was alone. Jack started to sag down the wall and then realised how much that hurt and turned so that he was facing it, resting his forehead against the cool stone. He felt feverish again, his throat hurt. Whatever Pitchiner had done – scrolling through his fears like that – it had knocked the wind out of him.

He made his way back to his room in a state of confusion, having lost his way. Eventually, the nurse who lived there found him, tutted under her breath after feeling his forehead, and then guided him back to bed.

* Jack’s fever relapsed that evening, and at the end of another two days of spelled broths and the sorts of medicines they gave to people with shadow-sickness, he wasn’t sure if the encounter with the Royal Admiral had even been real. Perhaps he’d just dreamed it – an encounter with an arrogant once-hero. Whatever it was, Jack knew that the Royal Admiral wasn’t his hero anymore.

Jamie was discharged on a Friday. He’d been well enough to sit by Jack’s bed every morning and every evening. But Jack watched him leave with trepidation in his heart. He’d confirmed it for himself; initiation was going to be in a month. Less than, now. Almost three weeks.

What was Jamie returning back to? Were the drills now harder than before? Were they pushing the soldiers too hard? Would Jamie be okay? People with shadow-sickness were supposed to ease back into physical activity. But Jamie…would they even let him?

Jack pulled on his clothing on a Saturday morning, the nurse on duty declaring him free from infection and fever, his wounds completely healed. Jack had smiled at him, feeling the scar tissue from previous beatings pull whenever he turned or moved his shoulders and back. It was a reminder of Crossholt sending him to the Disciplinarian. Every tugging drag on his back a reminder that he just couldn’t seem to avoid trouble.

The day was bright as he made the long walk back to his barracks, a discharge sheet tucked into his pocket. The red-brown cobblestones were slick and bright from recent rains, but already the sun poured light into the world around him, making the ground lightly steam. He could smell fresh bread and dumplings from street vendors in Lune Square, wished he had anything like spare money for them. All his life his food had been provided to him by institutions of Lune – filling and
nutritious, but lacking in taste. He couldn’t afford the golden-glazed breads, or dumplings made fresh and then simmered to plumpness in a mouth-watering stew that he could only imagine the taste of.

So he passed the street vendors hawking their foods without stopping, trailing his fingers along a shop window advertising magical inks and writing tools for the Lune alphabet. Then he turned down an alley – a shortcut – and hesitated.

The posters were different than the normal thin grease paper posters glued to the brick walls. He frowned. Instead of posters boldly exclaiming that they would triumph over the Darkness, that the Light as All, there were some hastily glued crooked posters warning of end-times.

_The End is Nigh._

_The Darkness is coming!_

_When will the Royal Military save us?_

And more disturbingly, a single poster of black ink on a striking pale green background – a beacon amongst the whites and reds and blacks:

_How long will you believe the lies of your Tsar?_

‘Whoa,’ Jack said quietly, turning in a full circle, shoes scuffing on a patina of refuse.

He made his way to another alley and it was the same – these even more messily glued, some wrinkled, some pocked with air-bubbles. He stared at them. Whoever had done them risked being sent to an Asylum. Only the Kingdom had the right to place posters on the walls like this. And it was obvious that these were not Kingdom-sanctioned messages.

His eyes were wide as he stared, feeling like he was still in the middle of his fever dreams. He couldn’t remember the last time he’d seen something like this. He turned in a daze until his foot slipped and he braced himself on rain-wet walls. Was this why they’d pushed the initiation forward? For surely this had happened after the attack on the platform. But why go after the Tsar and the Military?

Jack felt awash with a sudden wave of rage. How thankless! That all those Golden Warriors and soldiers would have risked their lives – some _losing_ their lives – all so the citizens would be safe enough. And they thanked them with _this_?

‘I _hope_ you get sent to the Asylum,’ Jack muttered under his breath, and then steeled himself and walked away, not wanting to see the horrible messages anymore.

*

Jack pushed open his door to see Jamie dressed in his outdoor gear, in the process of dropping an envelope onto Jack’s bed. He was impossibly pale, his eyes too wide when he saw Jack.

‘Shit. I thought they’d discharge you tomorrow,’ Jamie said. His voice was wet. Eyes bloodshot and red-rimmed.

‘What’s wrong?’ Jack said, staring at him. ‘Why aren’t you in manoeuvres? Was it Crossholt?’

Jamie snatched up the envelope just as Jack grasped it, seeing his own name penned there. Jack pulled as Jamie crumpled the paper, but Jack was fast and yanked hard enough to get the envelope
free. He wanted to make a joke about a love letter, but the look on Jamie’s face – he couldn’t. Instead his throat tightened as he opened the envelope. He felt like a heavy weight was falling through him and didn’t want to look at what was causing it.

‘Don’t,’ Jamie said. He didn’t even try to get the envelope back. ‘Come on, Jack.’

‘This had better not be what I think-’

_Dearest Jack,_

_I know we’ve always made fun about how I’m not really a deserter but have the heart of a deserter, but it was never a joke to me._

_Don’t be upset. I’ve gone to a refuge where they’ll take care of me. I can’t tell you where. I can’t have contact with you. But if you ever need a safe place and are ready to leave this life forever – and why wouldn’t you be, when I’m not here? Put your feelers out for the Guardians of Lune, and they’ll help you._

_All my love, to the brother I wished was my brother by blood._

Jack stared at the letter for a long moment, then a burst of bright, lost laughter slipped from his throat.

‘You know, as goodbye letters go, this one is _shit,_’ Jack said, trying to throw the letter down. Dramatic effect didn’t happen, the letter only floated weakly to the bed.

‘I don’t have time!’ Jamie said, voice cracking. ‘I have to go now. I have a contact I’m meeting.’

‘A contact? You- How long have you planned this and not _told me_? And you can’t!’ Jack hissed, wanting to shout, to _scream,_ but that would draw attention and even now – he knew he couldn’t. ‘You can’t do this! Initiation is a month away, and you _can’t_ leave me, you ass!’

But even as he said it, even as he thought his blood was turning far too hot to be contained by his own skin, he couldn’t believe himself.

Jamie had never wanted the military like Jack had. When they’d been put through the fear test to see if they really wanted to join, Jamie’s family had to put forth a bribe to make sure Jamie was allowed in. Even then, his fears nakedly, baldly transmitted that he wasn’t made for a life in the military. And Jack didn’t want him to die – and that would likely be the culmination of years of half-hearted training no matter how Jack tried to inspire him and motivate him. Especially now they’d shifted the date of the initiation.

‘You can’t leave me on my own,’ Jack said, staring at the letter and feeling like he couldn’t look at Jamie anymore. ‘No one else sees me. No one else gives a shit.’

‘I do,’ Jamie said, voice thin and earnest. ‘I always will.’

‘Then tell me where you’re going,’ Jack said on a rush. ‘I won’t tell _anyone._’

‘Jack,’ Jamie said, laughing weakly. ‘You know they have the serums, the fear reading, all those things that will- Will pull the truth out of you. I’ve told you too much just by giving you the name of the organisation. You just- _Please_ consider leaving before the initiation. A few of us have gone already. To a better life. They can’t keep using us like this – the Royal Academy just thinks-’

‘Will you _stop_?’ Jack exclaimed, and then clapped a hand over his mouth. He wasn’t even saying
the things he thought he’d say, if a day like this ever came. ‘A letter? You were just gonna- No
offence, Jamie, but *come on.*’

Jamie smiled at him tremulously, and then his face twisted, crumpled. A sight that Jack had *always*
hated, and hardly ever seen. His eyes squeezing shut and his mouth pulling tight, and then his
gloved hands were over his face and his shoulders were shuddering and Jack felt *awful.*

‘Oh geez,’ Jack said, walking over. ‘Okay, hey – we can work this out, right?’

He knew they couldn’t.

‘I’m not going to die for them,’ Jamie said into his hands. ‘I don’t believe in the cause like you do.
You’re the only reason I haven’t done this earlier. You are. So don’t convince me to stay now,
because I think you’re the only one who *could.*’

Jack rubbed Jamie’s shoulder and stared at the letter and the ripped, crumpled envelope. His throat
was sore again – felt like it would be sore forever – his eyes were burning. He opened his mouth,
ready to convince Jamie to stay. But for what? For three miserable weeks and then an initiation that
would…would likely end badly for him?

Jack knew he couldn’t be that selfish, even as he couldn’t imagine what the next few weeks would
be like *alone.*

‘Yeah,’ Jack said, his voice dry and soft, when all he wanted to do was scream. ‘So. They gonna
take care of you?’

Jamie’s eyes poked up from above the tips of his gloves. He nodded. Looked at Jack in wonder.

*He never expected me not to convince him to stay. By the Light, Jamie, give me a little credit.*

‘And I can’t know where you are,’ Jack said, hating how final the words sounded.

Jamie shook his head. ‘Unless…unless you look for them too.’

‘The Guardians,’ Jack said, looking back at the letter. ‘But it means leaving all this behind, doesn’t
it? I couldn’t ever…couldn’t ever fight against the Darkness, could I?’

‘Not the way you want to,’ Jamie said, finally dropping his arms so that his voice wasn’t muffled.
Red fingerprints were pressed into his pale skin where he’d gripped his jaw too hard.

‘I can’t believe you weren’t going to say goodbye, you-’

Jack didn’t have the term of angry endearment he needed in that moment. Everyone called Jack the
‘little shit,’ and Jamie was the one who had never done a thing to earn it.

*Except now.*

‘You little shit,’ Jack finished, and Jamie’s smile was weak but real. ‘Brother.’

The word felt awkward in his mouth, because they’d joked about it for so long, but now it seemed
like it was the only truth hanging between them. They’d been brothers for as long as they’d known
each other. Teasing each other in the beginning, coming to support each other through the different
demons that plagued them.

‘I’m not gonna miss my family,’ Jamie said, rubbing at his face. ‘I’m only gonna miss you. Shit, I
have to stop crying. Or they’re gonna suspect. I really have to go. I left it late enough as it was. I
have to go, Jack.’

‘Yeah,’ Jack said, trying to feel like the kind of person who would be strong and supportive in a moment like this and very nearly managing.

Jamie grasped his shoulder and squeezed.

‘Just remember, Jack. You’re the Light, you’re not going to fail. Okay? I believe in you.’

‘Yeah,’ Jack said, falling into a rough, quick embrace that didn’t last long enough.

Then, the door swung open, swung shut, and without any gear or supplies to take with him, with nothing more than the clothing on his body – Jamie was gone.

Jack forced himself to take several deep breaths, and then changed into the clothing he wore for manoeuvres. The best chance he could give Jamie was one where he went on like nothing had changed. He chewed up the letter and the envelope, feeling the bitterness of the ink in his mouth echo through his whole body. He handed his discharge sheet to Crossholt’s second-in-command. Then he pushed himself through drills and hoped that no one realised what Jamie had done until he was safely squared away.
Initiation Day

Chapter Notes

New tags: Military enforced drug use, hallucination, death (not major or even minor character though).

The next chapter shouldn't be too far away (I'm hoping a week or two at the absolute outside). I actually ended up having to chop this chapter in half, so Pitchiner isn't in this one, but he's coming very, very soon!

Feedback is love. :)

There had been so many drills, so many manoeuvres, so much chanting and singing of the Odes and Canticles and Liturgies and Psalms and Hymns – Jack almost believed he was ready. It was clear many of the others thought they were ready, despite a steady trickle of deserters from the ranks. (One was caught and punished, sent to the Asylum to set an example, and that night Jack had nightmares of Jamie locked in a cage and crying out his name in broken vowels that had left him muzzy-headed during drills the next day).

There had been no time for his superiors to question Jack about Jamie’s absence. Crossholt didn’t even have the time to be as cruel as usual, though he still found time to be quietly menacing, looking at Jack like he was yearning for some sort of break or time off where he could make Jack’s life awful again.

Jack’s days and nights passed in a strange, melancholy blur. He gorged himself on words and prayer until it felt like the light inside of him was more robust than a guttering flicker of candlelight. He supped on physical drills until he was too tired to think about what he’d lost, what he might go on to lose in the future. He whispered to himself in a room that still held two beds as he fell asleep. He resolutely didn’t look at Jamie’s made bed, its plumped pillows, the emptiness there.

A week before the initiation, the regime of tonics started. First, there were two administered in the morning. One golden and glowing that tasted of nothing but a faint citrus fizz. The second dark and cloudy, with tones of black murk and midnight swirl that made him gag towards the end as the sediment clogged his throat. In the evening another two. Gold and dark side by side.

He dreamed strangely, but could never quite grasp what he was dreaming about when he woke. Every morning would come and he’d be plastered in sweat, brown hair flattened to his head, a crust at the corners of each eye. He’d rinse his face in ice cold water and force himself to drills, where every other soldier looked as foggy-headed as he did.

He could sense dissent amongst the ones that didn’t feel the light strongly enough in their hearts. He heard the tail ends of conversations that weren’t meant for him, soldiers whispering to each other fearfully about how they weren’t ready.

Jack ignored all of it.

The fact was, he would be ready. He would be. The Royal Admiral could see him as a waste of
Jack was pretty sure the words he was looking for were: *drugged out of his mind.*

He blinked stupidly at the golden lights that surrounded them. The lanterns lit by the Priests and Priestesses of the Light. The ones who never spoke aloud, but shaped letters and words with their hands, a vow of silence marking them.

They’d been sent off by the city, applause and horns sending them off as they were accompanied by a guard of Golden Warriors and at least thirty of the Priests and Priestesses of Light. Then, before they’d left the city walls, standing before the gates, they’d been given tiny ornate glasses filled with water, only to find out that it hadn’t been water at all.

*Whee,* Jack thought in a daze, as one foot followed the other. He endlessly walked to the drone of the chants that he himself was repeating without even really thinking about it anymore.

It was all done by foot. Four hours of walking followed by breaks that lasted an hour, where they were allowed real water and drugged water, and a crescent moon sliver of goldbread which had little flecks of metal in it. Jack wondered if it was poisonous, but then, it’s what they’d given to all the other Golden Warriors since the beginning of the initiations themselves, so he shrugged, ate it, wished there was more to eat when he was done.

Another four hours of walking, another hour’s break, and on and on it went. For seven days, through valleys and ravines, over two mountains. There was a pause one day that lasted longer than an hour. A commotion up in the frontlines as the soldiers looked on with numb minds and numbed faces, the temperatures having dropped to below freezing. They had their furs to keep them warm, which made them painfully hot during the walking itself, but still managed to let the chill in when they stopped for longer than five minutes.

When the lines of soldiers started walking again, Jack saw a small disturbance in the ground ahead. As he passed, his eyes were drawn to a mound of stones that looked like a funeral cairn.

He shuddered. A girl behind him made a low sound of distress, but it was ignored.

Hunger was a rasping, gnawing ache in his belly. He imagined that he was turning inside out as his organs ate him. He dreamed in fits and starts in the rare moments they were allowed rest. He saw maws and teeth. Saw black eyes and heard horrid, twisted voices speaking to him in languages he didn’t know, had never heard before.

It felt like a unique terror, so huge and personal it could only belong to him. But he woke to faces of distress around him, everyone growing more haunted, circles smudging the undersides of their eyes as the Priests and Priestesses smiled at them benignly, and the Golden Warriors watched on as though they did not care.

Jack knew that the Royal Admiral himself marched at the frontlines. He’d seen him in his regalia in the beginning, sword strapped to his side, and his heart had stuttered where it had once leapt. A hiccup in his chest instead of a soaring.

*You’re not doing this for him, you’re doing this for Pip.*
On the dawn of the eighth day, they reached the base of a black mountain that stood wicked and jagged, refusing the snow’s touch. Despite the ice and cold all around them, the stone glistened, clean and strong.

Into the side of the mountain was a large, arched cave. Too large to be made with any of the machinery that Jack had ever seen. On either side of the broad, flat pathway leading to the entrance – snow giving way to a gold-flecked black stone – were huge pillars arched in the shape of monstrosities. His vision blurred as he stared at them, at the lunar alphabet carved deep into the pillars and stained red, at the way the figures on top hunched over themselves, stone claws scraping, teeth hooked and looking far too sharp.

He swallowed, staggered to a halt with the rest of the soldiers, gazed into the black maw of the cave. He shivered and wished that their fur coats offered better protection when they were no longer moving. But there were too many soldiers, and not enough good quality fur. The best furs went to the people who placed higher within the Lune hierarchy. So Jack rubbed his arms and breathed out puffs of ghostly air and found himself being pulled back into a pile of other soldiers, who had given up on trying to warm themselves individually.

They huddled, shook, some of them staring at the mountain, some of them trying to look at anything but.

*This is it,* he thought. *After this, things will never be the same again. I’ll be a Warrior. They’ll respect me. They’ll see me and I’ll be saving people.*

A young woman next to him smiled at him weakly when he met her gaze. She was large and thickly built, a frizz of brown shaggy hair around her face. She looked like the kind of young woman who was normally tough as nails and hard to beat – her arms three times as thick as his. Now, she looked as tired as he felt, and there was a haziness to her gaze which suggested she was finding it as hard to deal with the drugs as he was.

‘Fuck this,’ she whispered. They were clumped so close that a few of them laughed under their breath, Jack included.

Her eyes crinkled in a rough smile, her chapped lips splitting. She licked at the blood that welled like she was familiar with the movement. Jack understood it. His lips were holding up okay. But he had dry patches of skin on his cheeks and a flaking eczema on his elbows.

‘Don’t like the look of that cave,’ someone else whispered.

‘Don’t think we’re supposed to,’ another said.

Jack didn’t know their names. And now he was grateful, thinking of how many of these people he might not see again. Because they’d developed a camaraderie on this journey that was stronger than what they’d found in their weaponry drills and exercises. If he knew their names…

‘Fuck the dark,’ the young woman whispered. ‘That’s what I think.’

‘Yeah,’ Jack said, returning her smile. She leaned a little closer into him and closed her eyes, her eyebrows pulling together on a face that looked otherwise content.

Jack had seen the mountain goats standing together like this for warmth. Back when he lived on the fringes of Lune, an outcast at the edges where all the peasants were supposed to live – where there were mountains and farms and the shadows could drag a sister down into the frozen black. He’d seen them standing, too cold to bleat, and felt like that now. A strong shiver moved through him,
starting at his spine and ending at his teeth, his jaw locked together.

*You’ll see,* he thought. *Things are gonna change.*

*  

They sent the soldiers into the cave, one by one.

First, Priest Sanderson himself would daub their foreheads with a crescent moon of crumbling, sticky white-gold sand taken from seas that Jack had never had the privilege to see. Plump and smiling, he’d hand them a chalice of gold and watch carefully as they swallowed a mouthful of liquid that looked like honey.

The rest of the Priests and Priestesses formed a half-circle around Priest Sanderson. They wore the mitres that denoted their high status, a traditional headgear of cream, white and gold, with dark red glyphs decorating the rims and charming them with luck and light. They each held a gold-plated ripidium, one side printed with the insignia of Lune, the other printed with the faces of the Tsar and Tsarina. Jack wondered if they used the sacred staffs as walking sticks while climbing the mountain. But that was probably sacrilegious.

The Church of Light would send each soldier off with sweeping movements of their arms, silently singing the chants with their arms and hands and fingers, eloquent in their silence.

Jack watched as the hours trickled by.

Far more soldiers went into the cave than came out of it.

A hollow sort of terror was coming upon him as though from a distance. He couldn’t feel it properly, but he knew it was there.

The soldiers emerging from the cave were not hale nor whole nor healthy. They were covered in a thick, dark blanket and ushered away into a large tent set up by the Golden Warriors.

Thirty had gone into that cave, and only five had come out so far.

They weren’t ready.

Jack was with two others saved for last. No one had made it explicit, but they all knew that they were the reserves. The ones that no one thought would make it. The ones they could throw at the cave right at the end, not having to mind how traumatised they’d be by seeing so many of their comrades not return.

Next to him was the plump girl with the chapped lips, and beside them, another boy who looked pale and sickly.

‘You peasant stock?’ she whispered to Jack, her voice so quiet that that it was only air.

‘Yeah,’ Jack whispered back.

‘Figures,’ she said. ‘Me too. Pig farmers. No end of fucking jokes about that, looking the way I do.’

‘You look like someone who won’t go down without a fight,’ Jack said, without looking at her. ‘I reckon that’s what we need, right?’

‘Sure thing. I’m gonna make it, I don’t care what they think.’
A Commander hushed them from nearby, glaring at them, and the girl shifted on her feet and then went still.

But the conversation helped – at least for the next hour.

*

Jack’s name was last on the callout sheet.

The very last.

He and the Commander stood side by side, Jack shivering and rubbing his hands together, wishing his gloves would work harder. The Commander standing still and no doubt wearing thermals and looking as though he’d been born with that grim expression on his face.

‘Someone has it out for you,’ the Commander said under his breath. ‘Last on the sheet? Ouch.’

Jack thought of how Crossholt had backed off the past few weeks and closed his eyes, clenching his hands behind his back. Was this it? Crossholt’s final send-off? Putting Jack last on the callout sheet, making him watch as hardly any soldiers returned from the black void between ceremonial pillars of the grotesque?

‘Any tips?’ Jack whispered.

‘When they come for you, let them through,’ the Commander said, staring ahead. His lips hardly moved. Obviously practiced at talking when he wasn’t supposed to be talking. ‘Not in, but through.’

Jack scowled ahead and shifted on weak knees.

The same damned cryptic advice they fed to the soldiers in the Cantos as well.

*

He was silently panicking and shouting the Chants of Light in his head when Priest Sanderson touched him with a warm thumb and painted his forehead with the crumbling crescent moon. The Priest had a friendly smile, a light in his eyes, a constant goldenness to him that made him seem otherworldly. Up close, he was a small, portly man. But even with that fact before him, he still seemed larger than life, a creature of good dreams and shining things.

The mouthful of drugged honey that he swallowed stuck to the inside of his mouth and made the shadows darker, the light brighter. His vision blurred constantly now. He swayed on his feet and felt that if he was going to die, he probably wasn’t going to mind very much.

He passed each pillar one by one, resisting the urge to look behind him. Would the Priests and Priestesses rest now that he was going in? Would they eat? Would they light a fire?

The pillars got larger, loomed darker, and Jack tried not to look at them. It seemed like the entrance into the mountain was miles away, and then suddenly it was there and he was stumbling awkwardly into what he thought was total darkness.

It wasn’t, not really. The dark wasn’t total; gleaming bits of red and brown in the black stone wall of the cave throwing a dingy light. As he walked, the path abruptly narrowed, the cave ceiling seemed to sink upon him. He kept walking and the cave got darker. The light of the entrance seemed far away.
Jack stumbled over something too soft to be a rock and looked down to see a soldier upon the ground in full clothing, eyes open in horror, face frozen into a rictus. Jack started to crouch to see if he was okay, when he realised that the soldier wasn’t moving, nothing animate in those eyes. He swallowed a rush of nausea, clapped his palm over his mouth.

His eyes roved and he saw other bodies. Some had clearly been here for years. Frozen and desiccated, faces wasted into mummification.

Jack turned around and saw the faint light of the entrance in the distance and nearly ran back. How had the others not done the same? It was one thing to hear about it in the verses, another thing to see it.

*And the initiates of Lune would pass the shadows of those who had fallen,*

*Lost to the darkness of the past…*

He hadn’t realised it would be *literal*. He blinked hard, his vision still not right, and the bodies seemed to flicker and mist.

‘Maybe they’re not real,’ he said to himself, and then mentally kicked himself for not saying the Chants in his head. He was supposed to be looking to confront the darkness, there was no one here he could save. They were too weak, that was all.

He kept walking, past more bodies, more rocks, his vision getting worse until finally he had to walk with one arm out, his hand brushing the cave wall. It narrowed around him, and then everything really was becoming darkness, and Jack could feel it like a heartbeat pulsing… something *alive*. As though the mountain itself was a living creature that breathed, demanded sacrifices, gave so little back.

There were times he stopped, when he listened to his breathing roaring in his ears as he hyperventilated. Times he smelled something almost like decay, but it was too sweet and musty to be quite like any decay he’d ever smelled before.

At one point his boot crunched on something spindly that cracked like dry sticks. He refused to look down, refused to even think about it. There’d be no sticks in here.

‘I am the Light,’ Jack reminded himself. He was a candle in the darkness. He was a single flame. He would not go out. He was doing this for Pippa.

He could hear her even, begging him from a distance. Then pleading with him to run. Then begging again. Her voice sounded so real that he leaned into it, his whole body sloping forwards.

His next step carried him out over a precipice, his boot finding nothing but air. He fell, screaming.

* \[ \]

‘How are you here?’

Jack lay on something soft and cold. He opened his eyes and saw nothing at all. Opened them wider. Still nothing.

‘Pip?’

‘How are you here?’

‘Shit,’ Jack whispered, rolling onto his side and groaning. His body hurt. He was so damned *cold*. 
His fingers and toes were numb, he couldn’t feel his nose. ‘Shit.’

‘How are you here?’

‘Pip,’ Jack said again, trying to look for her. Her voice was as clear as a bell, and he knew he was supposed to be ignoring it. They’d trick him. He knew they’d trick him. It was what the Darkness did. It had stolen her soul and now used it as a puppet. That was why the Living Darkness was so evil. It consumed and only ever gave back corruption. ‘Shit fuck.’

‘Careful! You know what Papa will say!’

‘Fuck off!’ Jack shouted, pressing fingers that stung to his eyes. They were watering. He couldn’t see a damned thing. Was he…was it the total darkness mountain? Did the honey take his eyesight? Shouldn’t he be more bothered to hear Pippa’s voice? More upset?

Something wasn’t right.

There was a small tug at his belly and he placed his hands down as though to hold himself together, and felt something wrong. His breath caught as his fingers shifted reluctantly. It was amorphous and soft and his hands moved right through it. Then, a growl, deeper than any beast that had a living heartbeat. Unearthly, unreal. It rumbled right through him.

*Let it move through you, don’t let it stay.*

He clawed at himself in a panic, and the dark misshapen lump attached to him didn’t move. And then he felt it twisting in his gut and it didn’t hurt, but it still made him retch. He bent over, threw up a sour taste of honeyed bile, and then kept retching because by the *Light,* how was anyone supposed to live through this?

‘You should follow me.’

She spoke in her night-time voice. The one she used when she wanted Jack to escape with her out of the creche, so they could run down to the forest under the light of the stars and look for night-blossoming plants. She would tuck flowers behind his ears, and then run ahead into the trees, laughing in delight while he made sure she didn’t go too far.

‘Remember?’

A tiny glowing golden thing in front of him. Like a firefly, or a spark from a spell. Enough that he could see the outline of the clump of darkness resting on top of him, that he could see he was on a mound of snow.

*Stupid hallucinations.*

‘Follow me,’ his sister said.

The light danced in front of him in concert with the voice, and he rubbed at his eyes and rolled onto his knees, and then his feet, thinking – dully – that if Pippa was the light, she had to be good. It wasn’t the Darkness at all. Pippa was the Light. Of course she was! It seemed so obvious now. Even if a part of Jack tried to prod him into being afraid, Jack ignored it. He was too numb to think about the darkness in his belly.

‘You really there?’ Jack said.

‘Maybe,’ she said. ‘I thought you’d cry if you heard my voice again. Don’t you miss me? Papa will
think you’re so selfish.’

Her voice stung, and Jack swallowed a lump in his throat that tasted disgusting.

‘You should be crying.’

‘I am the Light,’ Jack whispered, pulling the words from somewhere deep inside of him.

‘You should be sadder. You’re not a nice boy. You’re awful.’

In his belly, the grotesque attachment shifted and roiled until Jack bent over and retched again. His chest hurt. He couldn’t feel rocks underneath his feet at all. It was lightly compacted snow crunching, reminding him of the day he’d lost her. The day he’d failed.

‘They make me say these things,’ she said, her voice shaking now. ‘Jack, they make me.’

‘Who makes you?’ Jack said.

‘They make me. It’s so dark here. Did they take you too? Sometimes you think you can listen to them. Sometimes they almost sound wise. And then…’

A small cry.

‘Pip!’ Jack said, his tongue feeling thick.

‘If you die, we could be together,’ she whispered. ‘I want it so bad, so bad. But not like this.’

Her voice broke. The light went out and Jack was in the darkness once more. He screamed her name, and then the syllable broke off halfway through, as that monstrous growl came once more, and then something invisible and malignant roared right into him.

* 

‘So very, very over it,’ Jack said brokenly. ‘Jamie had the right idea.’

A vast, hungry cavern opened up in his own mind. He could hear whispering. First from one or two people, voices he didn’t recognise, languages he didn’t know. Then more people, until it was hundreds, then thousands, then numbers he couldn’t imagine. All whispering. The sound cresting in his ears until he screamed to drown them. The voices stopped at once.

A kernel of compulsion remained. He felt his fingers bend into stiff claw shapes. He bared his teeth at nothing. He wanted to bite down. Wanted to feel blood in his mouth. Wanted to place his palms on the ground and feel the whispering spread until there was nothing of his own mind left. He wanted to let the voices out through his actions. Wanted to rend and tear and pull flesh from bone.

It didn’t even occur to him that he didn’t normally think like that, until a few minutes later, when he felt his own thoughts come back to him.

He forced himself upright and kept walking, following some odd centre of gravity inside of him. He whispered made up prayers and Chants and sometimes the voices in his mind whispered back to him. He couldn’t see where he was going, but nothing interrupted his footsteps. Only snow crunching, sinking beneath his weight.

So he was still real, and that meant he was still alive, even if he couldn’t feel his body anymore.
‘Follow me,’ Pippa whispered. Her voice came from outside of him, sounding urgent. ‘I want to show you something.’

He followed, losing track of time until it seemed like there was light growing so slowly around him that he didn’t notice it at first. Then the snow gave way to black stone once more, there was heat emanating from the walls, thick growls and menacing creaks everywhere in the bones of the mountain. He was walking on a narrow stretch of stone over a chasm of impenetrable black.

‘Don’t fall,’ she said, when he looked down. ‘Remember tree climbing? Pretend it’s that.’

‘I’m not supposed to be listening to you,’ he said between lines or prayer that didn’t make sense to him anymore.

‘I don’t want you to die,’ Pippa said. ‘But maybe you shouldn’t be listening to me. There’s no one better. You’re so far from hope. So far. They say you were wounded, so it was easy to get in. You had doors ripped open by others. Who hurt you, Jack? Who? Tell me. We can do anything to them. We can tear them apart, we can eat them until- We- NO!’

Jack called out, but she didn’t reply.

He called out again and heard a wicked, dark laughter echo all around him.

He wrapped his arms around his body and thought that so far, this was a shitty nightmare, and he’d be very happy when he woke up in his own bed.

* 

‘You’re going the wrong way,’ a voice purred. Definitely not his sister. The syllables were thick and wrong and sounded like they were being spoken by no living thing. But it was seductive and powerful too. Like an upper class gentleman possessed by the soul of evil. His body tried to respond, swinging him around. He felt a rush of real fear then, and gritted his teeth and forced himself to turn back and walk in the other direction.

So the shadows were inside him then. He thought he’d be more panicked, at the very least paralysed with fear.

And ignoring what they wanted felt awful.

‘But I already feel kinda crappy, so…’

‘You’ll die soon,’ the voice said.

‘Cool, man,’ Jack replied, shrugging. ‘Everyone thought so.’

‘Walk the other way, perhaps you’ll live.’

‘I’m the Light,’ Jack said. ‘And guess what? The Light doesn’t fail.’

More of that evil laughter, this time soft and almost sultry, and very clearly inhuman. But genuine amusement was there, and Jack felt a flash of irritation that warred with the feeling that he should turn around, he should turn, he should turn.

His body began to turn him before he could stop it, and he growled and forced himself to move the opposite way. His joints flared with needle sharp pains that made his lungs wheeze.

‘I’m starting to see why they don’t give us weapons,’ Jack said. ‘Doesn’t seem like it would be a
fair fight otherwise.’

‘They don’t tell you what we really are, do they?’ the voice said. ‘They don’t have the basic decency to tell you what they did. Aren’t you curious? Don’t you want to know why they all desert in the end? You’re a curious soul, aren’t you? Yes, so inquisitive. Pippa tells me you’re the very soul of an open-mind. But she’s quite young, and vastly stupid, after all, you’re going the wrong way.’

‘Mm,’ Jack said. ‘Opposite day. I believe you just told me to go the right way?’

The silence that followed felt affronted.

‘Bring a better A-game,’ Jack muttered, and felt sweat break out all over him as he ignored whatever else he now shared his blood and bones with.

It became a game, almost. He wasn’t very good at it, and he had to turn his body back several times, and he stumbled often – but so far, he seemed to be winning. Or at the very least, drawing even.

‘You remember snowflakes on our tongue?’ Pippa said, sounding like she was smiling. ‘Or, oh! Snow in your boots! And mine. And icicles on the branches! And the window frames! I think I was the prettiest in winter, don’t you?’

‘Sure do,’ Jack said, his heart hurting. ‘Is it really you in there?’

‘Think of ice,’ she said, the answer making his chest ache. ‘Think of snow and ice and frost. You’re so brave. They keep trying to trick me. But I know it’s really you.’

‘Are you mad at me?’

‘I love you,’ she said, her voice like the first real warmth in his heart he’d felt in years. ‘Why would I be mad? Besides, it’s…your mind playing tricks, remember? Maybe you’re making it up, Jack-Jack.’

Jack’s brow furrowed. No one had called him that in- Since-

No one knew to call him that except…except her.

He wrapped his arms more tightly around himself. Kept walking. Started to think this was what he’d be doing until he died. He thought he’d be more alarmed.

* 

Little phosphorent glow-worms hung from the cavern ceiling like stars. There, in the centre of a snowy vault was a black plinth and upon it, a sphere of shifting colours and shadows and lights. Flashes of electricity moved across it, arcing out. It hummed and sung, spinning slowly. It reminded Jack of the Disciplinarian’s spells and alchemy.

The voice of his sister told him to think about snow and ice, and Jack tried. He also thought about the Light. And he thought about the Darkness inside of him, and how it strove to turn him away from the plinth.

‘What do I do now?’ The words didn’t sound like the words he was trying to say. His face was too cold to shape them properly.
‘I have a present for you,’ she said. ‘I found it. There’s so much to find in here. I’d give you more but…I don’t know if this will work.’

‘Seems like something an evil thing would say.’

‘Jack-Jack,’ she said, ‘later, you’re going to ask yourself if this was real. If it was me. If you could’ve done more. If you could’ve saved me.’

‘Pip…’

But his eyes stayed dry. It was like he was in some dramatic retelling of an event that had already happened. He was watching without really being there and his eyes wouldn’t make tears, and his face wouldn’t screw up with grief.

‘It’s not the right question, Jack-Jack. You need to ask yourself if you’re ready to let me go. Be ready, Jack-Jack. Be brave.’

He fought with the Darkness in order to stand near the singing ball of energy. Up close, he could see things in it. Faces. Landscapes and cityscapes he’d never seen before. Constellations he didn’t recognise. Strange vehicles and flying ships that weren’t familiar. It was like looking into a hundred different worlds.

‘We had so much fun when we were young,’ Pippa said, the edge of a laugh in her voice. ‘Remember? You know what to do, Jack-Jack. I’m here with you. Both of us together.’

Jack did know what to do.

He took a deep breath and lifted his arm, feeling like it wasn’t even his arm anymore. Every movement made him fight against the Darkness inside of him. He stared at the tips of his fingers and thought vaguely that frostbite was going to kill him. He thought of ice and snow and crunching footsteps and the cold that had seeped right into him. He thought of the Light and how glorious it looked banishing the Darkness, and how he was going to be Warrior, and he was going to make it better somehow.

He sunk his hand into the ball of energy and the world exploded in dazzling brightness – blue and white and gold.

A sharp, painful thud!

More of that dark, self-satisfied laughter, malicious and cruel, and Jack’s body felt broken where it slumped against the wall he’d been thrown into. He blacked out.
The Cold Boy

Chapter Notes

Thanks everyone for all the love you've shown this little fic so far. I feel it's worth saying - I'm not trying to write something as epic and grand as FtDWR/ISWF, I just kind of want to rediscover these characters again, in a new way. So thanks to all along for the ride, but I'm pretty aware I can't repeat a sort of Shadows and Light experience, and I wouldn't want anyone to get their hopes up, I guess? :) Hope you enjoy!

A flickering light, an encompassing dark.

There was no name he remembered. Nothing but the cold. Then reaching out and finding a stick and standing upright, or what he thought was upright.

A golden light ghosted the edges of his vision, made it hard to see.

He didn’t even hear the whispering anymore.

Movement, perhaps walking, even running. No sense of direction aside from up or down, and sometimes not even those. Then falling. He always felt it when he hit the ground.

It always hurt.

*

‘By the Light, what the fuck happened to you?’

A young woman’s voice. Abrasive and filled with fear. He vaguely remembered a time when he’d also felt that kind of acute fear. But everything was calm and numb now. He was empty. Someone had come along with a scrubbing brush and taken out his insides. He felt as fresh as newly fallen snow.

Stubby fingers on his shoulders and he felt something swell up inside of him, nasty and hungry, chasing out the freshness and making him snarl weakly. Like an animal.

‘Fuck this,’ she said. ‘I’m not gonna leave you here.’

He was picked up like a sack of wheat and slung over her shoulder. He clung to the stick in his hand. Then realised he still couldn’t feel his fingers and he wasn’t clinging to anything. The stick was frozen to his hand.

That – oddly enough – felt pretty normal.

*

Had he even fought the Darkness at all?

It really just seemed like it’d found him, possessed him, and then he’d talked to his sister. And now the inside of his mouth was cold. He didn’t mind it. At least it wasn’t morning breath.
‘Wha’s your name?’ Jack slurred.

‘Cupcake,’ the young woman said. ‘Cuz I’m squat and sweet.’

‘Real name?’ Jack said.

‘How about we wait and see whether they’re gonna wanna kill you first or send you to an Asylum? Yeah? Something went wrong.’

‘Did you fight it? The Dark?’

‘Yep,’ Cupcake said.

‘Did you win?’

‘Guess you could call it that,’ she said, sounding unconvinced.

‘Good for you!’ Jack said, and then thought he might throw up. He opened his mouth wide, but his chest wouldn’t heave, and then the nausea passed and the side of his face was bumping into her lower back. ‘You’re strong.’

‘Yep,’ she grunted. ‘Tired though. Might have to leave your sorry ass here after all.’

‘I don’t think I fought the Darkness,’ Jack said. ‘And I don’t feel anything properly.’

‘That’s ‘cuz you’re dying of hypothermia, or frostbite, something. You’re as cold as a dead thing.’

‘You’re telling me!’

Conversation was too hard. He tried to warn her that he was going to black out again, but by the time he figured the sentence out, it was too late to shape it.

*  

‘Get up.’

His whole body was shaking, and then he realised the source of the vibration was coming from two strong hands digging into the meat of his shoulders. He opened his eyes and Cupcake stared back at him, first in annoyance, and then in fear.

‘Shit,’ she said. ‘I think it went wrong.’

‘What?’ Jack said, looking up as she let go of him and stumbled away.

‘What happened to your eyes?’

‘Yeah,’ Jack said, trying to push himself upright, his whole body hurting. He tried to shake his head clear of cobwebs and only succeeded in staggering sideways. He put his hand out until he eventually met rock, and took some deep breaths. The stick fixed to his hand dug into the stone as a third leg that seemed to be working better than his other two. ‘I have no idea? You see a ton of mirrors in here?’

‘Let’s walk,’ she said. ‘You know they don’t stay here for longer than a week.’
'What?' Jack said, following her, using the stick to help him walk and wondering if he’d manage without it. How was it frozen to his hand? And how was his hand not hurting? ‘How long have we been down here?’

‘I don’t know,’ she grunted out. ‘Hopefully not longer than a week!’

That seemed impossible. How could it have been a week anyway? He’d not eaten or had anything to drink. He would have starved to death, surely. Though, with how weak his legs were, how empty his gut felt, perhaps he still would. He rubbed at his face with the back of his hand, then scratched behind his ear. Several strands of hair came loose in his fingers, and he frowned.

‘If I’m saving a fucking shadow-wraith now…,’ she said.

‘How sad would you be?’ he said.

‘Mad as the stirred Dark, more like,’ she said, turning to look at him over his shoulder. She had a faint golden glow to her eyes. It’d probably get stronger over the course of several weeks, and then she’d be a new Golden Warrior.

‘Do I look possessed?’ Jack said.

He thought that it was a possibility, with some of the experiences he’d had. And then he waited for alarm to find him. For fear to bubble. He felt so calm about it.

‘Not really,’ she said, turning back again.

‘I don’t feel possessed,’ Jack said. ‘Oh, and congrats.’

‘On what?’

‘You know, you’re a Golden Warrior now. Your eyes are gold.’

Cupcake said nothing in response to that. Instead, she grunted every few steps, her breathing coming hard. They were walking up a slope. Occasionally they would have to climb. His body felt cold and unresponsive, yet it was still doing everything he needed it to do. Every now and then he’d get a sense that there was a huge morass of pain bearing down on him. He’d heard that oceans could make freak waves sometimes that swept away coastal towns. And he imagined himself like a town encased in glass, and the wave was coming.

‘Do you think they’ve left?’ Jack said.

‘I’m tired,’ Cupcake snapped, effectively ending the conversation.

Twenty minutes later, Jack was being hauled up the inside of a steep incline and staring at Cupcake’s forearms in admiration. She was built. He’d be dead without her, he was sure.

‘I don’t know,’ she said, as though time hadn’t passed between his question and her answer. As though she’d been thinking about it the entire time. ‘They have to stay a week for the ones that make it out. I mean it’s not like we can make the trip back without some proper food. But I don’t know how long we’ve been in here. The drugs made it hard to tell.’

‘Why do you think they do it? Drug us?’

‘Make us more receptive to the Darkness in the mountain? Everyone knows it’s weaker there. That’s why it can’t escape. But-’
‘So it could still be here,’ Jack breathed, because for some reason that hadn’t even occurred to him. He’d not sensed the living Darkness at all since Cupcake had woken him. ‘Right now?’

‘You know,’ Cupcake said, ‘I’m gonna punch you in the face in a minute, and I’m gonna enjoy it.’

‘Okay, okay,’ Jack said, finally reaching the new plateau and following her once more. ‘I get it. Shutting up.’

‘Thank the Light.’

*

The wave of pain grew larger and larger, but it never touched him. But he was more afraid of it than he was of the Darkness. He was starting to figure it out. Something was wrong in his body. He was close to collapse. He was injured. He shouldn’t be able to walk the way he was. Every now and then there was a strangled high-pitched noise at the top of an inhale that he couldn’t help, and his lungs felt like they weren’t doing their job properly.

Perhaps the air was just thin.

If he was protected in a glass bubble, then the wave didn’t smash down and shatter it like he thought. No, it was sneaky. It seeped in underneath, in bubbles and waves. One moment he was numb and frozen, and the next his vision was starting to grey out. Hiccups of nastiness ran up the base of his spine, lanced like spears in his head. Sometimes he heard a foreign whispering and thought his mind was wider than it had been before he went into the cave. It was expanded. But it didn’t feel like a good thing. It felt like someone had shoved a metal crank into his head and just levered his skull open.

The pain kept leaking in, and Jack thought maybe Cupcake was going to have to leave him behind after all.

*

He didn’t cry when he saw the exit, when he heard Cupcake swear a blue streak of relief. But his chest heaved and he sobbed like his body wanted to. The first wave of something real, and he went to his knees and gasped for breath, because Cupcake was saving a dying recruit.

She turned and saw him, looked infuriated. She marched straight over and shook him so hard he cringed.

‘Aren’t you fighting for something?’ Cupcake yelled at him. ‘Fight for it! I can’t do it all!’

Jack wanted to point out that actually he’d done quite a bit of walking on his own, and that the stick had helped just as much as Cupcake, but he was too busy trying to cough up half a lung onto black, hot stone.

Funny, how the heat didn’t seem to touch him. He placed his shaking palm flat on it and stared in amazement as frost curled from his fingers. It made breathtaking patterns. The most beautiful things he’d seen since that ball of magic and colour and light that his sister had lured him to.

‘Look at that,’ he said. Except the words didn’t form properly, and it was only croaking.

‘Shit,’ Cupcake said.

Jack moved his hand and made it happen again, and then he tried to laugh, and then more of the
pain snuck in and desperation followed on its heels. For the first time in too long, he felt a sense of real urgency. He was going to die if he didn’t keep moving. He was going to die at the entrance to the mountain. He was going to be one of those bodies that some new recruit tripped over, reaching for the light and never finding it.

‘Shit,’ Jack said, scrabbling to his feet and gratefully taking the wrist Cupcake extended to him. ‘Shit. Let’s get out of here. Shit.’

A few minutes later they stumbled free of the exit and ignored the enormous gargoyle pillars and aimed straight for the giant tent that was still there, glowing lights flickering from within. Cupcake was shouting something, a single word over and over again. And Jack slid from her grasp and fell to the ground, thinking that he was supposed to be fighting for someone.

Except that he’d seen her in the Darkness, and there was a part of him that just wanted to see her again.

*  

He hadn’t passed out for as long as he’d thought. He was still lying in the snow, and Golden Warriors and Priests and Priestesses were coming out of the tents. It was the Golden Warriors running towards them, but they had their weapons out; not blankets to catch and comfort them.

A defensive wrath sparked inside of Jack’s chest. He rolled to his hands and knees and then unthinking, thrust his stick out like it was a sword, like he was in the middle of a drill.

A single blast of snow and ice flew from it, and just as quickly the wrath disappeared and he stared at his stick held. Had he picked up some kind of magical stick? That was… kind of awesome.

Jack gasped when a bolt of golden light flew straight at him. Straight through him. It was broad and huge enough to envelop his whole body. It felt…a little ticklish. The Golden Warrior’s defence against the Darkness, and they’d only use it on him if they thought- if there was a chance he was-  

But it hadn’t hurt him, so he wasn’t possessed. He looked at them all in amazement. They were staring back at him with a variety of expressions. He saw horror, incredulity, and the Priests and Priestesses were signalling to each other so quickly he knew that they were excited or agitated.

‘Aw, fuck,’ one of the Golden Warriors said. ‘The Tsar is going to want to hear about this.’

‘Wrap them up,’ another Golden Warrior said. ‘They’re not possessed. Put that one in with the rest. Put that one in isolation. Something’s gone wrong.’

‘Wrong?’ Jack said. ‘Have you checked this out? I can make ice appear!’

And then he looked down at his other hand where it was fisted on the ground and saw frost and ice spiralling out away from his fingers and a hysterical bubble of laughter escaped from his throat.

Maybe the tsunami hadn’t been outside of him after all. Maybe it was inside of him. There was a roar of whispers, like the white noise and static he sometimes heard on the radio when the broadcasts finished for the night. Pain prickled in his nerves, coldness had sunk deep into his heart, and he kept hearing Pippa’s voice. Telling him to let her go. Telling him he was selfish.

He didn’t realise he was making the low, distressed noise he was making until a Priest covered him with a blanket. He looked up and saw Sanderson himself smiling down at him, but his eyes were sad, and the smile was fixed.
Jack went quiet, trying to shut everything away like he did after he’d been beaten by the Disciplinarian. It required all of his concentration, and so his eyes were still screwed up as a Warrior picked him up and carried him to the tent. And he was still trying to get himself together when they entered the warmth of the tent. It was only when he was lowered onto a flat, stretched piece of canvas that served as a makeshift bed, that he allowed his eyes to crack open and let in some of the golden lamplight.

The tent was partitioned into cubicles. In here, the voices were hushed and quiet, but Jack could hear real laughter, real voices. He heard an older woman say, ‘You’re one of us now, don’t worry about it. It’s what we do for each other, comrade.’

And then another woman said in amusement, ‘Speak for yourself, Eva.’

Jack’s cubicle was small. It certainly wasn’t large enough to hold the three Warriors and one Priest who came in one after the other. Then his eyes were being forced open and someone was swearing. A light was shone into his face and Jack tried to jerk backwards, too weak to do much more than flinch.

‘Just because North came out of this with his- Whatever it was, doesn’t mean that this recruit’s another one. North is, well… North! What’s your name, boy?’

‘J-Jack,’ he said. ‘Jackson Overland.’

‘An Overland,’ another one said, derisive. ‘He’s one of the creche kids.’

‘I don’t care if he came from peasant stock,’ the first Warrior said. ‘I don’t care if he was born in a latrine, we’ll need to get to the bottom of this. I knew we shouldn’t have done this early. I knew-’

‘Keep your voice down,’ another Warrior hissed. ‘You want to question the Tsar to his face next? There’s not enough of us to lose another one to an Asylum.’

‘So you’ll rat me out then?’ the first Warrior said. Then he crouched down in front of Jack and opened Jack’s eyes with his calloused fingers, and they were staring at each other. ‘How’d you make that ice?’

Jack shrugged. Realised that he still had his stick, and then realised that the Priestess was trying to take it away from him. He curled his fingers around it harder and scowled at her.

‘Those eyes, though,’ another said.

‘If he’s one of those, the Royal Admiral won’t be happy.’

‘You’re right, Bradhkov, the Royal Admiral is not happy,’ said Royal Admiral Kozmotis Pitchiner himself, as he stood in the entrance to the cubicle. Then he stared at everyone there, one after the other, and gestured sharply with his head. As they left, he spoke to them.

‘We’ll get him back to the city proper, and then decide what to do with him.’

‘Yes, Sir,’ all the Warriors said.

Which left Jack lying on a stretch of canvas propped on a frame of metal, staring at the Royal Admiral while an odd ball of resentment and rawness grew inside of him.

The Royal Admiral walked into the room and then crouched quickly by Jack’s side, examining him like he was a particularly bothersome insect.
‘I thought you’d died,’ Pitchiner said too softly for others to hear. ‘I didn’t put you on the bottom of the callout list on a whim.’

Jack stared at him, and then a black malice roared to life inside of him and he was scrambling off the bed, thrusting his stick forwards like a sword and screeching in rage. Ice pouring from his hands and snow appearing in the cubicle. And Pitchiner watched the entire episode of fury with nothing more than a knowing smile, before taking Jack by both wrists and wrestling him back down to the stretcher with a strength that seemed to cost him nothing at all.

To the onlookers that had appeared, he snapped: ‘I know what I’m doing.’

Everyone disappeared.

‘You tried to kill me,’ Jack said, turning his wrists in that grip, fingers clawing, feeling cold build in his palms until Pitchiner hissed and muscles in his jaw jumped. Jack was sending ice crawling up his forearms, over his uniform.

‘You think I cared about you that much?’ Kozmotis Pitchiner said, raising an eyebrow. ‘It was a recommendation made to me by your CO and I paid heed, given you’d already gotten in my way before. Someone always has to be at the bottom of the list, young man. Clearly it’s not the death sentence the rumours make it out to be. Now tell me, how are you doing that with the ice? And do you mind stopping?’

Jack yanked his hands back as Pitchiner let go of him. Fear clawed him from the inside. For a few seconds there, he’d wanted to kill the Royal Admiral. He’d wanted to- He’d wanted to do something terrible. It had been more than just resentful anger. He would have – if he’d had the power…and if Pitchiner hadn’t stopped him…

He thought of how he’d thrust the stick out in front of himself, outside the tent. How he’d blasted ice and snow at those Warriors.

He stared past Pitchiner and thought about the whispering in his head.

If they found out- If they found out something had gone really wrong, he’d be killed. Or sent to an Asylum. It was his duty to tell them. But how could he tell them something like that, knowing what the consequences would be?

‘I’m not a Warrior, am I?’ Jack said, his voice muted.

The Royal Admiral sneered, and Jack felt small and stupid for even having asked.

‘Actually, you are,’ he said.

‘What?’

‘Around the rim of your irises, when the Priestess checked, there’s a border of gold. I wouldn’t get your hopes up, it might not be enough.’

‘And…the rest of my eyes?’

Pitchiner stood up and walked out of the cubicle, and Jack felt dismissed. The muted voices that he could hear through the canvas walls of the tent seemed to hush wherever the Royal Admiral went. And that was how Jack could tell he was coming back. The Royal Admiral returned with a hand mirror, which he held out to Jack with a cold stare. Jack took it carefully, frowning at the frost that crept over the handle from his palm. He could hardly tell he was doing it.
Then, he stared at himself.

It was pretty, he thought. The silvery-blue. It wasn’t normal, but it was pretty. He turned his face left and right, and those eyes followed him. He could only just make out the border of gold. But it was like someone had poured liquid silver into his irises. At least it wasn’t the black of total possession.

Then he stared at his hair, which looked thinned out and straw-like. He reached up and touched it, and more strands came out. And then he saw a glint of something which didn’t seem real. He held the mirror even closer, staring up at his hairline in amazement.

The roots of his hair were turning white.

‘What’s happening to me?’ Jack said.

‘You could still be dying,’ the Royal Admiral said, and at least his voice wasn’t as cutting as it had been before. He hadn’t softened, exactly, not the way he was still looking down his nose at Jack. But it seemed that even the cold-hearted Admiral couldn’t deliver the news of a recruit’s death with complete disdain.

‘But—’

‘It happens sometimes,’ Pitchiner said. ‘It goes wrong. We don’t know why. Most of the recruits don’t survive a partial victory against the Darkness.’

‘I heard my sister,’ Jack said. ‘But she was…she talked to me. She said not just old things but…she talked to me. She— I think she helped me.’

‘Doubtful,’ Pitchiner said dismissively.

‘No, I mean— There were times she seemed…not herself. Like the Darkness had her. And then other times she was trying to fight back against it. Did I dream it?’

Pitchiner’s eyes had narrowed, and then he frowned. Jack stared at the Royal Admiral and swallowed. He was sore, he was cold and he didn’t feel great. It was unfair that he still found the Royal Admiral striking. Maybe he could blame that on years of propaganda or something.

‘There was a ball of magic,’ Jack said, feeling so stupid. He sounded worse than the fairytales and stories he’d heard as a child. ‘A ball of magic that the Darkness didn’t want me to see.’

‘Ah,’ Pitchiner said, but for all that his expression hadn’t changed, he looked like he’d been shocked by the information. Whatever Jack had said, he was suddenly sure there was something real to what he’d experienced.

‘The Darkness kept telling me to go the other way,’ Jack said.

‘And the ice?’

‘Pip told me to think about it. She said she had a present for me. That I needed to— touch the magic thing.’ Jack smiled crookedly. ‘I guess… I guess that was the present?’

Pitchiner’s eyes were wide, and Jack’s voice died in his throat. And then the Royal Admiral was kneeling beside him again and staring at him hard, a bubble of manufactured fear in Jack’s chest expanding so that he was locked into place. Jack hated that fear trick.
‘Whatever you do,’ Pitchiner hissed to him, ‘whatever you’re asked, do not tell the Tsar or any of his servants that this happened. Do you understand me?’

‘I’m not gonna lie to the Tsar,’ Jack said, and the unnatural fear built in him until he was shaking and trying to move away. Pitchiner only leaned forwards, more menacing than ever, the pyrite spark in his eyes gleaming.

‘You had best take my words seriously,’ Pitchiner said. ‘For your own safety.’

The fear rose to a small peak – nothing like what Pitchiner had evoked in the healing tower – and then he stood and walked away, his black, embroidered robe brushing the canvas entrance as he left.

A few minutes later, Priests and Priestesses came into the room holding vials of medicine and a medical kit and a bowl of something that smelled delicious and meaty. Jack frowned, confused and exhausted.

Whatever that was about, Jack knew he wasn’t going to commit treason for the asshole that had put his name at the bottom of the callout list; that was for sure.
Thank you everyone for reading and commenting! :) This chapter was a bit more delayed than I wanted it to be, but I'm happy to have gotten at least one more chapter out before Christmas! Woo :D

All at once, it hit him that he’d spoken to his sister.

The haze cleared in a single, great gust. A hook in his chest yanked hard enough that he felt his body go limp with shock. Then agony roared in his chest and he turned around on the slope they were walking down and started barrelling back towards the Black Mountain that he’d thought he never wanted to see again.

Pippa, Pippa, Pippa, I’m coming, I’m gonna-

But he didn’t know what he was going to do, only that he had to get back there. His mind was a blaze of noise and colour, in his hand he still held the stick that he’d grabbed from inside the mountain. They’d let him keep it, partly because they were afraid of what he’d do to them if they didn’t, and partly because it was clear that after another few days, he was still too poorly to make the journey back to the city of Lune without some form of assistance. Even now, his ribs and legs burned.

He pushed his weak body mercilessly, feeling cold air in his lungs and frost leaking out of his fingers, his thinning hair being whipped about by sharp mountain winds. Hardly thinking about it, he put his hands together in front of himself and pushed the wind away, and couldn’t bother marvelling when it fell back. He’d left her there. He’d just left her there!

Shouts behind him. Angry voices, but Jack ignored them. How could he just leave her there?

Then he heard pounding footsteps catching up to him, and he sobbed and tried to run faster, harder.

All too soon, a Golden Warrior sprinted level with him, slung a strong, warm arm around his waist and pulled him shrieking and still running from the path.

‘No!’ he shouted, pushing and sending out frost and freezing whatever he touched. ‘Let me go! She’s in there! She’s still in there! I just left her there!’

A swoop as Jack was raised higher into the air, and then the whoosh of his breath leaving his lungs as he was smashed down into the ground. His wrists were caught in handcuffs and he was kicking out even as he tried to gasp for half-breaths, unable to work the snow or frost powers properly with his hands immobilised.

Then, his arms were pulled roughly above his head and he screeched as he saw the glint of a brilliant, huge sword being thrust down. This was it, he’d broken, and they were going to kill him. Not even an asylum, not even-

A crunching sound, and the sword fell just below the straps securing his wrists. He was pinned to a cold expanse of clay and rock, kept trying to pull his wrists free until he felt his forearm brush the
edge of a sharp sword and he went limp, trying to gather his thoughts. He could just- He could just slide his arms up and then he could-

Fingers digging into his chin holding his face still, and a knee digging painfully into his hip, holding him down forcibly.

‘Now,’ Kozmotis Pitchiner said, sounding only slightly breathless, ‘kindly stop panicking.’

‘Let me go!’ Jack shouted, and hated that the response was an exasperated sigh. That wasn’t the right response. Why weren’t they taking him seriously?

‘Leave us,’ Pitchiner commanded to whomever was watching. ‘We’ll find another means of getting back to the Tsar. He’ll be too disruptive for the journey back. The Priests and Priestesses are getting upset, just look at them.’

‘Sir,’ a woman said in acknowledgement. Footsteps crunched in the snow and rock as she loped back to the others.

Jack turned his head to the side, trying to squirm free from the knee at his hip, saw the Golden Warrior reach the halted group and speak to several others. After a few minutes, everyone started falling into their lines of rank again, and he saw Cupcake watching him in the group of fledgling Warriors. Her expression was unreadable. He’d not gotten a chance to talk to her since they’d returned to the tent. They hadn’t lied when they’d told him they wanted to keep him isolated.

‘Please,’ Jack said, trying another tack as he turned to meet those golden eyes, before looking at something else because he didn’t want to be the recipient of that fear-trick again. ‘Please just, I mean it. I spoke to her. It wasn’t just- I wasn’t just hearing her last words. I swear. I just left her there. I have to go back.’

‘You’re not going back into the mountain,’ Pitchiner said calmly, his voice firm. ‘May I remind you that you were hallucinating due to the effects of long-term imbibing of psychotropics? How quickly we forget. Do you see the rest of them over there, throwing tantrums because they may have heard their parents? Their siblings?’

‘It was her,’ Jack said, his voice cracking.

And then, because the day couldn’t possibly get any worse, his chest felt like it was crumpling and his face screwed as his eyes began to water. He tried to turn away, to hide his face, he couldn’t even put his palms over his eyes. It was sheer willpower that stopped him from sobbing like a little child, but he couldn’t stop his face reacting, so he couldn’t hide it from the Royal Admiral. Tears streamed, his throat worked, and he had to keep his mouth open and focus on his breathing because there were noises building in him that wanted to be loud, that wanted to bring the whole stupid mountain range down upon them.

The idea of the rest of them hearing him – hearing his voice echo like that – it was an extra level of humiliation he couldn’t handle. He held it in as much as he could. As it was, being pinned by the Royal Admiral of the whole nation, unable to even pull his hands down and hide himself, he felt like the world was chewing through him. He might have survived the initiation, might have even survived a few days confined to bedrest and wondering why nothing affected him properly; but this?

He waited for it, the castigation. The cruel comments that the Royal Admiral seemed to personally enjoy flinging his way whenever he had to be in the same room as Jack. But Pitchiner stayed silent.
Jack couldn’t make himself stop, and being forced to lie like this was awful. Why wouldn’t they just let him go back into the stupid mountain?

Eventually, he risked looking at Pitchiner again, only to see his face in profile. He was looking off into the distance, probably watching everyone else leave. It was a profile Jack knew all too well. It was minted onto the backs of their silver coins. The strong sharp nose, the face set into some kind of perpetual foreboding determination, as though he was always staring at the Darkness he was ready to defeat.

‘I spoke to her,’ Jack said, his voice rough from having forced his body to stay as silent as possible. ‘I did.’

‘No,’ Pitchiner said, not looking at him. ‘And you’d do best to let that go.’

‘Just let me go back,’ Jack said. ‘It was her. I know it was. She knew things no one else knew.’

‘If you knew them,’ Pitchiner said, looking at Jack sidelong, ‘then you could easily have hallucinated them, couldn’t you?’

‘Can you just let my hands go?’

Pitchiner casually held up his right hand. Long pieces of ice hung from his thick black sleeve, and there was a pattern of red jagged marks across his palm that looked like scalding. But Jack could see from the pattern of ice on the fabric, that…that Jack had done it.

‘No,’ Pitchiner said calmly. ‘Not yet.’

‘You can’t stop me from going back,’ Jack said, his teeth clinking together as he tried tugging his wrists free again. Another scrape of the edge of the sword against his skin and he went still, his chest hurting.

‘All right,’ Pitchiner said. ‘Off you go, back to the mountain.’

But Pitchiner didn’t move, and when it became clear that Jack was trapped, Pitchiner only smirked and looked off into the distance again.

‘You’ve made your point,’ Jack spat.

His hip was throbbing. Pitchiner’s knee was bony, and it ground down into Jack’s hip. He tried to squirm out from underneath it, and felt the moment when Pitchiner leaned down harder. Jack swallowed a noise, felt a rush of black, bitter hatred that flooded through him like bile. But he forced himself to stay still. It still scared him, how he’d tried to hurt the Royal Admiral in the tent. How he’d attacked those Golden Warriors outside of the mountain.

He felt like something had gone wrong. And now, days later, he was pretty sure the rest of them felt the same about him too.

‘You didn’t even want me to live. Just let me go back,’ Jack said. ‘You don’t want to have to deal with me, right? So…just let me-’

‘No,’ Pitchiner said. ‘Will you ever start calling me Admiral, I wonder? Do you know how many times I could have sent you to the Disciplinarian by now for your lack of appropriate address?’

‘How about you go fuck yourself,’ Jack muttered, and Pitchiner laughed – still not looking at him. The laugh itself was deep, pleasant, and Jack wriggled to try and get away again. His hands were
clenched into fists. The ground beneath him was a bone-deep cold, but it didn’t feel painful, just weirdly familiar. ‘I’m gonna get back to that mountain, even if you take me all the way back to the city. I’ll just leave. What are you gonna do? Shove me in an Asylum?’

‘You are the property of the Tsar and Tsarina,’ Pitchiner said, finally looking at him, his face sober. ‘Like or not, you will not need to be imprisoned in an Asylum to remember that you’re a captive to the Kingdom. Golden Warriors are not their own, and you’re going to learn that very soon. Whether you’re in an Asylum or not, you will be monitored.’

‘Are we going to join the others?’ Jack said wearily.

‘No,’ Pitchiner said.

Jack thought he said that word an awful lot. Then he frowned and looked the way the others had gone.

‘Shouldn’t you be like…protecting the rest of them? You’re the Royal Admiral.’

‘Now that I know you can say the words, I’ll expect you to use my correct address in the future,’ Pitchiner said. ‘My women and men can handle themselves. As I believe I said to you once before, I am no babysitter. I do not work with people who cannot handle themselves.’

‘What’s the worst that could happen? If you let me go back into the mountain?’

‘You become a disgusting, wretched, impudent ice boy, who becomes possessed by the Darkness. And instead of leaving it in the Black Mountain where it is supposed to stay, you drag it out here, proving what a wonderful combination cold and dark can be for the side that we’re not really supposed to be giving any advantages to.’

‘Oh,’ Jack said, and then he closed his eyes.

Oh.

Could that happen?

‘The Darkness can use someone like you,’ Pitchiner said quietly, his voice far more hushed than before. He looked around carefully, before meeting Jack’s gaze. ‘It’s dangerous. You’re not supposed to bring anything out of that mountain except an ability to learn how to use the golden light. That’s all. The Darkness will consume and destroy any creature it can’t use. But those who can perform magic, who have certain abilities – what a delightful puppet you’d become. Why do you think magic casters aren’t supposed to leave the bounds of the city walls? Now, are you going to behave? Or will I have to concuss you on those rocks over there and drag you back to Lune unconscious?’

Jack frowned. Pitchiner probably meant what he was saying.

‘How are we getting back?’

‘Are you going to behave?’ Pitchiner said again, his voice sharper.

Jack shivered. Nodded.

Truthfully, that was all he often wanted to do. It just never seemed to work out that way. He remained still as Pitchiner removed the handcuffs from his wrists and pocketed them. Then Pitchiner sighed and stood. He pulled up his sword in a single moment and kept it out, holding it
easily in one hand. Jack took a few seconds to think whether it was worth bolting back for the mountain again. He closed his eyes as he pushed himself into a sitting position, scrubbing the tears off his face before pushing himself up. The fatigue that had dogged him for days was back again, and he had to plant his feet to stop himself from swaying.

*I’m sorry, Pippa,* he thought towards the mountain.

He saw his stick nearby, couldn’t remember dropping it. He picked it up and leaned on it, looking not at Pitchiner’s face, but his feet. Well, his boots. They sat midway up his calf, the leather tooled exquisitely, gleaming even though they were caked with snow and dirt. Fluttering around him, the long winter coat he wore, the hems and edges embroidered with gold glyphs of the kind of high Lune alphabet that Jack had no hope of ever being able to understand.

His knees felt like they were going to buckle. He leaned so heavily on the stick that it skidded across the permafrost hidden beneath a layer of snow.

He managed to catch himself, closing his eyes against another wave of queasiness. Nothing had felt quite right since he’d been in that stupid mountain, since the…Darkness, or whatever it was, had been *inside* him. He felt like something fundamental was missing. Like they’d taken an organ, left him without something he didn’t know he needed until it was gone.

‘We’ll be returning to the city now. With the light. I’m using small words so you won’t panic and turn everything – including me – into an icicle.’

‘We’re teleporting?’ Jack gasped. ‘Really? But I thought that was just for special occasions.’

The smile Pitchiner gave him was thin and wearied. Jack was starting to think he shouldn’t talk around him. Ever. Maybe he should just add a Royal Admiral here and there to be respectful. He kept forgetting. And when he didn’t forget, he just didn’t *want* to.

Pitchiner widened his stance and then spun his sword so quickly it blurred. He made the heavy, brutal thing look feather light as he cut into thin air and honeyed golden light spilled out of it. The golden light gathered, coalesced, and then became what must have been a portal even though Jack couldn’t see what was on the other side. Instead of vanishing, as the light often did, it hung in the air, rippling and shimmering.

Jack had never seen this kind of teleportation done before. It wasn’t often used, even on the battlefield. The books said it took too much energy, and that the Royal Admiral was only one of five Golden Warriors who had ever been able to use the technique.

‘If you try and escape me while we’re moving through this portal, you will die. Understand?’

‘Y-Yep,’ Jack said, and then felt shaky when a large hand not carrying the sword wrapped around his wrist.

He looked over his shoulder as he was pulled into the light, wondering if he’d ever get a chance to see the mountain again, hear Pippa’s voice outside of his nightmares. Then, he was touched with gold, suffused with it, and thought about warmth and sunlight and the feeling of light shining through pale translucent leaves.

A few seconds later he was standing on a tiled floor, surrounded by a wide circular wall. In front of him, a staircase that spiralled upwards, a gold bannister with plated ironwork wrought in the shapes of birds in flight. Jack could hear birdsong, fluting and trilling away in the upper levels where the sounds echoed all the way down. The tower was otherwise hushed, the rooms that branched off the
circular room they were in all had their doors closed.

Carved into a plaque above the staircase itself, the words: *The Tower of Memories.*

Pitchiner walked forwards and Jack followed, using his stick to support himself as he was pulled up the spiralling staircase. Higher and higher, until he was out of breath and wheezing, dizzy, spots pinging like tiny fireflies in his vision.

They passed platform after platform, the tower eventually becoming even more airy and light, arched and circular windows along the walls were inlaid with stained glass or opened into fresh air. There were colourful mosaics all over the cream plastered walls, tiny gleaming tiles pieced together in geometric patterns, or showing battle scenes and figures; Jack didn’t recognise most of them.

Finally they stood at what felt like the top of the tower. Jack sagged back against the curved wall and stared at a closed arched door of lacquered wood. Up here, he could smell floral scents, as well as something tropical and fruity. Like mandarins or candied pineapple on the back of his tongue. He knew where they were, he just wasn’t sure why Pitchiner would take him here of all places.

The Royal Admiral rapped smartly on the door, then waited by Jack’s side, glaring out of one of the windows and tapping his boot on the ground.

Jack stared as the huge arched door opened. In the room beyond, he could see light shining overhead through windows, and lanterns everywhere. Limned in white, wearing her bright clothing as always, Spymaster Toothiana leaned against the doorframe and looked between them both as though she’d been expecting them. Which couldn’t have been possible. They weren’t expected to return for days.

‘Royal Admiral,’ she said in greeting. Then she smiled at Jack. ‘And young Jackson Overland. What a pleasant surprise! Congratulations on passing your trials in the Black Mountain.’

‘Not. Quite.’ The Royal Admiral took Jack by the wrist once more and dragged him past Toothiana into a room that was one of the brightest, gaudiest things that Jack had ever seen.

She lived in the top of her tower, and from floor to ceiling – curving almost impossibly – were bookcases filled with thousands of books. Some with stern black and brown leather spines, gleaming or cracking with age. Other spines were bright and shining. Peacock blue alongside imperial purple, a dove grey with silver lettering alongside books with jackets that looked as though they were stamped, flexible gold.

Set into the circular wall were tall, arched doors with more colourful stained glass set in them, depicting fanciful birds and flowers. Jack wondered where the rooms led. One must have been where she slept.

In the centre of the room, a large working desk covered in ledgers and ink quills and inkpots. Behind the desk, a chair that looked more like a sculpture than a chair, with fanciful shining metals woven together until they plumed out at the top. In front of the desk, several more comfortable looking chairs. And then, to the left, a Little Fang – one of Toothiana’s messengers in her spy network – sat with her hands folded in her lap, looking out of place.

This was not the grim room of secrecy that Jack had expected. And yet he could tell from the young woman sitting in a dark suit – staring at him with narrowed eyes – that this was a place where serious business was conducted. But if he’d not known the reputation of Toothiana the Spymaster, he would have assumed she was some kind of whacky librarian with a penchant for too
Phinia, dear,’ Toothiana said, without turning back to the young woman, ‘can you check to see if Duke Ovatne and his sweet wife will be coming to the post-trial celebrations? And if he hedges, do lean on him until he agrees to come.’

‘Of course, Mistress Tooth,’ the young woman said, standing and adjusting the tiny pin on the lapel of her collar. It was a little bird that shone differently depending on how the light hit it – like the alexandrite so favoured by the Tsar and Tsarina. The woman bowed quickly to the Spymaster and the Royal Admiral, and then walked quietly from the room, closing the door behind her.

‘So early!’ Toothiana exclaimed. ‘Tell me it’s good news, Royal Admiral, or I’ll be really upset. Young Jack is looking a bit worse for wear.’

‘He can make ice,’ Pitchiner snarled, letting go of Jack’s wrist and then pushing him forwards with a sharp shove at his lower back, so that Jack staggered and his walking stick slammed down onto a floor made of tiles that were as gold and gleaming as all the fixtures in the room.

Jack wondered if this was the richest place in the whole of Lune. He’d never seen so much real gold at once. There was a candlestick on one of the bookshelves that looked like it might buy him enough clothing to last two or three years.

‘Show her,’ Pitchiner commanded, and Jack stiffened in response. That was a direct order.

He spread his hand and called ice as easily as thinking about seeing it spiral in pretty patterns up the black fabric of his poorly fitting uniform. Just as easy to turn his hand and watch snow fall to the ground. He always felt colder when he called it, his heart raced, but otherwise it didn’t bother him at all.

‘Personally? That’s pretty cool,’ Toothiana said, smiling at the falling snowflakes. ‘But puns aside… Has he been checked by Sanderson?’

‘There’s none of the Darkness in him. He’s not possessed. He went in last and came out with this. I believe it best to take him directly to the Tsar and let him make a judgement on what occurs. Another perversion of the mountain.’

‘Just like me,’ Toothiana said, her smile widening, her face almost beatific. But there was a sharpness in her gaze which she directed at the Royal Admiral now. ‘And our great hero North. Even Sanderson himself, I believe? Oh, who can tell with him? Even you, Royal Admiral.’

‘I came out wielding the golden light and vanquishing the Darkness, pander your conspiracy theories to others, please and thank you.’

‘Really,’ Toothiana said, placing a slender finger beneath Jack’s chin and pressing gently until he met her strange, violet eyes, ‘really, Jack, the Royal Admiral is only here to cross his t’s and dot his i’s. Isn’t he? He doesn’t really care what I have to say. He wants to take you to the Tsar. And then he’ll ask the Tsar if he can put you down. And we don’t want that now, do we?”

‘No,’ Jack said, staring at her in horror. Then he turned to look at Pitchiner. ‘Is that what you were going to do?’

‘Does that sound like me?’ the Royal Admiral said with a faux innocence that didn’t sit well on him.

‘Then,’ Toothiana continued, speaking in a hushed tone, as though she was sharing a secret with
Jack, ‘then, he will be able to go to the dear Tsar himself and say, ‘I have been to see the Spymaster about this already.’ This ice of yours, it’s so pretty! Can you hurt people with it?’

‘I…’ Jack looked between them, suddenly feeling like he was in some kind of trap. ‘M-maybe? Yeah?’

‘And how did you end up with a magic ability like this, when you were only going in there to confront that awful darkness? What did you find down there? In the dark?’

‘I…’

Pitchiner had told him not to share his story. He’d even come back after that first visit and repeated the warning, tried to make Jack promise that he wouldn’t say a word to the Tsar. But Toothiana wasn’t the Tsar, and Jack wasn’t going to lie for someone who still wanted him dead. He might not know the Spymaster well, but she’d been kind to him once, and smiled at him, and that was a damn sight more than the Royal Admiral had ever done for him.

‘There was a ball of magic,’ Jack whispered. ‘My sister told me to touch it and I did and then…this. I guess?’

‘A ball of magic,’ Toothiana said slowly, the words rolling off her tongue like she was savouring them. ‘Do me a favour, Jack? When you see the Tsar, don’t tell him that’s how you found the ice.’

‘Is…this some kind of test?’ Jack said, mouth dry, staring between the two of them. ‘I’m not going to lie to the Tsar. He’ll know! I’m not going to lie!’

The Spymaster and the Royal Admiral both shared a long look. Spymaster Toothiana’s face was grim. Her long-lashed eyes blinked once, slowly, and then she looked at Jack directly.

‘Of course it’s a test,’ she said, but her expression was odd. Jack looked over to Pitchiner, but his expression was so blank that Jack couldn’t read his expression at all. Jack rubbed at his other wrist nervously, his skin crawling. He remembered seeing a poster in an alleyway – how long will you believe the lies of your Tsar? Maybe they were just trying a lot harder to rat out the people who were treasonous. He thought of all those other recruits with him, quietly whispering about how wrong it was that they were doing the initiation so early.

‘I’m not going to lie,’ Jack said again, his voice firmer than before. ‘I’m not going to lie to the Tsar. That’s treason.’

Spymaster Toothiana walked back around her desk and picked up her jade cigarette holder. Carefully, without looking at either of them, she inserted a new cigarette and lit it with a finely crafted lighter. The tip glowed orange as she took a slow drag on it, and a few seconds later she pushed two fingers to the brilliant green earpiece she wore, her gaze going distant. Jack figured she had to be receiving intelligence from one of her many Little Fangs.

After another minute, she rested the cigarette holder in a carved jade ashtray, and Jack watched the ash burn down as she steepled her fingers together.

‘I’m so used to dealing with those who aren’t loyal to Lune that it’s almost surprising when I meet someone who is,’ Toothiana said, with a tired smile. But her eyes flickered to Pitchiner again, and Jack had no idea what they were communicating to each other. Was the Royal Admiral really going to see if Jack needed to be put down? Like an animal? He wasn’t possessed, he’d lost count of how many times they’d proven that to themselves.

‘Please,’ Jack said, staring at her. ‘I passed, didn’t I? There’s a bit of gold in my eyes. They even
said. I haven’t got any of the Darkness in me. They’ve tested. Over and over. And I have this ice too. No one’s even checked to see if I can even make the light yet, and maybe I can! Can’t you…I don’t know- Can’t you do something?’

‘No,’ Pitchiner said, as Toothiana leaned into the high-back of her chair, an assessing gaze in her eyes.

‘You’re going to tell him to kill me,’ Jack said, glaring at him. ‘I wasn’t asking you.’

Toothiana laughed, the sound melodic. Her eyes sparkled with real warmth for the first time since she’d told him not to tell the truth to the Tsar.

‘Seems you’ve made a friend, Kozmotis,’ she said, beaming at him. ‘I wouldn’t worry, Jack. The great Tsar isn’t in the habit of killing newly made Golden Warriors! Quite the opposite in fact. Royal Admiral, would you give me a moment with our young Jack, please?’

‘Absolutely not,’ Pitchiner said, shifting behind Jack. ‘You’ll have it later. If at all.’

Toothiana looked like she was ready to argue, and her peaceful face had suddenly transformed into one of passion and glinting eyes. But then she subsided, finally reaching down to her cigarette holder and knocking the ash off the dwindling cigarette. She didn’t have anymore, and the cigarette would burn itself out soon.

‘Then you’d best see the Tsar after all, right?’ she said. ‘Honestly, I don’t know why you bother coming here sometimes. You could just tell him that you’d visited, and not actually waste my time. It’s not only you who’s busy, Royal Admiral. If all the living shadows were vanquished tomorrow, you’d be out of a job – I would not.’

‘Hey,’ Jack said quietly. ‘Can I sit down, just for like…a second?’

Toothiana’s forehead creased, and she nodded, gesturing towards one of the chairs. Jack walked towards it, sat clumsily, pressed a cold hand to his forehead. His body temperature wasn’t as frigid as it had been. But the Priests and Priestesses had determined that he ran colder than everyone else now. His hands and feet almost always felt cold. Even the inside of his mouth was colder than it used to be.

Who would he talk to about the week he’d just had? Jamie was gone. Jack wanted to speak to Cupcake again to at least say thank you, but he had no idea if he was even going to be alive at the end of the day.

Soldiers weren’t supposed to start shaking. They weren’t supposed to hunch over in chairs they’d never sat in before. And they weren’t meant to do it in front of two of the most important people in the nation.

He couldn’t stop himself. Even his eyes still felt scratchy.

‘Can I just, uh, have a nap before you ask the Tsar if you can kill me?’

Toothiana made a soothing croon just as Pitchiner said: ‘I do not have the time to deal with this, and if you-’

‘This works out so well!’ Toothiana exclaimed, standing and clapping her hands together. ‘How about you go and report to the Minister and let him know how many new Golden Warriors we can be expecting, since you’re back early. And Jack can stay here and he can have a rest and a warm drink and we can have a little chat. Perfect! Well then, I expect I’ll see you back here in about an
hour? Two at the latest?’

‘Lady Toothiana, if you-’

‘I insist,’ Toothiana said, even though her tone was warm and her smile was wide, she looked very dangerous indeed. ‘It’s not that hard, Royal Admiral, for me to make a meeting with Tsarina Agnessa and say to her, ‘oh no, that Pitchiner, I don’t think he’s as stable as he used to be…’ There are Warriors vying to become your replacement, as you know, and I have many, many favours I can call in at a moment’s notice. Give the boy a break, for Darkness’ sake! I’m asking you for an hour or two.’

‘To poison his mind,’ Pitchiner growled.

Jack was still shaking. Refused to look around. Whatever was happening, he didn’t want to get involved, even though they were talking about him. He just wanted to go home, but he wasn’t sure what counted for home now. He knew that he probably wouldn’t be allowed to go back to his barracks.

Guess I won’t have to see Crossholt again, that’s something.

‘Dear, you know I care about Lune just as much as you do. Now, as I said, you catch up with your business and I’ll catch up with mine. Thank you ever so much for visiting, Royal Admiral, I do value your time, you see. I don’t wish to take up any more of it.’

A pregnant pause, then the sound of heavy footsteps, and a door opening and then slamming loudly. Jack flinched at the noise, hunched over himself until his forearms rested on his thighs.

Toothiana sighed, walked past him and then there was the click of a latch as the door was locked.

‘Now then,’ she said in a huff, ‘how snarly he is today. I suppose no one likes to see that many recruits prematurely die in the Black Mountain.’

‘Yeah,’ Jack laughed, ‘because he’s so cut up about it.’

‘Oh, believe me, he is,’ Toothiana said, ignoring his sarcasm. ‘But enough about that. Can I sit next to you?’

‘It’s your tower,’ Jack said, and then closed his eyes. Toothiana sat right next to him and moved the chair closer, and Jack blinked in shock when her hand rested on his back.

‘We have to have a talk,’ she said. ‘But first, how about we just sit here for a while? Have you ever had a hot chocolate before?’

Jack turned sideways to stare at her. Of course he hadn’t. Chocolate was far too expensive, and he’d never be able to afford it on his allowance. Not when he was a kid being raised in the Overland creche, and not since he’d become a recruit either.

‘We can do that in a minute,’ she said. ‘Promise.’

She rubbed his back gently, like he remembered doing for Pippa when they were younger. He had to look at his lap again, his eyes burning once more. He focused instead on slow breaths, pausing at each inhale and exhale. He was a mess.

He wanted to lean into her. But instead he stayed hunched and kept his eyes closed. He didn’t know who he was supposed to trust anymore.
The Tsar

Chapter Notes

Thanks for your patience, folks! I wrote myself into a bit of a dead end with this chapter (did I ever) and had to gut the whole thing and start again to make it work. And thank you so much for the comments! You all rock <3 Going back and reading them really helped me to stay motivated when I found myself in the 'cul de sac of winging it.'

‘Come on, honey.’

A jostling at his shoulder, and Jack woke with a start, bits of ice shooting from his fingers as he stiffened in the chair. Toothiana was already three steps back from him, eyebrows raised, a bemused smile on her face. She held two tall glasses of something dark brown, tilting her head at him.

‘Want some?’

‘Yeah,’ Jack said, feeling disoriented. How long had he slept? One moment the Spymaster had said she was leaving to get some refreshments, and the next… It couldn’t have been more than ten or twenty minutes, but it felt much longer. His brain wasn’t coming back to wakefulness properly. He still felt drugged, which was impossible – they’d given them all enough time to clear the drugs from their systems at the mountain.

Jack then realised that he’d gotten flakes and chunks of ice everywhere – on his pants, on the floor, on the…blanket? He stared at the blanket around his shoulders, even as he absently brushed off his pants.

‘How long did you let me sleep?’ Jack said.

‘An hour. I couldn’t give you much longer, poor thing. The Admiral will be back soon. Likely to deliver you to the Tsar, I expect. Now, have some. Here. Careful, it’s warm. I’m not sure how that will feel with your…abilities.’

Jack hesitated, touching his fingertips to the glass. It was far hotter than he expected, but not painfully so. He wrapped both palms around it, staring at the way frost started to creep from his fingers over the glass. He furrowed his brows, willed it to stop, and it did. When he looked up, Toothiana was watching the glass as closely as he’d been watching it.

‘They said it went wrong,’ Jack said, sniffing the contents of the glass. Real chocolate. He could hardly believe it. He didn’t even know what it was supposed to smell like. But it was sweet, faintly bitter, and there was something that could have been spices. But even those weren’t familiar. Something woody and sharp at the same time, even comforting. He held it close to his face without drinking it. ‘The initiation. I went last.’

‘You’re here, alive, and the golden light doesn’t harm you, so I’m not sure how wrong it went,’ Toothiana said, beaming at him. ‘I was surprised, before, that you’re so loyal to the Tsar. Your friend Jamie – the one who went to the hospital for shadow sickness? I remember you mentioning
him. But he deserted, didn’t he?’

Jack looked up from the glass and met her thickly lashed, violet eyes.

‘Yeah,’ Jack said, his voice going hoarse. He hated this part. ‘He’s a…he’s a traitor.’

‘Mm,’ Toothiana said, nodding like they were sharing a secret together. ‘Yes, well, deserting is quite common these days. Usually roommates desert in pairs. I’m surprised he didn’t take you with him.’

‘I’m not a…’ Jack frowned, took a sip of the liquid chocolate to cover his confusion. It was far sweeter than he’d expected, and the bitterness came afterwards. It was thick, and he could taste a kind of sediment on his tongue. He took another sip and clutched the glass tighter to himself. ‘He just- I didn’t know. Until the day he left.’

‘Did he tell you to come with him?’ Toothiana asked not unkindly.

‘I wouldn’t have gone,’ Jack said. That much, at least, was true. ‘I needed- I need to be a Golden Warrior.’

‘And so you are,’ Toothiana said.

‘Am I?’ Jack said, staring down at the contents of the glass. The chocolate clung to the sides where he’d tipped it. Stuck thickly to the rim of the glass. He licked at his lips absently. ‘I mean- They said it went wrong. So I’m not- I’m not possessed, and I can do ice or…something. Shit, I mean, sorry, what’s going to happen now? And why…why does the Admiral kind of want me dead?’

Toothiana leaned back in her chair, then after a moment she picked up her cigarette holder and stared at it, before lighting the cigarette itself. The herbal scent of smoke filled the air. Jack realised she hadn’t taken a single sip of her drink.

‘Who knows why the Admiral does anything,’ she said, after blowing out a thin spire of smoke. ‘You provoked his ire on the platform that day. And it’s always a concern when someone comes out from that mountain with powers they aren’t intended to have.’

‘He said…the Darkness, if it got me, it could use me now. Instead of just…kill me?’

‘Yes,’ Toothiana said seriously. ‘That is true. But it’s the same with many of us. When I came out of that mountain, I—’

‘You?’ Jack said, staring at her and accidentally spilling some of the drink on his thigh. It was only a small amount, but he swore again, and then put the glass down on her desk and felt awkward, even though she was laughing gently.

‘Of course, silly,’ Toothiana said. ‘But I’m not a Golden Warrior, now, am I?’

‘What powers did you get?’ Jack said. ‘I mean- Can I ask that? Is that okay?’

‘It’s no secret,’ Toothiana said. ‘But I suppose that my story doesn’t travel as far and as fast as it used to. As for my power, it’s not much, really. A trifling thing. I’m eidetic, a walking library. I contain the memories of everyone I have ever heard of or chosen to research. The books in this tower are to facilitate others, I need nothing more than what I carry in my head.’

‘You got that from the mountain?’ Jack said, staring at her. ‘But that’s so…weird.’
Toothiana laughed, the sound melodic and warming. Jack felt himself smile in response to it, even though his lips felt stiff.

‘I guess it is,’ Toothiana said, ‘and yet it’s been so useful to the Tsar and to Lune.’

‘But…isn’t that a problem? Remembering everything ever?’

‘It’s not quite everything ever,’ Toothiana said, putting down the cigarette holder and taking a long drink of the hot chocolate. Until then, Jack realised he’d suspected she might have put something in his, even though he’d kept drinking it. ‘It’s…selective. Names, dates, years…the kind of information that most people forget in an instant, it’ll be there for me. Poof! I’ll just remember. I train my Little Teeth to have a good facility for memory recall too. That is where the real information is, Jack. In the connections you can make between something that happened two hundred years ago, and something happening now.’

‘But…so you saw the magic ball too? Did you- Did you hear anyone?’

‘In the mountain?’ Toothiana said, smiling sadly. ‘I heard many people from my past that I’d lost. Every single one. They wanted me to remember them, begged me and yes, I can remember it like it happened only yesterday.’

‘Wow,’ Jack said, leaning forwards, wishing he could talk with her forever. He’d never talked to anyone in a position of such power who just...talked to him. ‘You know, my sister and I were…playing in the snow the day she- the day she went away. With the ice. Do you think it’s connected?’

‘Those of us who have come out of that mountain touched differently, suspect there’s a reason for it, Jack. But you’ll come to that in your own time.’ She tilted her head and smiled warmly at him, and he found himself smiling back.

‘But,’ Jack said, remembering something, ‘you said you’re not a Golden Warrior. And you said I am? Do you mean…did I fail? Am I just…I mean I know why they made me go last. I know. I wasn’t ready.’

It was the first time he’d said the words aloud, and hearing them felt like a judgement that Crossholt was passing upon him, complete with a sneer on his face.

‘Look at my eyes,’ Toothiana said, leaning forwards herself. ‘Look closely. Do you see any gold at all?’

‘No, they’re…purple? Violet? Did the mountain do that to you?’

‘No,’ she said, smiling. ‘That’s my heritage. I secretly didn’t want my eyes to change colour, and I can’t help but think…maybe I changed the outcome for myself. I’m so glad I did. I’m not made for that war out there. I can fight, I can fight well, but I much prefer the way it is now. But you, Jack, your eyes – silver, yes, and beautiful – but around them, I can see that gold of a Golden Warrior. I don’t know how much of one you’ll be, I don’t know how much of the light you can make, but that quality of gold? It only touches those meant to make the light. That’s what I know. Take heart, Jack, I know it’s all very frightening, but you have friends in high places now. You can always come to me if you want to talk.’

‘What?’ Jack said, staring at her. ‘But- You’re busy, and-’

‘I mean it,’ Toothiana said. ‘I’d like that, and oh-’ She turned at the sharp rap on the door and sighed, picking up her cigarette holder once more. ‘I believe that’s our Royal Admiral, come to
She leaned back in her chair once more, called for Pitchiner to enter, and the Admiral did, looking between them suspiciously. When he saw the hot chocolates and the blanket, he rolled his eyes.

‘Please don’t coddle him,’ he said.

‘I don’t take my orders from you,’ Toothiana said sweetly, tapping some ash off into the jade ashtray. ‘Have you come to collect him? A shame to see the boy go. We had such a chat.’

A muscle in Pitchiner’s jaw leapt, but he stayed silent, gesturing for Jack to get up. He tapped his foot as Jack untangled himself from the blanket. He still felt a bit shaky on his feet, he needed far more than an hour’s sleep that was for sure. Then he frowned at the hot chocolate, he hadn’t even managed to drink it all. It was such a waste.

‘Don’t worry,’ Toothiana said, realising, ‘I’ll finish it for you. We can do this again another time. I don’t imagine you’ve ever had lassi before either? Or kulfi?’

‘Stop spoiling him,’ Pitchiner said, holding the door open and gesturing for Jack to walk past him.

‘Let me think about it and get back to you,’ Toothiana said, her smile broadening so that her teeth were showing. ‘How’s that? Now, don’t you have a terribly important meeting to attend? Do try not to get him killed, Royal Admiral. And have a nice day!’

Pitchiner muttered something under his breath and once Jack was through the door, slammed it shut. He began walking briskly, and Jack kept up. His forehead furrowed when he realised that Toothiana had said she wanted to have a ‘little chat’ with him, and all they’d done was talk more about her. He looked over his shoulder, confused. Had she wanted Pitchiner to think they were going to talk about more than they did? But why?

‘I don’t get any of this,’ Jack said.

‘Even if you did,’ Pitchiner said, ‘it wouldn’t help.’

*  

It didn’t take as long as Jack thought it would, for them to arrive at the Palace of Lune. A carriage pulled by fine-boned dapple grey horses had drawn them all the way to the main entrance, and Pitchiner had led Jack through the giant rooms and halls far too quickly for Jack to take in the opulence around him. Admiral Pitchiner talked to varying people as he’d entered, seeming as comfortable here as he did anywhere else.

Now, they finally stood in another vast room, and Jack tried not to look completely out of place, unable to stop himself from staring.

‘His Imperial Majesty, Tsar Lunanoff, will join you in the sunroom at his earliest convenience,’ said an impeccably dressed woman who must have been yet another kind of servant or butler. Jack didn’t even know. He grasped his stupid stick and felt out of place. He had never seen so much gold in his entire life. It plated the plaster mouldings on the roof so high above them that Jack had no idea how it was kept clean. It danced along the cornices in curlicues. The walls were painted with striking, vibrant paint muted to soft tones – wars of the past that Jack didn’t know about because the history they were taught only extended back so far. Here, it was not only wars depicting Golden Warriors fighting the living Darkness, but the Old Wars, when Lune fought other nations.
The paintings stretched, contained by no frames, broken up only by doorways and arches, windows of real glass that let the sun pour through. Jack turned in slow circles and wondered what it was like to be surrounded by all this history.

‘Stop gawping,’ the Admiral snapped.

But he didn’t seem particularly concerned when Jack didn’t, only annoyed that Jack couldn’t seem to contain his wonder. Admiral Pitchiner had affected a look of great boredom, but Jack could see the expression wasn’t quite smooth. Jack couldn’t interpret what was going on beneath the surface. Agitation?

‘Are we the richest nation in all the universe?’ Jack said, breathless. ‘Are we?’

‘Oh, no my dear, not yet that,’ said another voice – amused and containing a hint of laughter in it. Jack whirled and then bowed as low as he could at the waist when he saw that it was the Tsar.

Jack’s eyes were wide, he stared nervously at the tiles. Even here, the marble was all inlaid with gold, and every tile was bordered with carved ornate writing that looked like it might be spells or charms. Jack heard the brief shuffle of Admiral Pitchiner giving a bow that must have been quite shallow.

It made Jack realise that he was among people who were far, far above him. The Admiral himself didn’t even need to bow to the Tsar properly.

‘Up, up,’ the Tsar said, and Jack gasped when he felt fingers at his shoulder. ‘Come now, let’s not stand on ceremony in here. As to your question, we are not yet the richest nation in the universe. But we’re closer than we were, isn’t that right, Pitch?’

*Pitch?*

‘That is correct, Your Imperial Majesty.’

‘Don’t be formal on my account,’ the Tsar said, his voice surprisingly droll. ‘Are you trying to impress this little one? Or trying to remind me that you have manners? We’re long past that.’

The Admiral laughed quietly, and Jack rose at the insistent prodding of the Tsar and looked up at a face that he’d seen on coins since he was a young boy. Up close, the Tsar was almost like a painting, with smooth, clear skin marred only by a triangle of beauty marks at the side of his right eye. His eyes were thickly lashed with a warm brown, making the light grey of his irises stand out all the more. Honey brown hair fell in lustrous waves, not a single strand out of place. His nose was arched, but seeing it face to face was strange, for Jack was mostly used to seeing it in proud profile.

He was beautiful, and he looked like he contained the wisdom of ages in those eyes, even as his skin showed the youth of a body well cared for. Jack swallowed and lowered his eyes to the Tsar’s chest. It was the first time he’d seen him in something that wasn’t the regalia he wore in posters and on coins or during military events. A pale grey shirt with buttons made of pearl, and embroidery on the collar in stars and starbursts. Simple pants that looked like they were made of the softest leather, and dyed a steely blue-grey that Jack had never seen before. His boots shone, not a single scratch on them.

‘You’re back early,’ the Tsar said, turning to the Admiral. His smile was almost boyish. ‘I take it we have a special exception then.’

The Tsar of Lunanoff turned his gaze back to Jack and his wide-eyed good humour vanished behind narrowed eyes. And Jack tried not to swallow, because this was someone who took the
nation to war, who maintained the Asylums, who held his life in the balance.

‘And what happened to you then, young man? Down there? In the dark?’

‘Uh,’ Jack said, looking down and thinking that he was addressing the Tsar, and that his voice wasn’t worthy, or that his whole body wasn’t worthy, and that if Jamie could see him now. Shit, Jack thought, Jamie wouldn’t believe any of this. ‘Um. Y-Your Imperial Majesty, I- There was- I found a ball of magic. I mean, I think it was magic? I don’t know. I don’t know what it was. I heard my sister. And then there was a- But I don’t know what happened.’

‘Quick,’ the Tsar said breathlessly, ‘someone make him our new storyteller!’

The Tsar laughed – the only one in the room doing so – the sound of it bouncing off the walls. Jack blinked, began to frown, and then startled when he felt cool fingers underneath his chin. But when he looked up, the Tsar’s expression wasn’t cruel, but soft, a gentle smile playing around the corners of his mouth.

‘Well, well, you have been through an ordeal, after all, haven’t you? Poor thing. You brought him straight to me, Pitch? Cruel sod. So you have magic then? You’d best show me, and we can decide how we can make that work in our military.’

‘H-here?’ Jack said, staring around at the paintings on the walls. He couldn’t. By the Light, he’d be put to death just for icing the Palace. ‘Um…’

‘What young master Overland here is trying to say,’ Pitchiner said, ‘is that his newfound powers are rather destructive, and unless you want everything nearby coated in ice, we’d best move this outside.’

‘Is that so?’ the Tsar said, sounding excited. ‘Ice? That’s a new one, isn’t it?’

‘It is,’ Pitchiner said. He sounded as bored as the Tsar sounded enthused.

‘Then we’ll take this to the loggia. Come along, the both of you, let’s go.’ The Tsar bounded off with an energy that seemed most unlike his more regal self, where he was always so calm and composed. But then, Jack supposed, he had to lead a nation, so he probably tried to hide the more playful parts of his personality from the public.

The loggia, it turned out, was a second storey balcony framed with arches, stretching so far left and right that Jack couldn’t see the ends of it. The arches opened into gardens of well-tended plants and trees that stretched so high Jack had to arch his neck all the way back to see the tops.

But even here, the columns were etched in gold, gleaming with embedded faceted crystals. It was beginning to hurt Jack’s eyes. The light glinting off the planes of gemstones, the richness in the colours everywhere. Even the vivid greens of the trees and shrubs, the blaze of colour in flowers that he’d never seen before – some he’d only heard of in books and rumours, like the ocean-scented sealotus, that bloomed upon the waves and could be coaxed to grow in salted fishponds.

‘Your Imperial Majesty, I-I don’t have like…control over it,’ Jack said. ‘I mean, even here…I could still damage- I wouldn’t want to- I mean it’s the Palace and-’

‘Oh don’t worry about that,’ the Tsar said, waving his hand dismissively. ‘There are people here to deal with that sort of thing, should anything of the sort happen. So hurry along now, we don’t have all day. Or, you might, but I am quite a busy man.’

‘Yes, um, sure, Your Imperial Majesty.’ Jack gripped his stick even harder and took several steps
back from both of them, wanting space. He’d not had much of a chance to explore this on his own, and frankly, even though it felt natural to call the ice to his fingertips, it also scared him to not know exactly what he could do yet. He didn’t know how powerful he was, and that meant he didn’t know how dangerous he was, and he didn’t know how to avoid showing them something that might make the Tsar decide he wasn’t worth keeping around.

Jack forced his eyes closed, frowning a little at the darkness behind his eyelids. But it was still better than the glaring lights, the swirl of paints and colours and scenes that overloaded his senses. Even here, tiny white diamonds pinged in his vision, an aftermath of all that brightness.

He opened his lungs, breathed deep, found cold where there was none. He didn’t know how, but it was in him. Ice flew to his fingertips, chilled his body until he could feel his body temperature sinking. There were a handful of seconds where he shivered and then he adjusted. It felt as natural as if it had always been there. When he opened his eyes again, he looked down at the frost that had crept in fern like patterns over his hands, over his soldier’s uniform, even the stick he carried with him.

There, on the ground, he could see a starburst of frost sprawling out around him.

How could anything so beautiful be bad? He blinked at it, because he’d done that, hardly even thinking about it.

_I really have no control over this at all, by the Light, how am I meant to do this? For the Tsar?_

But Jack pointed the stick he’d brought with him out towards the gardens, hardly knowing where to aim. In the end he pointed his stick towards a tree that he hoped – prayed – might be sturdy enough for whatever he was going to do. He hardly knew.

He thought of how he’d attacked the Golden Warriors that had come for him after the initiation. Thought of his ice spiralling out of control when he’d tried to run back to his sister. It was easy, now, to remember that trapped, restless need to defend himself.

Ice blasted forth, jagged power no longer an expression of beauty, but pure force. Ice in both icicle and small pellet form made hard, hammering noises as it hit the bole of the tree, causing birds to squawk and chatter in alarm, flying up from the gardens in fright. Jack stared at them, distracted, the ice halting. There was one bird that was red and gold, with a large trailing tail, a huge train of long feathers that ended in impossibly blue disks. As Jack watched it fly towards the opposite balcony, he thought of fantastic creatures in children’s books and looked at the gardens again with new wonder in his eyes.

He felt like he was in a dream.

The ice was still around him, and when he finally turned back to the Tsar and the Admiral, he hoped their shocked expressions weren’t ones of horror.

The Tsar clapped his hands together, not once, but several times, yet the gaze he turned to the Admiral wasn’t childlike at all. His lips pulled together in a tight smile.

‘You know what this means, Pitch,’ the Tsar said.

‘I haven’t the faintest,’ Pitchiner said, watching Jack, his expression now carefully blank.

‘We can train him up. You can do it, since you did such a good job with the last one.’

Pitchiner’s eyebrows pulled together and he turned to look at the Tsar, showing such disdain on his
face that Jack felt almost nauseated seeing it. How did people do that to the Tsar? Treat him so?

‘You do remember what happened to the last one, don’t you?’ Pitchiner said.

‘The citizens need it. Imagine how they’ll rally,’ the Tsar said. He walked lightly up to Jack and then deliberately dragged his boot tip through the ice frosting the tiles. ‘This young, unlikely soldier. An Overland at that, to give the peasants hope. Though of course we’ll need to change his surname now. How many criminal Overlands do we have out of that creche? Too many, I believe.’

‘Far too many,’ Pitchiner said, frowning. ‘However, on the matter of training—’

‘We’ll get him his own uniform. Something in white, wait- no- blue and white? What do you think? Not that I care for your opinions on the sartorial, but let’s pretend. I’ll ask Agnessa, she’ll know.’

‘He has been up for disciplinary action more times than I—’

‘That’s what the training is for,’ the Tsar said, ruffling Jack’s hair affectionately, and then clucking under his tongue when more of it fell away. Then, as Jack opened his mouth to apologise for his hair sullying the Tsar’s fingers, the Tsar peered down and looked at the top of his head, and Jack felt his own shoulders lock. ‘He’s made for this, Pitch. You should come see for yourself. I do believe he’s growing in white hair.’

‘From the shock, no doubt,’ Pitchiner said, ‘of only just surviving the ordeal and coming out the other side a poor excuse for a Golden Warrior.’

Thanks, Jack thought, shooting a quick glare to the Admiral. Thanks a bunch.

‘Keeping in mind that ice is useless against the Darkness,’ Pitchiner added. ‘Train him if you must, perhaps he can provide snow days for the children in the outreaches.’

‘Tch,’ the Tsar said, lifting Jack’s chin and looking down at him once more. Jack felt like the Tsar wasn’t seeing him at all, but some distant vision. Jack’s breathing came faster, he still didn’t understand what was going on. ‘You’re such a cynic. But our people, they don’t need your cynicism. Your stoicism can only attract so many new recruits into the fold. We need hope. After the latest attack – the Darkness so close to myself and my lovely wife? The citizens see it for what it is – you let them get too close to Lune.’

Pitchiner’s lips thinned, his eyes sparked, and for a second Jack thought he was even going to shout. But the Admiral said nothing at all, and the Tsar scowled at him for several seconds longer, before looking down at Jack and petting the side of his cheek with the flat of his hand. The touches weren’t light, even stung slightly. Jack thought perhaps they were supposed to be rousing.

‘Have we tested this ice against the Darkness?’ the Tsar said. ‘Do you know? Or are you lying to me, Royal Admiral?’

‘It’s not been tested, but you know as well as I do—’

‘Let’s remember that I know better than you do,’ the Tsar said, and all the lightness in his voice vanished as he walked away from Jack and stalked over to Pitchiner, folding his arms behind his back and leaning towards him until Pitchiner took a step backwards. ‘You are getting old, no longer the young and fresh face of our military. Like as not, Pitch, but you will not live forever. And I need to think beyond our friendship, Comrade, and look toward the future. Of course, I can see he is not fit for leading. But the potential…what he could represent – the young Overland, peasant stock with magic, a fantastic magic that would bring them forth, tumbling over themselves
not only for the *Light*, but for more? You’d dare block that?"

‘He is rude and feckless,’ Pitchiner said slowly, ‘and I tell you with the considered experience of my years, that he is not what you wish him to be.’

‘We can’t simply let him go into the regular regimented training,’ the Tsar said. ‘So the Asylums then? But that is a vicious thing to wish upon a young lad who has yet to prove himself. You just don’t want him to go back with you.’

‘There are *others* who can deal with this,’ Pitchiner said, his voice firm.

‘I want you,’ the Tsar said. ‘So it will be you. He can stay in your wing until we decide what to do with him. You have enough rooms, cast him off into one of them and teach him some skills in comportment and we’ll see what shall happen.’

‘We are fighting a war,’ Pitchiner said, squaring his shoulders. ‘I need to be giving my attention where it can best be used. We have only *just* had our new initiates pass through into what it is to be a Golden Warrior, and you want me to be a glorified babysitter because you can’t think of what to do with him?’

The Tsar went quiet, and for a while, Jack could feel a tension so thick that it made his throat tighten. His hand was sticking to his staff, iced to it. Watching these two argue with each other was terrifying.

‘Kozmotis,’ the Tsar said.

Pitchiner’s first name was delivered quietly, with only the barest hint of reprimand, and yet Jack felt it like a blow in the room. He held his breath, watched whatever battle seemed to be raging within Pitchiner’s mind, because he couldn’t quite keep it from his face.

Finally, Pitchiner closed his eyes briefly, then bowed his head in acknowledgement.

‘Give him a chance,’ the Tsar said, his voice just as quiet as before. ‘You know we need this.’

‘As you wish,’ Pitchiner said, but his face had been schooled to impassiveness, and Jack knew that this wasn’t over, and that his future – perhaps his life – was still in the balance.

‘I don’t want you back with the others just yet. Take a measure of his powers and report back to me. Now, you look like you could both do with some sleep, you’d best get some, we have an exciting few weeks ahead of us!’

Pitchiner nodded again, keeping his head bowed this time, and the Tsar spun and winked at Jack, before walking from the room at a brisk pace. When he was gone, Jack heard a faint, cheerful whistled tune pick up and then after a few measures, it stopped – the Tsar disappearing behind closed doors, or the tune petering out.

Jack stood there in the loggia, feeling the breeze on his skin, realising that his body temperature was still far lower than usual. The tension in his body hadn’t left.

Pitchiner didn’t even look at Jack when he turned and left the balcony, and it took Jack a moment to realise that he was meant to follow. He slipped briefly on the ice he’d made, before finding his feet again, running after Pitchiner, feeling out of breath even though he’d just mostly stood there and watched them argue.

Instead of moving through the main halls, back the way they’d come, Pitchiner walked deeper into
the Palace. Then, as Jack thought that his senses couldn’t possibly get more overwhelmed, Pitchiner opened what must have been a servant’s entrance and then they were walking down a narrow, non-decorated hall that had many plain doors leading off it. But the hall went on and on, and eventually after many lefts and rights, the narrow hall terminated in yet another plain door that looked just as unrecognisable as the rest.

It was a labyrinth, and Jack had no hope of finding his way around. Twenty minutes of this, and Jack felt dazed. How big was the Palace?

Pitchiner opened the door, and Jack blinked as they entered a large, domed room. It was empty, but for a plinth in the middle and what looked like a sundial, except it was far too complicated and a little unlike any sundial Jack had ever seen. The floors were some midnight blue stone flecked with mica and – Jack wasn’t quite surprised anymore to see it – probably more gold. The walls were painted with a glossy midnight paint, occasionally swirling into indigo and violet, and all around, Jack saw the constellations of Lune – these ones unmoving, permanently in place.

Above them, wedges of sky were visible, but the glass was tinted, and Jack couldn’t even tell how bright it was out there.

At regular intervals, doors lacquered in the same motif – each one a stylised sun, rays radiating outwards in yellow, white and gold.

‘Where are we?’ Jack said. He cringed when his voice echoed off the gloss and lacquer and tiles. The domed room speaking for him, amplifying what he’d said, before his voice fell away.

Pitchiner didn’t turn to look at him, hadn’t even checked to see Jack had been keeping up. But now his steps slowed and he looked around the great room himself.

‘My wing,’ Pitchiner said, his voice muted. His voice didn’t echo quite so much, he seemed to know how to talk in this room.

‘You live in the Palace?’ Jack said, trying to make his voice softer. ‘But…I thought you lived with the Golden Warriors.’

‘Only when needed,’ Pitchiner said.

Pitchiner’s shoulders rose and fell in what could have been a silent sigh or a deep breath. Then Pitchiner turned decisively and walked over to one of the sun-doors, opening it and once more not waiting to see if Jack would follow. Now Jack walked through a narrow arched corridor, this one not painted or tiled. It was only a bare ochre plaster that – after everything Jack had seen – felt calming. He reached out and brushed his hand across one of the lights set into the wall, then cringed at the shadows he created.

‘Why is your wing so big?’ Jack said, needing to fill the silence, even as he risked Pitchiner’s wrath. The idea of being stuck in this huge place, this huge silent place, set his teeth on edge. The Overland creche had been filled with peasant children, and his sister had always been chatty. The barracks where he’d stayed with Jamie had never been quiet. And there were stories and fables about soldiers dying in the quietness of space, and Jack didn’t know how Pitchiner could stand it.

‘Do all those doors lead to places that belong to you?’

‘Use your imagination,’ Pitchiner said, sounding impatient and tired.

‘They are?’ Jack said. His voice had crept up in pitch, and he could hear his own desperation now. ‘What’s going to happen to me?’
‘You were there,’ Pitchiner said, throwing open a door. ‘You heard.’

‘I don’t know what I heard,’ Jack said. ‘I don’t know—’

He blinked at the room before him. Large and dark, with that same tinted glass – in arched panes now – opening out to the sky. A bed in the middle of the room, larger than anything Jack had ever seen, a four poster draped in gossamered curtains of blue. But then, strangely, almost half the room looked set aside for training. There were mats on the floor for manoeuvres, safe enough to fall on. There were braces and brackets on the walls with weapons set into them, including swords. It was a surprisingly large space, and yet it felt entirely unused. Jack could see a fine layer of dust on everything now that he looked closer. Even the floor…looking down he saw his own footprints in the dust. Pitchiner’s too.

Didn’t they have servants to clean this kind of thing?

‘This is your room now,’ Pitchiner said. ‘Someone will be by to bring you food and check your health over. Do try not to ice the room.’

‘I’m staying here?’ Jack said. ‘This is- But the barracks—’

‘Yes, yes, it’s all a shock, you don’t know what to do with yourself, etcetera,’ Pitchiner said, turning to face him, one eyebrow rising. ‘Do please continue, it’s very endearing.’

‘Fuck you,’ Jack said, feeling some dark, antagonistic thing launch up from a pit in his gut. But he managed to wrangle it down, even as Pitchiner didn’t look surprised that Jack had reacted in that way. It didn’t seem to matter what Jack did, what he said. He wasn’t even calling him the Admiral. ‘How did you feel? The first time you had to deal with all of this shit?’

‘The first time I had to deal with ‘all of this shit’ as you so gracefully put it, I successfully passed my initiation and I was among my peers in a group of good cheer and solidarity. You’re an anomaly.’

‘No more than Spymaster Toothiana!’ Jack said. ‘She said!’

‘She’s wrong,’ Pitchiner said. ‘It is in her nature to soothe the wayward.’

Pitchiner turned to leave and Jack took a step towards him, too scared to reach out, but not ready for him to leave.

‘Wait,’ Jack said, his voice cracking. He watched as Pitchiner walked to the door they’d come through, and only when his hand was on the door handle did the Royal Admiral pause. ‘The Tsar said there was a ‘last one.’ What did that mean? What happened to the last one?’

Pitchiner turned then, his lips curling up in a smile that held no humour, something bitter in the cant of his eyes. Jack felt his heart pounding, could feel himself making frost without meaning to - etching patterns along his skin and the floor.

‘What always happens. He died.’

Jack watched as Pitchiner closed the door behind him, leaving Jack alone in a room too vast, decorated in the colours of night.
The Admiral's Daughter

Chapter Notes

As for this chapter, well. Everyone has a breaking point. Jack is a hot, hot mess. Omg. A hot mess. (Pitchiner's a hot mess too, but he's better at hiding it. FOR NOW).

Jack woke, sneezing from the dust that plumed up from the covers as he shifted. He yelped in shock when he saw a small apparition at the foot of his bed. He blinked and blinked, and the apparition resolved into a small, thin girl of ten or eleven with bright green eyes and black curling hair that tumbled down to her waist and fell about arms that were only covered with a light green nightgown.

‘This was Fyo’s room,’ she said. ‘Why are you in here?’

‘What?’ Jack said, rubbing his eyes.


‘Fyodor,’ she said slowly. ‘Fyodor’s room.’

‘Who are you?’ Jack said. ‘What- Why are you-’

‘Papa’s home early,’ she said, her smile brief.

And then Jack saw it – something in the way the smile pinched the corners of her mouth, or maybe the way she raised an eyebrow at him in the exact same way… He’d heard rumours that the Royal Admiral had a daughter, but she was never at the public events, and Jack hadn’t been able to verify the information. It had been easier to find out what all the Admiral’s medals were for.

‘The Admiral’s your father?’ Jack said. ‘What time is it?’

‘Late,’ she said. ‘I don’t sleep so good. I used to come visit here a long time ago. In this room. Fyo would make shadow puppets for me on the wall. Or teach me the smallsword. Do you know the smallsword?’

‘The Admiral let you do that?’ Jack squeaked.

She laughed then, the sound not small or light, but deep-throated for someone so young. It reminded him of the Admiral’s rich voice. Maybe it ran in the family. She wiped her fingers along the base of the bed, looking at the dust she pulled away, and then scowled at Jack, her lips pursing.

‘Papa didn’t let anyone come in here for a long time,’ she said. ‘Papa was so sad. Now you’re here. Don’t make Papa sad.’

‘He doesn’t care enough about me to be sad,’ Jack said, watching as she turned in a precise twirling step – like something from a waltz – and then walked quietly to the side of the room devoted to training. Jack reached over and touched a portion of the porcelain lamp by his bed, it lit in response. Jack looked out of the tinted windows and saw that there were still stars in the sky. It was late. But at least the sleep made him feel more alert than he had in a while.
Still, it took him a little while to realise he’d iced part of the pillow, part of his quilt.

‘Papa’s heart is in a tower of stone,’ the girl said. ‘He only takes it out for me. But after Fyo, he put it away and didn’t let anyone else touch it. He won’t listen to me. He thinks I’m just a girl.’

‘Aren’t you?’ Jack said.

‘I’m the Admiral’s daughter,’ she said fiercely. She walked to the brackets of weapons and Jack flailed out of bed, panicking. That would be great, she could accidentally stab herself while he was in here, and it’d be another thing they’d kill him for.

‘Stop!’

‘Papa wants me to be his princess,’ she said as she slid a smallsword from a bracket and then held it in a surprisingly solid grip. After a few moments she sighed and brushed dust off it. ‘He’s not even looked after the weapons. Fyo would be so sad. He loved to fight. Do you love to fight? You are just a boy. Does it make you mad when I say that?’

‘No,’ Jack said, standing now, looking down at the shirt he’d found to sleep in. Was it Fyo’s shirt? Was he sleeping in a dead person’s things? ‘I’m kinda just a boy. Well, I mean, legally an adult and all, but- I’m no one’s son, not like you’re the Admiral’s daughter.’

‘Where are you from?’ she said, with genuine interest.

‘Please put the sword back,’ Jack said. ‘I know you look like you can handle it, but don’t go proving it to me. Your father would kill me.’

‘Oh, he would,’ she said, in realisation. She put the smallsword back.

‘Thank you, thanks,’ he said desperately, and she cocked her head at him as though he was a very strange animal and did that twirling step again on the mat, her arms lifting as though readying for a partner. The nightgown was embroidered not with stars or constellations or the sun, but with flowers. It made Jack realise how much he was used to seeing space motifs on everything. ‘I’m from the outreaches.’

‘You’re a peasant?’ she said, stopping mid-twirl, her arms dropping. Her voice was almost harsh then, surprise, and maybe even disgust.

‘Sorry,’ Jack said. ‘Probably not good enough for Fyo’s room, right?’

‘I miss him so much,’ she said, plaintive. She looked around the room and rubbed at her face. ‘But I didn’t want to put my heart in a tower of stone. Imagine being so sad you locked it up. Papa is so sad. He fights and fights, but he doesn’t believe anymore. He forgot how. It’s so important! Fyo and I used to tell him stories, but Papa doesn’t want to hear my stories anymore. He says they make him sad. I don’t want to make him sadder. So I only tell my stories to flowers now.’

Her voice had become more and more strained as she’d kept speaking, and then she took a deep, swift breath.

‘Can you tell I’m sad too?’

‘I can,’ Jack said, swallowing, surprised at the earnest way she was talking to him. She didn’t even know him, and after the coldness of her father, he wasn’t sure what to think. ‘I’m sorry you’re sad.’

‘Did you meet the Tsar?’ she said. ‘I don’t like him.’
‘He’s…I- What? But he’s the Tsar.’

‘Papa won’t let me be in a room alone with him. With any of them. Not even the Tsarina. But the Tsesarevich is okay. But he’s just a boy. Like me. Just a girl.’

‘I’m sorry I said that,’ Jack said, smiling a little. ‘Didn’t like me saying that, huh? I’m sorry. It’s me, anyway, I’m the one who’s just a boy.’

‘Not if you’re in Fyo’s room,’ she said, twirling a lock of hair around her finger. ‘Papa must have found you worthy.’

‘Oh man,’ Jack said, his heart breaking. ‘I’m sorry. But- No. The Tsar made him…take me in. Made him. The Admiral didn’t want to.’

‘I hate him,’ she said than, fiercely. She marched over to the wall and kicked it viciously, then kicked it again. ‘Why is he like that? Why? That is not how you get Papa’s heart free from the tower! The Tsar is a spoiled child. He is spoiled. And I know I’m spoiled, and I still think he’s spoiled. Like fruit.’

Jack’s heart was beating faster and faster, he felt sick.

‘Can you say that?’ he said, his mouth dry.

‘Not to his face,’ she said, shoulders slumping. ‘No one can. But don’t trust him when he laughs. And gives you things. And tells you that you’re special. Because all he cares about is Lune.’

‘That’s…a good thing,’ Jack said.

She looked at him then with pity. They both didn’t look away from each other for a long moment, and then she ran both her hands through her hair, tucking it all behind her shoulders.

‘You really are just a boy,’ she said then. ‘Fyo was once, but he learned. Do you like stories?’

‘Um-’

They both startled when they heard the clearing of a throat. Jack turned with wide eyes to see the Admiral Pitchiner standing there in the shadows, gold eyes glowing, looking not at Jack, but at his daughter.

‘Seraphina,’ Pitchiner said quietly. ‘What did I say to you?’

‘I didn’t disturb him, Papa,’ she said, smiling with a brightness that changed her whole face. Suddenly it was as though she shone with good will, with happiness, and the transformation was so complete that Jack looked over at the Admiral and wondered if he had ever smiled like that. If his face had ever transformed with joy. ‘He was already awake!’

‘Is that so?’ he said, his lips quirking upwards.

‘Yes,’ she said. ‘You didn’t tell me he’s just a boy. He even agreed with me.’

‘It’s late, my sweet, you need some more sleep.’

‘I’m not tired,’ she said, even as she walked towards the hand that the Admiral extended.

Pitchiner’s face was soft. He wore a simple black shirt – one without any buttons – and black slacks with a scattering of golden runes embroidered at the bottom. He looked tired. Jack thought
of what she’d said – that his heart was locked away in a stone tower for everyone except for her. Jack thought he could see what she meant now. His face was so soft for her. There was a smile in his eyes, even if it didn’t quite find his mouth.

When she slid her small hand into his, Pitchiner looked over at Jack briefly, his expression unreadable. She looked over at him too.

‘Will you let me tell you stories one day?’ she said.

‘Now, Seraphina,’ Pitchiner said quietly, ‘Jack will be far too busy for stories.’

‘No- It’s- I mean- Sure,’ Jack said, thinking that of all the things to wake him up in the middle of the night… It reminded him of Jamie prodding him awake, it reminded him of… *Oh, shit, it reminds me of Pip.* ‘I mean, I’d like that.’

‘Wonderful,’ she said, beaming at him. ‘Okay, Papa, you can whisk me away now. The princess needs her sleep, doesn’t she?’

Pitchiner scooped her up in his arms as though she weighed nothing. ‘That she does. Say ‘goodnight Jack.’’

‘Goodnight, Jack!’ she called.

Pitchiner looked at Jack once more over his shoulder, and then left – disappearing into yet another hallway, the door swinging shut gently behind him.

Jack rubbed his face, sneezed again from the dust, and then placed a hand on the back of his neck as he looked around the room. He could feel loose strands of hair over the back of his hand, could feel frost on his skin. She hadn’t even commented on it. Then he thought of Pitchiner saying that ‘the last one’ had died. So… Fyodor had lived here, and been special to Seraphina? And then he’d died. And Pitchiner hadn’t let anyone in this room again.

‘Shit,’ Jack said, looking around. He looked down at his shirt and tugged at the hem. It was a dead person’s shirt. *Fyodor.* Maybe Fyodor was capable, maybe he really impressed the Admiral, and maybe compared to Fyodor, Jack was just a shadow of a soldier with some freakish powers that no one expected him to have.

He walked over the padded mats to the bracket holding the smallsword that Seraphina had picked up. He could see her handprint on the hilt, cutting through the dust. He lifted it himself. He couldn’t wield a proper two-handed sword, but this – this he could use. He spun it in his fingers, shifted on the mats finding his balance. He could train here. Keep up with his drills.

Instead, he used the bottom of his nightshirt to clean dust from the blade. Seraphina was right, none of these weapons had been cared for.

Jack spent a few more minutes taking down some of the other weapons, occasionally sneezing. The room needed to be aired out. Cleaned thoroughly. At least the weapons were of such a fine make they hadn’t even tarnished.

He almost dropped a dagger on his bare foot when the door opened again and Pitchiner strode in, looking surprised to see Jack on the mats.

Jack fumbled the hilt and then gripped it hard, standing stiffly, afraid.

‘A warning,’ Pitchiner said, his voice low and threatening. ‘I know you are a rule breaker. I know
you have been to see the Disciplinarian and his associates more times than most people will know in their lives. If you ever so much as show a hint of being that person around my daughter, I will find the fastest clipper there is and drop you off into the dead of space where nothing but the Darkness will ever find you. Is that clear?"

Jack stared at him for so long that Pitchiner took a step forward, his eyes narrowing.

‘I said, is that clear?’

‘I wouldn’t,’ Jack said, voice hoarse. ‘She’s a kid. She’s just a kid. What am I gonna do? I wouldn’t do anything. I swear.’

A hesitation, then Pitchiner seemed to take what Jack said on board. He didn’t relax, exactly, but he nodded once and looked around the room instead. Jack did too, wishing he knew what was going on here. Wishing he knew what had happened to Cupcake. She’d still be travelling back from the mountain, surely. It didn’t seem possible that he was here and sleeping, and they’d be making their way down the mountainside, probably resting in the tents right now.

‘She said…’ Jack began, and then nervously licked at dry lips. ‘Who’s Fyodor?’

‘A mistake,’ Pitchiner said, almost absently.

‘And me? Me too, huh? You’ve already given up on me and you don’t even know me.’

Pitchiner frowned, turned back to him, and Jack waited for the insults. Waited for the scathing words to come. But he said nothing, and Jack quietly turned and put the small dagger back, because it didn’t feel right doing anything like that now, when he’d just been threatened by the Royal Admiral of all of Lune.

‘Um,’ Jack began, ‘Admiral, Sir- I- She told me… She said not to- That she didn’t like the Tsar? Can she just-? I mean I’d never tell the Tsar that’s what she said…but-’

‘Really?’ Pitchiner said, arching a brow in exactly the same way Seraphina had before. ‘Because earlier when I asked you – when Toothiana asked you – not to tell the Tsar about how you found your ice powers, that wasn’t how you behaved at all. But you’d commit treason to protect a child?’

‘She’s a *child,*’ Jack said. ‘She doesn’t know what she’s saying.’

‘Ah,’ Pitchiner said, smiling to himself. ‘I see.’

‘Not that she’s not bright, or intelligent, I mean- It’s obvious that-’

‘Watching you backpedal may become the highlight of my week in the days to come,’ Pitchiner said, the smile broadening. Though it was never sincere, like Seraphina’s. Jack wished that – even now – he still didn’t find the Admiral handsome. That he didn’t stand there feeling ashamed and physically aware all over, as though just by being in the same room, his senses were lit up in the Admiral’s presence.

‘It’s not treason,’ Jack said, staring at him. ‘It’s not the same thing.’

‘No?’ Pitchiner said. ‘You define the laws, do you?’

‘Do you want me to betray her?’ Jack blurted, feeling trapped.

‘No,’ Pitchiner said after a pause. ‘Of course not. She is – as you say – a child. She is also not
wrong to think the way that she does, nor are hers the thoughts of the uneducated. There now, are you going to betray me to the Tsar?

‘I…’

‘You are all encouraged to inform on each other, after all, aren’t you? You seem like the type to have reported all of your friends.’

‘I…’

Pitchiner made it sound like such a bad thing, and Jack was desperately confused. He pressed a hand to his eyes and didn’t want to look. Jamie had said seditious things in the past, and Jack had kept all his secrets. But that was Jamie, and Jamie had never actually tried to get Jack to quit the military, so it wasn’t really sedition. It didn’t matter what the posters said, or what they’d been taught in the creches. It wasn’t the same thing.

‘The Tsar would understand, anyway,’ Jack said, wincing. ‘I mean- I’m not going to… I don’t know what you want me to say!’

‘Odd really,’ Pitchiner drawled, ‘given you seem to love running your mouth.’

‘I just don’t want her to get into trouble,’ Jack said, rubbing at his face and then sneezing again, wiping quickly at his nose. ‘That’s all. She seems nice.’

I have no idea where she gets it from, since it’s probably not you.

‘Whatever trouble she gets into, she can deftly get herself out of. Now, my rest has been interrupted, and I need to catch up on some sleep. Good evening.’

‘Wait,’ Jack said again, thinking that he’d always be saying that to Pitchiner’s back, always dismissed and left in the dark. ‘I’m just- I’m sorry. Okay? I don’t get any of this, and I know you know that. But I can see that I’m not welcome here or anything, and that, like, this isn’t your idea of a good time. I don’t want to be- I want to be helpful to Lune, so- can you just tell me how to do that? Please? Maybe it’ll get me killed faster, I don’t know, but at least you could…’

Pitchiner turned back to face him and Jack couldn’t find the rest of the sentence. Then, Pitchiner looked down at the shirt Jack was wearing. And Jack looked down at it himself, and thought of Seraphina talking about Fyodor – Fyo – and how Pitchiner had now said he was a mistake, and that he’d died. Seraphina had said her father had locked his heart away in a tower.

‘I can wear…my training clothes,’ Jack said, his voice strained. ‘If you want. Instead. There’s not a ton of- I mean… But if it’s easier for you?’

When Pitchiner met his gaze again, he looked tired. He raised his eyebrows, shook his head.

‘I can’t think why your clothing would concern me.’

Then he turned and left again, closing the door behind him. There was a quiet snick! And Jack realised it had been locked.

Jack tugged on the hem of his shirt a few more times, then walked over to the darkened glass and looked out at the dimmed constellations. He’d trained for so much of his life to be a Golden Warrior, to fly out there on the skippers and the great ships.

When he looked down again, his shirt was frosted and his fingers were cold. He took a deep breath
and made the ice stop, then walked over to his stick and grasped it. He remembered hearing
Pippa’s voice in the mountain.

With a fierce ache in his chest, he missed her and all the other kids at the creche. He missed Jamie.
He missed Cupcake, and he’d only known her briefly, but she’d saved his life, and she seemed
cool.

What was he going to do now? He just hoped whatever the Tsar had in mind, he could prove
himself.

*

The next morning, he woke alone. It was day outside, but the dark glass didn’t give him an
accurate idea of what time it was. There were no clocks in the room, he realised. Then, as he
walked around the perimeter of the room, he learned that every door was locked except for the one
that led to a separate bathroom.

He tried to tell himself that he wasn’t a prisoner and, as his stomach growled, he told himself there
would be food. Soon. There would have to be. He hadn’t eaten properly in a while. Even the oats
made only with water and salt, thinned out until it was nothing more than a soup, even that would
be welcome.

He remembered Pitchiner saying someone would be by with food, to check on his health. Had he
misremembered? But no, that’s what he’d said. The Admiral didn’t seem like the kind of guy who
would lie about something like that.

Eventually, Jack could see the sun and he could start tracking the time a bit better. That was even
more disturbing, because now he realised just how much time had passed – no one coming to
check on him. Vast as the room was, he couldn’t lose the feeling he was trapped. He spent entirely
too long knocking at the doors and calling for the Admiral, and then calling for anyone.

He killed about two hours doing drills, another half hour showering in the most luxuriant heat he’d
ever been allowed to bathe in – though it may have been lukewarm water for all he knew – he was
far more sensitive to temperature since the mountain.

He wondered if he had wrapped himself in a dead person’s towels even as he stared at himself in
the mirror and pulled out bits and pieces of what brown hair remained. His eyes were no longer
blue, but blue-silver. It wasn’t even a milkiness, they glinted when he tilted his head in certain
directions, and caught the light as Pitch’s did. And there around his irises – a jagged, uneven rim of
gold. It was lustrous and bright.

His eyes were the only part of him that he wanted to look at, because the rest of him was changing
in ways he wasn’t sure he liked. He was much paler than before, which only highlighted his dark
eyebrows and eyelashes, which didn’t seem to get the memo about the white stubble growing out
of his scalp. His lips were dry and chapped from the cold air of the mountain, and licking them
didn’t help. He looked frailer now, somehow. He was always thin, his musculature building in
wiriness and leanness instead of bulk. But this…

His stomach was a hard knot when the sun began to set, and Jack turned on the lamps in his room
because the overhead chandeliers were too bright and unseemly. He rubbed at his chest and
wondered when the last time he ate a proper meal actually was. A few sips of a hot chocolate, and
then…what? Before that they’d been on the mountain. They’d been eating rations. His next big
meal was going to be that evening with the rest of them, in the tents they’d set up together.
Even in the creches, good food had been rare, but plain food had been plentiful. There was always porridge, even if one wasn’t in the mood for it. There was damper on weekends, and raw carrots and other root vegetables. Jack and Pippa could forage in the forests if they wanted more. The last time he’d gone hungry, he’d been in deprivation training for the endurance portion of his military curriculum.

And of course Crossholt had tried to give Jack less, so Jamie had snuck Jack a whole lot more. Jack had been discovered, taken the fall for Jamie, and promptly sent to the Disciplinarian. That had hurt, but it also meant Jack had never really had to go properly hungry.

‘What is going on?’ Jack said to the crack of the door that he thought might lead to Pitchiner’s room. ‘You can’t just leave me here!’

Silence.

Jack hated the lack of noise. He didn’t even hear servants moving about in the corridors. Instead, all he could hear was the slowly increasing speed of his breathing, his heartbeat echoing in his ears.

By the time it was fully dark, Jack had the light on in the bathroom as well and he’d even turned the chandeliers on, because the shadows were freaking him out. The silence reminded him of the emptiness of space, or the feeling of the mountain pressing down in on him. He felt dizzy if he did drills, he felt chilled. He took another warm shower and slowly kept turning the hot tap until he adjusted and his shoulders were red and his thoughts simmered away to nothingness.

After that, he slid straight under the covers in the hopes he could warm up the bed. He drew his knees up to his chest, lay like that until he felt like the room was spinning.

He had no idea what time it was when he snapped. When he got out of the bed, seized his stick and tried to break the windows with ice. It flew to his fingers, writhed in his chest, and it was hungry and bright and he attacked the doors with it. Freezing them, bashing the stick against them, kicking at the door handle in the hopes he could break the lock.

All he succeeded in doing was breaking the door handle off one of the doors.

He banged the stick and then his fists on the doors. He yelled until he was hoarse.

No one came.

He sagged against an iced door, his breath pluming, chest heaving. His eyes burned, but he refused to let himself cry. Instead, he listened to his breath spiral out of control, even as he tried to force it to do what he wanted. He gripped the long stick as hard as he could, not sure he’d felt this bad since Pippa was taken by the Darkness.

And he’d dealt with that by deciding that he’d become a Golden Warrior, and now...

The knocking sounds were weak, as he tapped on the door.

‘Please,’ he said, his voice breaking. ‘Just don’t leave me here.’

Ice chipped, fell in musical clatters to the floor.

No one came.

*
Midway through the second day, Jack was in a thick, groggy doze when he heard a commotion. He pushed himself up weakly from the bed to see one of the doors splintering inwards, golden light shining, and the Royal Admiral Pitchiner standing there in full battle gear – fabric and armour ripped, face marked with soot, hair far wilder than usual – looking shocked to see just how much of the room was iced.

They stared at each other then, and Jack kept pushing himself upright and didn’t think he was above begging for food anymore.

‘Why would you do that?’ Jack said, his voice hoarse. ‘Leave me?’

He’d kept shouting at the doors, and he didn’t sound like himself.

‘There was an attack,’ Pitchiner said absently. ‘It required full mobilisation. And I forgot that I had a lodger.’

‘You forgot,’ Jack said.

He slid out of bed and used the stick to hold himself properly upright.

‘I thought you were punishing me,’ Jack said.

Pitchiner stared at him then, his eyes narrowing. He looked like he wouldn’t understand why Jack would think that, but after Crossholt, even after some of the other caretakers in his life, it didn’t seem so absurd.

‘What would’ve happened if like, if you’d needed to be away for longer?’

‘Ah,’ Pitchiner said. ‘Best not think about it.’

With that, Pitchiner waved in a servant who was pushing a cart of covered dishes, and even the wash of gratitude couldn’t erase the bitter flood of prickling feeling that followed. He pointed his stick at Pitchiner, at his turned back. A rush of darkness was building inside of him. Growing thicker, stronger, and Jack was scared of it until he realised that it was on his side.

‘Best not think about it?!’ Jack shouted.

The ice, when it came, wasn’t silent. It crackled through the air, the servant screaming and backing up against the wall, cart clattering. Jack’s rage didn’t let him think about what he was doing, and for some reason he thought Pitchiner would block the attack. He was the Admiral. Jack was just venting the vicious, fierce anger that roared up inside of him from the very mountain itself. Jack wanted to hurt him, wanted him to suffer and know what it was like. Leaving him here like this.

The blast threw Pitchiner against the wall.

Jack felt the whole world slow down around him, his heart thumping so fast he couldn’t distinguish the beats anymore, just a constant vacuum of hard noise.

The zing of a sword leaving its sheath before Jack even saw it. Jack swore that Pitchiner was turning so slowly, even though it couldn’t have been slow – the way his robes whirled. Even Jack’s rabbit-fast heart – his juddering pulse – felt like it had been turned to static.

He saw the purpose with which Pitchiner stepped towards him. Knew the way he placed his foot that it was a culmination of decades of training – Pitchiner stepping into some advanced drill – all of that bearing down upon him. Suddenly, all those threats he’d received coalesced, and he was
standing in a dead boy’s room, and he’d just attacked the Admiral and that was high treason and he had no reason to stay, he wasn’t a Golden Warrior and they didn’t want him and so…

So he didn’t have to stay.

Wind whipped around him, ruffled the remaining hair on his head, tugged at his clothing. He could feel how it wanted to do what he wished. It wanted to help him. It seemed natural, then, to run away. The wind helped, pushing him, his feet skidding on the floor. He was fast enough that even Pitchiner couldn’t catch him when he ran past.

Jack was pushed through the corridors, his feet sometimes feeling like they were lifting, which couldn’t be possible, wasn’t possible, and maybe it was all in his mind, he was just so desperate to get away from the pounding footsteps that followed him.

He didn’t know how to get out of the Palace, but he’d find a way. They couldn’t make him stay; not when he had nothing to look forward to anymore.
Fleeing the Palace, the winds making him faster than he ever could have been without them, he saw places where the Palace of Lune had been damaged. The Admiral hadn’t been lying. The damage was inconsistent, here and there entire rooms were filled with broken, shattered pieces of furniture, ornate chandeliers akimbo on the floor, soot and smudge marks across the walls and those breathtaking wall paintings. Other rooms were fine, untouched, perfectly preserved like museum displays.

There were Golden Warriors about. By the time they saw him running past them, it was too late for them to catch him.

Jack listened only to fear. It built and expanded and mutated until he was nothing more than a hammering heartbeat and narrowed, sharpened vision and the wind whipping faster and faster around him. It tore the rest of his brown hair from his head, leaving only the white stubble behind. It lashed at his clothing, tried to forcibly pick him up once and then twice. Each time it deposited him, he stumbled hard, gasping.

An increasing clamour behind him, running footsteps, and Jack picked up the pace. His feet fell on nothing at all, he kept his staff out in front of him for balance and the wind juddered and picked up and fell around him.

A window open to the world. Azure skies. Nothing at all that seemed dark or threatening out there. Jack’s heart hiccupped with hope and he turned towards that huge window framed with broken shards of glass. He shouted when the wind simply whisked him up and tossed him through into open air. Jack held his hands out, eyes so wide they were filled with tears. He was in the air. Not only in the air, but rushing forwards. Almost like- Almost like-

A swoop of excitement, and then he was falling – he hadn’t been on the ground floor when he started running and he wasn’t now. He saw the grounds hurtle up towards him, legs and arms flailing. A slash of the staff through the air and Jack felt the moment where his will and the wind intersected, harmonising. His descent slowed, and then he was buoyed up again and tumbling, trying to keep his balance, dizzy, hungry, desperate.

The laughter that started to bubble up in his chest died in his throat.

It was just one more thing showing how wrong he was now. How much he’d failed. He’d just attacked the Royal Admiral and he hardly knew why! He was angry, sure, but he’d never been an angry person who responded with violence. Years of badgering, bullying and more from caretakers who didn’t believe in taking care of him, and he’d never once responded with violence.
There was something alien and evil inside of him, and if he wasn’t possessed, then it was him.

Jack’s breath came on a cold sob. He tried to think of where to go and in response, the winds yanked him forward. They seemed to know where to take him, and he decided to trust in the winds that had gotten him out of the Palace.

He looked all around him. The city was so small. He could see the mountain range in the distance where his initiation had taken place.

He’d been up in some of the warships before, but it was different seeing the world with no frame of iron or steel around him. The city a warren of streets, roads and alleyways, the roof tiles almost all uniformly a rich red-brown or a dark slate-grey, and every now and then one of the Towers would flash out with its gold tiling. The Tower of the Spymaster. The Disciplinarian’s Tower. But they were falling away from him, receding in the distance.

His thoughts began to blur as the world around him did. Minutes later he was falling again. He couldn’t seem to get the wind to cooperate, though he felt sharp breezes buffet him, as though trying to slow his fall.

The ground rose up to meet him. He rolled into a ball to try and protect his finer joints – his wrists and ankles – from fracture damage. They’d trained him to do that if he ever fell off a ship straight into the air.

A sharp thud all the way through him, but not enough to break any bones. The wind pulled and tugged at him a few seconds longer, then vanished in a whirl. He lay and listened to his uneven, wheezing breaths. Then he gingerly uncurled, looking around him.

He was in the training grounds. The barracks.

It was the only home he’d known for a long time now. Maybe that’s why the wind took him here. Maybe he’d wanted to go home.

Jack squeezed his eyes shut. Some plaintive voice echoed inside of him and he could hear the words clearly now: ‘I want to go home.’ His breath shook, was heavy on the exhale, almost sounded like crying. But he was in the barracks.

You didn’t cry in the barracks.

He looked around in confusion. There was no one here. He pushed himself up and leaned a little on his staff and then mechanically started to walk back to his room. Maybe he should be trying to get away, but no one would find him here for a few minutes at least, and he could fly.

‘I can fly,’ Jack said, looking up at the vast expanse above him and hardly able to believe he’d just been in it.

It didn’t seem like he’d be able to do it again. The wind around him just felt like the wind, as personally unresponsive as it had ever been.

Jack heard the sound of rusting hinges squeaking. It was a sound that set his skin to crawling. It always had, ever since he’d come to live in the barracks. He turned automatically, his whole body stiffening.

Crossholt stared at him from his office. After a few seconds he leaned against the doorframe, folded his arms. His gaze raked over Jack once, then again, then a third time. His expression had
been impassive at first, then disapproving, and now Jack couldn’t quite read it at all. He had the strangest sense that Crossholt was scared. But he didn’t look scared, so how would Jack know?

‘Overland,’ Crossholt said, managing to infuse so much disgust into that single word, that Jack took a step backwards. ‘Why are you back early? But of course. Something went wrong didn’t it?’

Jack took another step backwards and looked behind him. He couldn’t feel the wind around him at all. He didn’t feel like some magical boy that could fly up into the air. His grip tightened on the long stick he had. It was sturdy, it hadn’t splintered or broken, he knew it would serve as a weapon.

He also knew that the moment he went into some defensive stance around his Lieutenant, it was over. You didn’t attack your superior officer. Ever. You made reports. There was paperwork to be filled out.

His breathing was silent and fast, his heart rabbit-thumping away.

‘Well?’ Crossholt barked. ‘Answer me, Overland!’

‘Yes, Lieutenant,’ Jack said, his voice still hoarse and weak. In his new room he’d been screaming for someone to notice him. Crossholt had definitely noticed him.

Jack took another step backwards.

‘It went wrong, didn’t it?’ Crossholt said. ‘Did you escape? Is that it? Don’t want to go to the Asylums?’

Jack nodded in jerky movements. It was true, wasn’t it? He escaped. He’d attacked the Royal Admiral. There was no coming back from that. He was going to the Asylums, or maybe – if he was lucky – they’d just kill him outright.

A flicker of wind pushed past his ears, a breeze curled around his left ankle.

Jack’s heart was so loud he could hear it just behind his ears. His fear continued to climb slowly, as though ascending a ladder, determined to find the top. Behind that was a strange, glittering hatred. He stared at Crossholt, the scars on his back twinged. All the scars Crossholt had never let him heal, even though anyone else who went to the Disciplinarian got to have their scars fixed in the Tower of Healing.

Normally it was only thieves and those who beat others, who raped and murdered and abused, who had to keep their scars. Anyone looking at Jack’s back for the first time – if they didn’t know his history – would think he had committed far worse crimes than he actually had.

Except for now, where you actually did just screw everything up.

‘Where is everyone?’ Jack said, coughing at the end of the sentence.

‘The others that weren’t at the initiation were summoned to the Palace,’ Crossholt said, lips curling up. ‘I suppose you found your moment to get away after all. I’ll tell you what? How about you come here and let me deal with you for a bit, before I let the right people know where you are.’

‘Why?’ Jack said, looking behind him.

The breezes picked up. He could see the branches at the tops of trees starting to wave softly, back and forth.
‘Why do you hate me so much?’ Jack said, stumbling a little.

A push of malice inside of him. It came from no corner of himself he’d ever felt before. He blinked at Crossholt, his vision blurred, he felt ice coming to his fingertips. On the next exhale, ice crystals plumed from his mouth.

Crossholt stared, and then his cheeks went ruddy with anger.

‘I always knew there was something wrong with you,’ Crossholt said. ‘It’s like getting the runt in a litter. There’s always one. And sometimes they come good. Usually they don’t.’

‘Uh huh,’ Jack said, his hands trembling.

‘You should’ve died in that mountain,’ Crossholt said. ‘But this works just as well.’

‘Lieutenant…I-’

Crossholt – for all that he was left behind when everyone else had mobilised, for all that he was no longer an official part of the active service – was still fast. His lunge, when it came, dashed Jack’s thoughts and his training. He wasn’t allowed to fight back. It was Crossholt.

He landed on the ground harder than when the wind had slowed his fall. Jack dropped the stick without thinking, his hands wrapped around Crossholt’s wrists. He choked, vision blurring as bitten nails dug hard into his neck. Jack was lifted and slammed down into the ground again and his chest heaved on a hysterical laugh.

Jack couldn’t suck down more than a narrow whistle of air, there was no more coming, and overriding the panic was a jaw-clenching hate that went deeper than anything he’d ever known. His hands gripped Crossholt’s wrists even harder, and then Crossholt roared loudly enough that the sound thrummed and hurt Jack’s ears.

Crossholt scrambled away. Jack pushed himself up, coughing and unbalanced. He looked over and then made a weak sound. Crossholt’s wrists had shards of ice through them. Crossholt was staring at his forearms. There was blood on one side of the sharp icicles. His skin and muscle and maybe even bone had split around them all. There had to be at least ten. Crossholt looked up and stared at Jack with horror.

Jack lurched away when Crossholt lunged for him again.

‘Stop,’ Jack cried. ‘Stop!’

His training kicked in, but only in flashes, and Crossholt knew every move that Jack had ever been taught. Crossholt knew how to block the kicks. He knew how to stop Jack’s twisting torso.

Jack tried to keep his ice at bay, as scared of that as he was of Crossholt. Inside, he felt a hollowness filling with malevolence. Jack wanted Crossholt’s eyes open and unseeing. Wanted to scrape the life right out of him. Wanted him dead so he couldn’t hurt anyone else. Needed him to know what it was like, to be scared all the time, all the time.

The sound that burst from his throat was animalistic and raw and had him coughing under the force of it even as the ice burst from his hands in one violent thrust. There was so much it pushed him backwards. He skidded across the mowed grass.

Then, nothing at all. The wind that Jack hadn’t even noticed – tossing and turning in the air around him – died down. Jack lay on his back breathing weakly, getting his breath back, staring up at the
blue sky.

‘Nnh,’ he managed, then pressed a hand to his chest.

Clumsily, he rolled onto his hands and knees and then reached for his stick without thinking – only it wasn’t within reach. Ice and frost was everywhere on the ground around him.

Jack wasn’t ready to look up. He kept flinching, waiting for Crossholt to hit him again, or grab him. Thinking that it would be better if Crossholt did.

Jack didn’t want to look up.

He kept his head down. Kept his head down until he couldn’t stand it anymore. He could hear birds chattering and tweeting nearby. He felt the sun on the back of his head. His breath still misted when he exhaled. He was cold, but it wasn’t uncomfortable.

Eventually, he had to look up.

He sat back on his haunches, kneeling, arms limp by his sides. He could almost imagine that Crossholt was still alive, with that look on his face, frozen in some moment of hatred and revulsion and horror.

But the huge icicles through Crossholt’s chest and neck and torso, the utter stillness of his body – Jack knew he wasn’t alive.

Jack cast around for his stick and reached for it like a child might reach for their favourite stuffed bear. He drew it onto his lap, then curled around it, not looking away from Crossholt. Lieutenant Crossholt. Who couldn’t train anyone, anymore.

There was nothing else to do now, Jack knew. He didn’t want to escape knowing he was capable of this. He’d just wait. He’d wait, and they’d take him away, and Jamie would hopefully never know that his friend hadn’t become a Golden Warrior after all, but a monster.

* 

A time later – the icicles through Crossholt beginning to melt and dripping onto the grass – Jack heard footsteps and somehow he just knew it was the Admiral. The footsteps stopped when they reached his side, and no one grabbed him immediately, and that was when Jack was sure.

Jack knelt there, his long stick in his hands, out of breath. He stared up at the Royal Admiral of Lune. Pitchiner looked over to the body of Crossholt, and all Jack could really make out was the sternness of his profile. He couldn’t tell the expression. It didn’t really matter.

‘So,’ Jack said, ‘you can take me to the Asylums now. Or…whatever you want.’

To his surprise, Pitchiner knelt beside him, his movement not quite graceful. For a few moments, Pitchiner pressed his hand to his right hip, and Jack wondered if he was wounded. His face was still marked with soot from whatever battle he’d had to fight. And Jack thought that he was meant to be fighting off the Darkness, the Shadows, and instead he was having to deal with Jack.

Except Pitchiner didn’t look upset, he looked contemplative, still looking over Crossholt’s body. After a long minute, he said:

‘This is what I was afraid of.’
‘Yeah,’ Jack said, laughing, an edge of hysteria to his voice. ‘Of course. Made wrong, right? Of course, I get it. I get it. You don’t have to keep me around. I get it.’

‘No,’ Pitchiner said. ‘You don’t. I was concerned that you had been made too much like me.’

Jack was too busy wiping at his eyes. Even his tears weren’t quite warm anymore, and they froze to his fingertips. He brushed them off on his pants, sniffed, then looked over at Pitchiner in confusion when he realised what he’d said.

‘What?’

‘The Darkness sometimes cuts too deep,’ Pitchiner said, never looking away from Crossholt’s body. ‘It may bring you no comfort to know this, but in the first year after my initiation, I did some things that aren’t in my public record. Similar to this. I had to learn how to control it, and you will have to learn too. It will be difficult and I’m not sure you have the mettle for it. But you may as well understand… We let the Darkness in and then cast it out again. In that moment, I think, we are given the ability to make the Light. But of course some can’t cast the Darkness out again, and they stay within the mountain.’

Pitchiner picked at a tear in his travelling robe.

‘For some of us, we let the Darkness in and we let it stay too long even if we do manage to cast it out. It cuts too deep. It creates new pathways in our minds. We are not possessed when it leaves, but we also hear it and it speaks to us. Where before, a quick revenge fantasy comes to nothing, suddenly we are capable of acting on impulses, urges to do harm before the wish to do good takes over.’

‘That just sounds like I should be put down,’ Jack said. ‘I’m nothing like Fyodor, am I?’

Pitchiner was silent for a long time. For so long that Jack mentally started saying his goodbyes to Jamie. He was so tired. So hungry. It didn’t really matter as much. Pippa was gone – according to everyone else, she was a disembodied voice in a mountain. Cupcake probably wouldn’t want to see him again. And Seraphina, well, she didn’t know him long enough to be sad if he went away.

‘You’re not like him,’ Pitchiner said.

‘Was he really a mistake?’ Jack said.

‘He didn’t live,’ Pitchiner said, his lips curling in a humourless smile. Jack wasn’t sure that was an answer. He rubbed at his throat. It was bruised. Like his back. Like every other place Crossholt had grabbed at him or hurt him.

‘I’m aware I haven’t given you much of a chance,’ Pitchiner said, ‘but I don’t truly wish you dead.’

‘You put me last in the initiation list, I’m not stupid,’ Jack said. ‘I know what that means.’

‘That was – for all you won’t see it that way – pragmatism. Reports were that you were no true candidate, and I must give those that are the advantages I can. The mountain claims too many, I will not put the weakest first, to watch the strongest polished off at the end due to fatigue. Mercenary, yes, but necessary.’

‘I killed someone,’ Jack said, his voice choking at the end. ‘He didn’t deserve that.’

Pitchiner only seemed to get more comfortable. He took a deep breath and then pressed his hand
down flat to the frost that was still coating the grass.

‘Crossholt was a mean-spirited little man,’ Pitchiner said. Jack looked at his profile in surprise. ‘But no, he did not deserve this. It’s a heavy burden to carry, Jack. Killing someone who didn’t deserve an end like this. Without training, you will do this again.’

_The Darkness sometimes cuts too deep._

‘It also means that you’re more susceptible to possession,’ Pitchiner said, voice soft. ‘The others will find it easier to withstand. You are like a tapestry that has had too many holes ripped into it. I’m going to give you a choice, now. This gives me legitimate cause to place you in an Asylum, and you will not like it there. Nor will you live long. Or, I could kill you outright, which you may consider a mercy. Or, you can come back with me and I will explain what has happened to the Tsar, and I expect he will tell me to train this side of you as well. But if you choose the latter, Jack, you will have to live with the knowledge that you have killed someone and that you could do it again. And it will not be easy. I am not sure you and I will ever like each other.’

Jack was still crying. It was silent, only tears, but he had to keep wiping at his eyes. He’d killed someone. He’d killed someone important. He could almost hear Crossholt saying: ‘Much more important than you’ll ever be.’

Even though Crossholt had always been nasty, always had it out for him, Jack had never imagined doing something like this. He’d just wanted Crossholt to trip over his feet sometimes, to feel off-balance and humiliated the way he always made Jack feel.

Now, Jack felt like the Darkness was still there, clumping together, oozing like rot inside of him. But Pitchiner said that wasn’t the case, and the golden light hadn’t hurt him. Which meant that the Darkness had just found something in Jack’s mind that was there all along.

‘It would be safer for everyone…if you just killed me, right?’ Jack said, his voice breaking. ‘Right?’

‘Obviously,’ Pitchiner said.

Jack winced, his eyes squeezed shut. What if he did this to someone else? Someone who had never hurt him? Some stranger? Or…someone like Pippa? He dropped the stick and wrapped his arms around himself and tried to open his mouth to damn himself. He knew what the right decision was. He could imagine Jamie shaking his head, but Jamie was gone and Jack wouldn’t see him again.

‘Jack,’ Pitchiner said, his voice low, even urgent. ‘It would be safer for everyone, yes. But if you can train it, it would be an asset to the Royal Military. I’m not sure if you can – others haven’t – but this is not a safe war, and what the Darkness has done to you, it also does to itself. When it cuts deeper into someone, it leaves itself vulnerable. You can learn to sense it out faster, hear it better, and if there is any chance you can make the golden light, you can cut it down with greater speed. Whatever the Darkness did to me, it made me a broken man, but a better warrior.’

The words settled around Jack like stones, hemming him in.

‘The Palace was attacked?’ Jack said, his voice softer now.

Pitchiner grimaced, then sighed. ‘It should never have happened.’

‘Has it ever happened?’

‘No,’ Pitchiner said, turning to him, his forehead creasing. ‘It hasn’t.’
‘What will the people say?’

‘It was a controlled exercise to test the readiness of the Palace to deal with an attack, and proved that we are more than ready, and that they need only feel safer than ever.’

Pitchiner delivered the words with the drollness of someone used to reciting something he didn’t believe. Jack had seen the chaos in some of those rooms. He’d been forgotten for at least two days. Jack placed his hand flat on his stomach. He was still hungry, but it was like a hard knot inside of him that he kept forgetting about now.

‘It wasn’t a controlled exercise,’ Jack said, shivering.

‘It wasn’t,’ Pitchiner said, looking over at Crossholt. ‘If you decide you wish to live, I imagine you’ll be quite impressed with what Spymaster Toothiana comes up with to make this look like anything other than what it is.’

‘What?’

‘You’ll not be permitted to tell anyone else that you have done this,’ Pitchiner said. ‘They’ll watch everything you say, from this point onwards. But Spymaster Toothiana will need to be informed, to prepare the stories they’ll need in case this happens again.’

Jack’s breath was shaking. He wiped at his eyes again.

‘I can fly,’ Jack said. ‘I think.’

‘Yes,’ Pitchiner said, pushing to his feet and holding a hand to his hip again. ‘There have been some eye-witness reports. Now, Jack, you are to make a decision. Tell me now.’

Jack looked over at Crossholt for a long time. Then he pushed himself upright and swayed, and maybe someone else would have reached out to steady him, but Pitchiner didn’t. He waited for Jack to find his own balance.

‘Is it selfish?’ Jack said. ‘To say I want to live?’

‘Yes,’ Pitchiner said, and Jack managed to hold back his cringe. ‘But, I was selfish too, once. Really, you’re in the best possible hands if you decide you want to live. I won’t hesitate to cut you down if I need to.’

‘That’s…reassuring,’ Jack said.

Strangely, it was. Because Jamie would tell him that Crossholt always had it coming, but Pitchiner had spoken the truth of it. Crossholt was a mean-spirited little man, but he’d only tried to kill Jack because Jack was an aberration, because he was back early and there without supervision and looked like every other mistake they’d ever sent to the Asylums. Jack had tried to save his own life, but in the moment, he’d not killed in self-defence – he’d killed out of malice. Because he wanted to rip the life away from him. And Jamie would never have understood that, but Pitchiner did.

‘A decision, Jack.’

‘I’ll…go back with you,’ Jack said.

Jack turned to look behind him at Crossholt’s body, frowning. He had no idea if he was making the right decision – he suspected he was making the weak decision – but he wasn’t ready to give up on
living just yet. He grimaced and walked a couple of paces behind the Royal Admiral, letting his mind go blank.

Jack hesitated at the threshold of the room they’d given him. Fyodor’s room. He stared at it and his heart started pounding again and he couldn’t make himself walk beyond the doorway.

‘I don’t want to be locked in again,’ Jack said. ‘I haven’t eaten in days.’

‘Jack…’ Pitchiner said disapprovingly. But he didn’t say anything else and he didn’t shove Jack into the room.

‘It’s too quiet,’ Jack said, feeling like he was six years old and telling the creche leader that he didn’t want to be made to sleep in a separate room from Pippa.

The Admiral turned away and then started walking down the corridor. When Jack went to follow him, the Admiral held up his hand and Jack halted. Jack stood there in the dim corridor and held his stick close to his body. He leaned back against the wall, closed his eyes and listened to the sound of his breathing. He sounded like he had a cold, some kind of virus. His body hurt all over. Some of those bruises from his fight with Crossholt he’d already be able to see. His neck was sore.

Jack waited there and didn’t know how much time had passed when the Admiral came back with a servant pushing a silver service trolley with several plates and bowls of food on it. The servant looked at Jack curiously, but said nothing. Jack saw that the servant’s coat was ripped in several places and realised the servant may have been a casualty of the ‘training exercise’ that had happened at the Palace.

The servant left the trolley in Jack’s room, then exited quickly, bowing deeply to the Admiral as he went.

‘How bad was it?’ Jack said, his voice low. ‘The attack? Is your daughter safe?’

Pitchiner’s face snapped to Jack’s, his eyes narrowed with an odd kind of rage. But then, Jack supposed, he was dangerous now. He represented a danger to Seraphina. He’d just killed someone. No wonder Pitchiner wanted to lock him up again, even if Jack didn’t want to be imprisoned. That was what he deserved, wasn’t it?

Jack’s jaw tightened, and he slipped sideways into the room that he’d half-destroyed. There were pools of water everywhere and some of the ice was still thickly frozen to the walls and the other door. Jack rubbed at his face and it did nothing for his headache. Instead, it inspired a sudden wave of dizziness.

He swayed, stumbled, then caught himself on one of the bed posts. He waited for the click in the lock in the door behind him, but didn’t hear a thing. He turned, surprised to see Pitchiner still there, staring at him.

After almost a full minute, the Admiral walked into the room and looked around, folding his arms behind his back.

‘You should eat something.’

Jack looked over to the service trolley and pushed himself towards it, staring down at an uncovered bowl of pink apricots and tiny green grapes. Jack touched his finger to one of the apricots and then picked it up hesitantly. He’d heard of them before, but he was surprised that such a delicacy was
furry. He rubbed his fingers over it and then bit into it, overwhelmed by the sugary tartness.

This was how they ate all the time?

He lifted the domed silver cloche from what turned out to be a platter of meats. Some fresh and glistening with juices, and some cured and well-marbled with fats. Jack wondered if he’d have to save those for later.

‘How long should I ration this for, Admiral?’ Jack said, hesitantly. ‘How many…days?’

Pitchiner frowned at him, and then waved a hand. ‘Not at all. The servants will return three times a day with new refreshments. They’ll remove whatever you don’t eat.’

‘I…’ Jack stared at it all, momentarily forgetting to chew the next bite of apricot. ‘Who eats the rest?’

‘Whatever you don’t eat will be composted into the gardens, some of it is saved as scraps for the stables and kennels, I believe.’

Jack’s eyebrows lifted. It shouldn’t really surprise him, but knowing that the horses and hounds ate better than the recruits and the peasants from the creches was humbling. He felt more out of place than ever and looked around the room warily. Fyodor was probably one of the upper class recruits. That was why he got to stay here, even if it didn’t stop him from dying.

‘The attack on the Palace was dire, but swiftly curtailed,’ Pitchiner said.

‘I was in here for two days,’ Jack said. ‘I think. How long was I here?’

Pitchiner pressed a thumb and forefinger to his forehead, pushing in like he had a headache of his own.

‘I am not here to be your nanny, and you would do well to treat me with the respect I am owed,’ the Admiral said.

‘Sorry, Admiral Pitchiner,’ Jack said.

After all, they were feeding him, weren’t they? He wasn’t being killed. But he knew that door would lock soon, and then… and then…

‘Please don’t lock the door, Admiral,’ Jack said. ‘I mean I know…I’m kind of a prisoner. But just-’

‘No,’ Pitchiner said. ‘You’ll learn that what happened was an aberration soon enough. Expect a visit from the Spymaster and the Engineer of Wonders at some point. I’ll be back myself tomorrow morning to start assessing your capacities as a soldier and a Warrior. The Tsar will want to see you also.’

‘The Tsar…’ Jack said, feeling weak. ‘Uh, Admiral Pitchiner?’

‘What?’ Pitchiner snapped, looking so much at the end of his tether that Jack almost offered him something to eat. Almost, except the man was tall and intimidating and Jack felt slightly breathless whenever he was in the room.

‘The attack, I-’

‘If you think my patience is endless, you are about to find out it is not.’
‘Yeah,’ Jack said, his voice weaker than before. But Jack refused to give up. ‘Yeah, I know, but I just- You and Spymaster Toothiana told me to lie to him. And now he’s- you’re all going to lie to everyone about this…thing that happened. The attack. And now I’m going to be lying about Crossholt and how he died, right?’

‘That is about the sum of it,’ Pitchiner said, his hand dropping from his forehead as he tilted his head and studied Jack.

‘What else- I mean no disrespect at all, really, but what else- What else is a lie?’

Pitchiner blinked at him, and then his mouth curled in a slow smile. But the smile wasn’t bitter, or mean, or mirthless – as so many of Pitchiner’s smiles had been before. It seemed…tired, but real.

Somehow, that scared Jack more than anything else that had happened. He stepped back to the bed and sagged on it.

‘But it’s for the Kingdom, right?’ Jack said.

‘Get some rest, Jack,’ Pitchiner said.

The Admiral turned on his heel and left, and before Jack could even open his mouth to protest, the door was locked and he was on his own once more. Jack kept eating the apricot, and then ate meats he wasn’t familiar with, finding them all savoury and succulent and filling.

‘Okay,’ Jack said to himself, voice still thick and rough from what Crossholt had done, from screaming for help in the days before. ‘So I like…killed someone, and now I’m getting fed better food than I’ve ever been fed before?’

He waited for that to make sense, but it didn’t. In the end, he was too tired to make much of any of it and his thoughts refused to come together. He lay on the bottom corner of the bed, having dragged the trolley until it bumped into the mattress, and continued to reach for bits and pieces of food with his fingers, staring around the room.

He fell asleep like that, the stick clutched to his side, three grapes rolling out of his limp fingers into a puddle of water on the tiled floor.
Crossholt’s empty, staring eyes plagued him. That combined with the indigestion which fell upon him after he stuffed himself as full of as much food as he could, meant that he spent the night tossing and turning, trying to get the sleep he knew he needed, unable to avoid the image of his destructive ice, that slack, dead face, the barracks.

Finally, just before the sun was about to rise, Jack balled up and the exhaustion that followed fear came over him. It didn’t matter that he couldn’t get comfortable because of the soreness in his body. It didn’t even matter that he could still see the echo of Crossholt seared into his vision. His body demanded sleep, and it fell upon him heavily, consuming him.

He woke, groggy and aching, to the clattering sound of a cart being pushed beside his bed. The smells of fruits and toasted grains, of fresh bread and potato pancakes roused him, and his eyelashes fluttered to see a portly man touching his fingers to different cloches and finally touching his own finely coiffed hair, as though concerned about his appearance. When he noticed Jack blinking at him, his eyebrows lifted.

‘Young Master Jack,’ the man said, ‘breakfast is served. You’ve been asked to clean yourself thoroughly for the arrival of the Tsarina’s seamstresses and tailors. However, I’m afraid you only have forty five minutes before they arrive. I do hope that is enough time.’

‘Wait,’ Jack said, licking the bitter taste out of his mouth. His voice croaked, his throat hurt. ‘Wait, hang on. Forty five minutes to shower and eat? Do I have to- What else do I have to do in that time?’

‘Whatever you wish,’ the portly man said. ‘Is it enough time? Well, it shall have to be. We have no more to spare you.’

Then, he bowed respectfully – though not at the waist, it was more of a shoulder lean – and he trotted from the room, his hand straying to his hair just before he closed the door behind him.

‘Forty five minutes for a shower?’ Jack blurted.

He lifted his hands to rub at his face and then stopped at the rays of pain that radiated through his shoulders. He shuddered, then carefully sat up, surprised at the pain in his hips. He touched tentative fingers to his neck and felt that it was burning, the lines of Crossholt’s fingers having inflamed the skin.

But he was alive, and Crossholt was dead.

Jack took a single, sharp breath and then made a small sound at the pain in his ribs, the way everything seemed to creak. It wouldn’t be the first time he’d had to make do while being bruised,
but…what would the Tsarina’s servants say?

*Probably nothing. None of the others ever said anything.*

For once, it was a relief knowing that they wouldn’t care, that they wouldn’t make a big deal of it.

He found more of Fyodor’s clothing and made his way gingerly to the bathroom, where he was surprised by his own face. He placed the folded clothes carefully on the generous dresser and then leaned closer, frowning.

His brown hair was gone. In its place, a layer of white that looked like it was growing in thickly at least. Jack reached out to touch his hand to it, breathing carefully through the pain in his shoulder. It was soft, fluffy. He rubbed it a few times. He remembered his brown hair being shaved short a few times in his life, so that they could give the Overland creche children the delousing that they didn’t need, all because they were certain that anyone poor enough to be in the Overland creche had to be infected with crawling things.

This was different. His hair was softer, and it had grown in – probably since the day he’d left the mountain. And even though it was strange, and he didn’t look like himself, he had to admit he kind of liked the way his silvery eyes and white hair looked together. Especially given his powers were based in ice.

‘Look at me,’ Jack said, trying for a smile.

But it was his overall face that bothered him. The smile that didn’t reach his eyes, that only made his lips look tense. The bruising on his neck that had blackened overnight. There were smudged circles beneath his eyes, his eyelashes crusted with the remnants of salt from crying.

He reached out and touched his face in the mirror, and then blinked in surprise at the frost that spiralled outwards in fern patterns. With some effort, he stopped himself from doing it, and then as easily as breathing out, he let the frost start again and watched it with wonder. For a few moments, he forgot about Crossholt, the pain in his body, and his eyebrows slowly rose and his mouth opened.

‘Wow,’ he breathed. ‘Look at that.’

When he looked at his face next in the mirror, it was through the distorted lens of decorative ice crystals. It took away the harshness of what he saw, made him into some amorphous frost sprite. He thought it was an improvement.

He was more thorough than usual in the shower, scrubbing his feet twice, making sure to catch vigorously behind his ears until they hurt. He cleaned between his toes, abraded his own skin to make himself as clean as he could. Even taking his time to be thorough, even being careful with his shoulders – or as careful as he could be, everything still hurt – he still only took twenty minutes to clean himself in the lukewarm water that felt as hot as when he used to turn the hot tap all the way up.

He dressed without looking at his naked body. He didn’t want to see the bruises. The last marks of a desperate man touching him.

*Crossholt was going to kill you though. It was kill or be killed.*

‘Yeah,’ Jack said to himself, ‘but who scared him half to death by looking like some post-initiation abomination? For all he knew, I could’ve been possessed.’
That was the truth of it. Crossholt had been malicious towards Jack from the very moment they’d first met, but Jack knew that Crossholt would’ve had to put any post-initiate under arrest if they turned up unchaperoned, before any of the others had returned from the mountain. Besides, it had happened before, a few times. Jack had never seen it himself, but he’d heard of urban fables: recruits turning up mysteriously quickly after initiation, spreading shadow sickness wherever they went, before some brave soul finally detained them, revealing the possession and sometimes dying in the process.

Jack looked around the bathroom carefully then. There’d been an attack on the Palace. He kept forgetting, preoccupied with the image of Crossholt’s face. Were they safe?

And Pitchiner, making it clear that it had been an unexpected attack, and then telling him the lie that the military and government would tell everyone else to make them feel safe.

It made Jack uneasy. Surely…that was for the good of Lune? The people had to feel safe.

But what if they felt safe and they really weren’t?

Jack dressed as quickly as he was able, Fyodor’s clothing a little too big for him at the cuffs of the embroidered shirt, the hem of his pants. Then he left the bathroom and picked at the food on the cart. He didn’t want anything too rich, having learned his lesson. So he ate potato pancakes with no toppings, and was very careful to look for a piece of fruit he recognised: a pear. The pancakes were stolid, but they made him feel stronger than he’d felt for a few days, and he reached for his stick and held it to reassure himself. He didn’t know why it made him feel so much better, but he supposed it had something to do with it being the thing that helped him escape the mountain.

Well, Cupcake too.

He wondered how she was doing. Hoped she was doing well.

There were no clocks in the room, so he couldn’t tell if it had been forty five minutes when six of the Tsarina’s servants swept into the room as though they had every right to be there. A tailor who Jack could only tell by the measuring tape at a belt around his waist gestured imperiously in the vicinity of Jack’s direction.

‘Strip, please. We need your measurements.’

Jack swallowed, nodded, hands moving to the buttons at his shirt. The tailor was wearing some of the nicest clothing Jack had ever seen anyone wear. Instead of embroidery, his suit was printed, dyed with a subtle pattern of birds in flight. His hair was dishevelled in that way that suggested he’d spent some time pulling tufts of hair this way or that way before making a decision. His black rimmed spectacles looked like they were made for his angular face.

Jack was shrugging off his shirt when he realised that all of the servants had stopped in the process of moving about the room, taking out samples of clothing, bustling about with the items they’d brought with them.

He stopped and looked up, saw them staring down at his torso. So Jack followed their gaze and saw the bruises they were seeing. He closed his eyes, suddenly hoping they wouldn’t draw attention to them.

‘You’re injured?’ the tailor said sharply. ‘Why have you not been treated?’

‘Uh,’ Jack said, absently covering his chest. ‘No one knows. I mean- It’s just bruises, right?’
The tailor stared at him blankly, and then his eyes narrowed.

‘Well, far be it for me to judge, we’re only here to make sure you are outfitted as befits your station.’

‘My station?’ Jack said, as the tailor pointed to Jack’s pants and made it obvious they were to come off as well. Jack just dug his thumbs into the waistline and pulled down. He hadn’t found a belt, and they came down easily.

‘Underclothes too,’ the tailor snipped, impatient. ‘Yes, your station. Do you think it is peasants that get fitted by those that fit the Tsarina? We would not dirty our hands in such a fashion.’

_But I am a peasant._

As soon as Jack was naked, the tailor was there forcing Jack’s shoulders straight. A seamstress bent down and casually moved his legs a little apart. Then there were measuring tapes everywhere. Around his waist. Along his inseam. Around sections of his forearm, his elbow, his upper arm, his shoulders. The tailor said nothing else about Jack’s bruises, and seemed occupied with the task before him.

‘What do you think?’ the tailor said to one of the seamstresses who was wrapping the measuring tape around Jack’s head. ‘The Tsar has said something that flatters his appearance. Is it true that you can make ice?’

Jack blinked when he realised that the question was directed at him.

‘Yeah,’ Jack said. ‘That’s- That’s true.’

‘He’ll need frost proof clothing,’ the tailor said, not looking at Jack. ‘Silk is out.’

‘Silk was never _in,_’ one of the seamstresses muttered.

The tailor smirked, as though it was an ongoing joke between them, but then his face became businesslike once more and Jack stared in surprise when he realised that one of the seamstresses was measuring his _fingers._

He didn’t really care about his nudity. He’d not had a right to expect that he could stay unclothed around people of higher station, especially those who were concerned with clothing or health. So there was a part of him that just detached and stopped caring. He was an object they were handling, and soon it would be over and he’d get dressed again.

‘Blue, perhaps,’ the tailor said, looking Jack over with a critical gaze. ‘Blue, silver, grey, black. Perhaps some brown to lend some warmth.’

‘In the pants?’

‘Brown _pants_?’ the tailor said, and then he tilted his head and shrugged. ‘Instead of the gold, we can embroider his clothing with silver. Frost and snowflakes, something thematic. But the symbols of the military too. Perhaps around here…’ the tailor skimmed his finger around Jack’s waist, indicating the hem of an invisible shirt. ‘The Tsar wishes him to be immediately noticeable in a crowd. So the black and gold standard is out.’

‘Was it ever _in_?’ the seamstress of before snipped sarcastically, even as she offered some samples of cloth to the tailor.
The tailor laughed, peered at Jack’s hair, then ran surprisingly rough fingers over the top of his head.

‘Will you wear it like this?’ the tailor asked.

‘I think longer?’ Jack said, looking between them. ‘Like I used to?’

‘Good, I think. The shape of your head is not ideal for hair at this length.’

Jack’s lips quirked up. ‘Did you just say the shape of my head is ugly?’

‘Young Master Jack,’ the tailor said, addressing him directly for the first time, ‘I took great pains to avoid saying that.’

‘I’m pretty sure that’s what I heard,’ Jack said.

‘You can’t trust anything that tailor Flitmouse says,’ said the seamstress who had been making the in-jokes. Jack tried to catch her eye, to smile at her, but she was focused on her work.

Jack had a strange sense of loneliness then. These people with their little jokes and their lives, and Jack was an outsider even now. Then he thought that maybe he deserved it, because he’d murdered someone, and he’d wanted to murder them. Not just out of self-defence.

Pitchiner said he was like that too. He was affected like that. Is that why he’s always so distant from everything? And such a douche about it?

He went silent as they discussed cloth nearby, picking out shades of blue without asking him once if that was what he wanted to wear. They chattered constantly, sometimes arguing, and another seamstress brought out samples of different metallic threads for embroidery and their fingers busily moved over each, pointing, choosing, pushing aside.

The Admiral of Lune had said the Darkness had pushed too deep. Jack didn’t feel like he was wrong, either. He’d known in the mountain that he wasn’t letting the Darkness through him – even though he still didn’t have much of an idea of what that meant. He’d let it in. He’d let it stay. And it had vanished, yes, but not before Jack had thought that maybe it would never leave.

It was strange, because right now, standing naked before these people, he didn’t feel malice or malevolence. He felt uncertain, scared, lost. But that just meant that he couldn’t even begin to control it. How was someone supposed to control something they couldn’t feel? He didn’t want to get so scared that he was overcome with it again.

And it wasn’t like the thing with Crossholt was the first time, either. When he’d come out of the mountain with Cupcake and seen the Golden Warriors, if he’d known what he was doing, he could have seriously injured or killed them. And then Pitchiner, Jack had lashed out with his staff and hurt him with the ice. Pitchiner’s back had been turned. He had been walking away.

Jack shivered.

The servants kept chattering away and Jack hesitated, then walked over to the bed and perched on it, watching them.

A quick knock on the door and all the servants turned as one, and the door swung open as Jack hurriedly reached for a pillow and covered his privates with it, just in time to see Nikolai St. North and E. Aster Bunnymund enter the room together.
Jack stared, because it was North, the Engineer of Wonders. He reached for his stick absently – where it was resting on the bed – and drew that to his body too, as though he could somehow protect himself with fabric and wood. He wasn’t scared, exactly, but to see the Engineer and the Disciplinarian side by side filled Jack with an odd kind of dread. Why were they here, together? Why?

‘Did I get- Did I get reported?’ Jack said, breathless.

Bunnymund’s long ears perked forwards a little.

‘C’mon mate, I get days off too, y’know.’

‘Ah, but he is joking!’ boomed North, slapping Bunnymund heartily on the back even as he peered with immense curiosity around Jack’s room. ‘He is never taking a day off!’

Jack stared at North, his fingers clutching and icing the pillow at once.

North cut an imposing figure. He’d gained some weight since the days that he’d been a Golden Warrior – one of the best, too – but he still bore the size and breadth of someone who could have won wars with his musculature as well as his sabres. His red coat had pulled back at the sleeves to show arms covered in thick black tattoos, and his face bore the signs of someone who was ready to apprehend the world with fierceness at but a moment – in the light of his bright blue eyes, in the cast of his thick black eyebrows, and in the sharpness of his black moustache and beard. At his waist he wore a belt that even now held a sabre, as though he couldn’t quite let go of his Warrior past despite being one of the best aeronautical engineers that Lune had ever seen.

‘Well, I think we’re done here,’ the tailor said, pointing down to Jack’s clothing and then at Jack in a way that indicated he wanted Jack to get dressed again. ‘We’ll get some underclothes and basic training shirts and so on to you in a day or so, the more formal items will arrive over the next few weeks. A full wardrobe overhaul doesn’t happen in a day, you know!’

‘Yeah,’ Jack said, weakly. ‘Sure, I- I understand. Thanks so much.’

The servants of the Tsarina left the room, one of the seamstresses clucking disapprovingly at Bunnymund as she went. Bunnymund’s ears began to flatten towards the back of his head, but they poked up again as soon as the servants were gone.

‘Pretty sure Flitmouse told you to get dressed,’ Bunnymund said, flicking his ears forward in emphasis.

Jack looked between the two of them – North walked towards the equipment hanging on the wall by the training pads, and Bunnymund walked over to the tinted windows and looked outside, up at the sky.

Jack lowered the pillow hesitantly, and then the stick, and quickly darted off the bed to seize his clothing. It was one thing for servants to be measuring him and poking at him, but these were- this was too weird.

Jack stepped into his pants and winced as he pulled them up, and then was startled by a sudden clatter of metal against metal. He looked up at North, who had knocked two blades together accidentally, and was staring at Jack with wide eyes, horror in the slackness of his mouth.

‘What?’ Jack said, staring at him. ‘Shit, what?’

‘Think it’s the bruises,’ Bunnymund said drily from where he was standing by the window.
Jack reached for the pillow and his clothing and covered himself as quickly as he could, his heart beating faster.

‘It’s nothing.’

*I didn’t do anything.*

He’d killed someone, and the Disciplinarian was *right there.*

‘Jack,’ North said, staring at him, then looking to where he must have seen the bruises. ‘That is not being nothing. I know. What happened?’

‘Nothing!’ Jack burst out.

‘Was it Kozmotis?’ Bunnymund said flatly. ‘Because if it was—’

‘It wasn’t him, honest,’ Jack said. ‘I just- I fell.’

‘Rightio,’ Bunnymund said, looking over at North. ‘That was some staircase that got a chokehold of you! This doesn’t have anything to do with the fact that Crossholt’s disappeared and they’re still preparing a press statement about it?’

Jack backed towards the bed and his thighs bumped the mattress. He sat weakly, reached for his stick and held it in front of him, and thought that this might be what Pitchiner was talking about. This need to constantly be on the defensive. North and Bunnymund hadn’t moved. The first time Jack was getting to meet the Engineer of Wonders, and he was reacting like *this.*

‘It’s nothing,’ Jack said again. ‘Seriously. Right? These things happen.’

North looked over to Bunnymund with narrowed eyes, and there was a glower there that was so strong that it stole the breath out of Jack’s lungs, and North wasn’t even looking at him. But when North looked back, the expression was gone, replaced with something friendly.

‘Of course,’ North said. ‘Then perhaps you might be getting dressed, yes?’

Jack nodded quickly, and then slid off the bed and discarded the pillow and turned around so that they both couldn’t see the marks on his front anymore. But at a muttered curse from North, he realised that he’d exposed whatever damage had been done to his back. He pulled his shirt on as quickly as he could, but he didn’t miss North growling:

‘You have carved a pound of flesh from him, Epiphanes.’

‘Too right, Nikolai,’ Bunnymund said. ‘I get the orders on the form, I don’t get to prance around them and pretend they’re just suggestions like you do.’

Jack buttoned up his shirt. He wished he had a belt. He widened his stance a little. Turned to face them.

‘So, this is like… I mean, it’s cool you’re here and all but ah, why, exactly – if I haven’t been reported…’

‘I am being here to see what I can do about your staff,’ North said, pointing to the long stick on the bed. ‘They are telling me that you are attached to it, so it is my job to give you a reason to be. Bunnymund is here because he was bored and wished to tag on.’

‘Tag along,’ Bunnymund said, with the impatience of someone who was used to constantly having
to correct phrases. North shrugged his huge shoulders like he didn’t particularly care one way or the other. It was odd though, Jack thought. Most peasants tried to discard their accents as fast as they could. Even Jack had the neutral commoner accent, having trained himself out of the thicker accent of childhood. North not only kept his, but seemed to lean on it, reminding everyone of his humble beginnings.

‘Pass me this stick you found in the mountain,’ North said, walking over and holding out his hand. Jack could see callouses on his fingers and palm. He looked at his stick and reached out to it, and then hesitated.

‘It’s…I mean, it’s just a stick,’ Jack said. ‘It’s not- It’s not a weapon.’

‘Let me be the one deciding this,’ North said, beckoning with his fingers.

Jack passed over the long bit of wood and frowned as North took it up and away from him, holding it before his eyes and looking along its length. Jack didn’t see what the big deal was.

‘This is straight and well-formed,’ North said, sounding surprised. ‘You found it in the mountain? I am wondering how, no trees grow in there.’

Jack frowned. Then a horrible feeling crept over him. ‘Do you think the Darkness made me take it?’

‘No, I am not thinking this at all,’ North said, his voice quietening. He peered at Jack over the wood itself, and his eyebrows lifted. ‘The mountain is a wondrous place.’

Behind him, Bunnymund scoffed, and North’s eyes narrowed in irritation. When he looked over, Bunnymund leaned back against the window, folded his arms and said:

‘Listen, mate, you’re hitting the Engineer of Wonders thing a bit hard. That mountain is not a wondrous place.’

North frowned like he didn’t quite agree. But he didn’t argue, and when he turned to Jack he was silent for a few moments, as though thinking of how to frame his thoughts.

‘You see, Jack,’ North said, finally, ‘the mountain is being different things for different people. It is where the Darkness lives, but there is also a magic there that tames it, and that magic sometimes is giving us the things that we need when we have lost all hope. Maybe this is what you needed.’

Then he looked at it some more and rested it upon the ground, like a walking stick, and leaned on it a little.

‘I am thinking not a scythe,’ North said, conspiratorially. ‘Maybe something different. Something they will not expect. When I am returning it to you, it will be something that fits you as a person.’

‘But you don’t know me as a person?’ Jack said, feeling like it was very daring of him to say so.

‘I am trusting my instincts in this,’ North said. ‘And I have some meteorite which will do very nicely, and you will then use it to fight off the Darkness, as I do with my sabres!’

‘As you used to do,’ Bunnymund sniped.

North rolled his eyes, and then he turned easily and walked back to the weapons hanging along the wall, honing in on the smallsword that Seraphina had picked up, that Jack had brushed the dust off of. He touched a finger to it thoughtfully, but Jack could only stare at the stick North held. North
was going to take it away, and Jack wanted to yank it back and say it didn’t need to be turned into anything.

Jack felt stupid for being so attached to it. Truthfully, he didn’t even really know why. He wanted to protest it being taken anywhere, but if North would give it back to him in a way that meant he could keep it around him more often, then… that was a good thing, wasn’t it?

‘Jack, tell me something,’ Bunnymund said, in a way that made Jack’s entire body tense. ‘You come back early. You get put in Pitchiner’s wing. We’ve heard about the ice thing. And now Crossholt’s gone missing. I’m thinking that there’s something about you that reminds them of our dear old Admiral?’

Jack swallowed, glancing over to North, who was standing quite still.

‘I don’t know what you mean,’ Jack said. ‘Uh, Crossholt’s missing?’

‘You’re a terrible liar, mate,’ Bunnymund said, smirking. ‘I’m not accusing you of anything.’

‘Seems to me like you kind of are, though?’ Jack said, feeling his heart pound faster. And then he felt it, a faint coil of hate inside of him. Like a tendril pushing up the back of his spine, a blurred darkness behind his eyes that told him it would be so easy to smash down this line of questioning.

Jack took a step backwards and bumped into the bed. Bunnymund’s ears slowly lowered until they lay against the back of his head. North was facing them both, his fingers still touching the only clean weapon in the rack.

‘I don’t know why I’m here,’ Jack said, trying to think about anything other than that odd vine of hatred growing inside of him. ‘I don’t know what happened in the mountain.’

He could feel frost spiralling out from his feet, but refused to look down at it. But North looked at it, was staring in awe.

‘I don’t know what happened to Crossholt,’ Jack said.

‘He had it out for you,’ Bunnymund said simply. Like that explained everything.

‘No,’ Jack said, staring at him. Pitchiner had told him there would be a series of… lies. Jack needed to pay attention. He couldn’t- He needed to be smart about this. ‘I just wasn’t a very good recruit. Seriously. There’s always one, right? In every group? I was just that one.’

Jack didn’t have a word for the expression that crossed Bunnymund’s face then. Or for the unreadable look that he exchanged with North.

‘Jack,’ North said patiently.

That tone of voice did something to him that he didn’t quite know how to handle. Jack leaned back against the bed and thought that the first time he met the Engineer of Wonders, it was supposed to be as a fully-fledged Golden Warrior – maybe to choose the kind of flying machine he’d get to pilot. Not this.

‘Jack,’ North said again, ‘we are not here to harm you. It is… difficult, being taken into the Palace like this. It is difficult also being under Pitchiner’s care, since he is being more jaded than he once was. We are not your enemies.’

‘Forgive me if like, the Disciplinarian standing right there makes that seem like the opposite of the
truth,’ Jack said. ‘I mean no disrespect or anything, I just think—’

‘-Maybe if you didn’t break so many rules, hey?’ Bunnymund said.

Jack stared at him. He took a slow, silent breath, tried to squash the viciousness that tried to rise in response to that. Instead, he pressed his lips together and thought of Crossholt’s fingers around his neck, thought about being sent to the Disciplinarian for trying to help when the Darkness had attacked the platform.

‘Crossholt isn’t the kind of person you want to be around when you’re determined to be a larrikin,’ Bunnymund added.

‘Uh huh,’ Jack said, not able to look away from him. He could feel how cold his hands were getting. Then ice crawling like insects along his arms. ‘Guess you’d see the worst side of everyone, doing what you do. Maybe you have no idea who I am outside of that.’

‘If you have a beef with me for doing my job, and asking you more than once if you wanted to report Crossholt, then—’

‘I am thinking now is not the time for this!’ North boomed out, stepping between them, cutting off Jack’s line of sight. Jack caught a flickering twitch of Bunnymund’s ears, but couldn’t see him otherwise. He looked down at the floor instead, surprised at the anger coursing through him.

‘Yeah,’ Jack said, staring down at frost patterns on the floor and feeling queasy.

‘Instead,’ North said, ‘you can tell me why those bruises are not healed yet. There are healers.’

‘What?’ Jack said, looking up. ‘What do you mean?’

‘The Priests of Light,’ North said. ‘You- You are not knowing this?’

‘Well I know they heal people sometimes, like, if they’re allowed to,’ Jack said. ‘I’m not really in that category of people, y’know? And besides, it’s just bruising. It’s not like anything’s broken. I mean, what kind of Warrior would I be if I went crying to a healer every time I got a little bruised?’

Bunnymund shifted until Jack could see him again. His ears were perked up – not all the way up – but no longer lying flat against his head. Jack couldn’t read the expression on his face again, and hated it. The both of them stared at him almost expectantly. As though they expected him to say something important.

‘Guys,’ Jack said, spreading his hands, ‘I really don’t know why you’re here? Like, if it’s for the stick, okay. But like- If it’s about the ice trick or whatever, I don’t really have any control over that yet. And if it’s to see whether I’m an abomination then I guess…you’d know already? Right? So… if you want to clue me in at any point, then that’d be…awesome.’

‘We only wanted to see how you are settling in,’ North said warmly. But from the expression on Bunnymund’s face, that was – in Jack’s opinion – a pile of crap. He felt like he’d felt in Toothiana’s Tower. As though large things were being said or implied that he couldn’t possibly comprehend.

‘Yeah,’ Bunnymund added. ‘There was an attack on the Palace.’

‘About that…’ Jack said, looking towards the window. ‘It was just a- Just a training exercise.’

‘A really bad liar,’ Bunnymund said emphatically. ‘The Tsar is going to enjoy you. He wants a
mascot and you can’t even carry off the bleedin’ party line. And for the record, we know that it wasn’t a training exercise. North aint friends with Tooth for nothing, you know.’

‘Were you okay, Jack?’ North said gently. ‘During the attack?’

‘I was here,’ Jack said, and then laughed. ‘I mean, I was locked in here for a few days and people forgot about me, so like, I was fine sort of. I’m glad the Darkness didn’t get in because then I would’ve been pretty screwed. But if all the Warriors were on hand maybe they would’ve found me then.’

‘Is Kozmotis here today?’ Bunnymund said to North.

‘I am thinking he might be,’ North said slowly. ‘I’ll go fetch him.’

Then North walked over to the door that Pitchiner always left through, and Jack’s eyes widened when the door just opened for him. Jack knew it was locked, but for North, the mechanism clicked and then he was walking down the corridor, his broad frame taking up a lot of the space, casting shadows that loomed. Jack looked at Bunnymund, who was back to looking out of the window.

‘Is it that you like the tinting on the windows, or is it that you have no idea how to change it?’ Bunnymund said.

‘It can change?’ Jack said, staring at it. ‘It doesn’t always have to be dark?’

‘Yeah, there’ll be a control panel around here somewhere. It’s North’s technology that he has on some of the ships. Probably eighty percent magic and twenty percent something else. He doesn’t really do anything properly. Let’s just say if someone tried to replicate his results who didn’t know a damned thing about magic, well… One man’s engineering, right?’

Bunnymund moved around the room, close to the windows, running his fingers along the dusty sills looking for something. By the join to the wall, a small platform jutted out at Bunnymund’s touch, filled with mechanisms of gears and wires and sparking lights. Bunnymund pressed his finger to a small ratchet and pulled it down, and just like that, the tinting faded and sunlight started to spill into the room.

‘Oh,’ Jack breathed. ‘That’s so cool.’

‘It’s pretty bonzer, yeah?’

‘So…you and the Spymaster and the Engineer are like…buddies?’

‘That’s one way of putting it. We’re sort of like…people who have some of the same goals in life. Sandy too, but most people don’t know that.’

‘Sandy,’ Jack said, eyebrows drawing together. ‘The High Priest? Sanderson?’

‘Yep,’ Bunnymund said, looking up from the gears and cogs on the control panel and grinning. ‘That’d be him.’

‘Huh,’ Jack said, his hand reaching absently out for his stick before he realised it wasn’t there. He trailed his fingers along the blanket instead, like that had been his aim all along.

‘Who beat you, Jack?’ Bunnymund said.

‘Training,’ Jack said quickly. ‘You know how training is.’
‘I thought you fell.’

‘While training,’ Jack said, smiling brightly.

‘Was it Kozmotis? Or was it Crossholt?’ Bunnymund said patiently.

‘What? The Royal Admiral? He’d do something like that?’ Jack stared. He knew that Pitchiner was dangerous, but so far, there’d been no signs that he was the kind of person to lash out like that. But then, after the way Bunnymund tilted his head, one ear cocking while the other was lazily held at half-mast, Jack realised he’d been tricked.

‘You know,’ Jack said, scowling at him, ‘I don’t get why it’s a big deal all of a sudden. It’s not like this kind of stuff hasn’t happened all the time. I’m an Overland, remember? And you don’t care. Like, give me the choice between being knocked around a bit and taking your lashes and I’m going to be choosing the former, because at least all of this…’ Jack gestured at himself, ‘won’t scar.’

Bunnymund frowned at him, and then his shoulders rose and fell on a sigh. He raised a paw to his eyes and covered them for a moment, muttered something under his breath. But when he dropped his arm, he just looked tired.

‘Y’know,’ Bunnymund said slowly, ‘they might’ve given me the Alchemist’s Tower, and I might be…might seem like someone with a lot of social heft, but Crossholt was above me in station. I’m not a Golden Warrior, and I wasn’t born on Lune. If I get orders from someone I have to follow them through.’

‘You don’t need to make excuses for it?’ Jack said, getting angrier. ‘I’m just saying if I had a preference, I know what I’d pick. Okay? Calm down, it’s not like I think you did the wrong thing.’

Bunnymund lifted the same paw to his face again and rubbed at his forehead, shaking his head. He turned to look back out the window again, and Jack thought he looked sad, and spitefully thought it was a good thing. Maybe he wouldn’t have to be the only one feeling miserable.

North returned back through the corridor alone, and he looked between Bunnymund and Jack.

‘He is coming,’ North said. ‘Finishing up a report. So, Jack! This ice that you can make. Can you show me? I would love to see it in action.’

Jack slid off the bed again and thought it wouldn’t be so hard to do, it was just he didn’t know what to do. He stood and raised his hands until they were at waist level, then shifted so that his palms were facing upwards. Bunnymund had turned to watch as well, and Jack looked between the two of them, calling frost to his fingertips without thinking.

Instead of spiralling on a surface, it danced in the air silently. Ice crystals catching the daylight now pouring in through the windows. As Jack watched, the ice took spiral shapes, or made separate curves that danced around each other. The frost was easy to make, it felt like it was always there. He smiled to see it, found it comforting.

Then, without knowing how he was doing it, he looked up and it began to snow. With no clouds, without the sense that he was sucking moisture up from the room and reforming it. The snow was a kind of magic, but it was real, and it fell and clung in dry flakes to his hair, to North’s moustache and beard, to Bunnymund’s fur, his twitching ears.

‘I can do other stuff too,’ Jack said. Violent stuff. ‘But this comes easy. I don’t really have to think about it?’
North was turning in a slow circle, looking up at the snow and smiling.

‘And I can kinda fly?’ Jack said, too quickly to ask himself if it was a smart thing to say. ‘I mean I think? I have no control over it but I can like… that’s… I just don’t really know what I can do yet.’

North was beaming at him, and it was contagious, Jack found himself smiling back.

‘It’s awesome, hey,’ Jack said, realising for the first time that these powers – whatever they were – they were amazing.

‘It is,’ North said, his voice low but sincere. Then he turned to Bunnymund and said: ‘Are you still thinking he is not a Guardian now?’

Jack felt something in his body go very still. A line from Jamie’s letter that he’d memorised floated back into his head:

*But if you ever need a safe place and are ready to leave this life forever – and why wouldn’t you be, when I’m not here? Put your feelers out for the Guardians of Lune, and they’ll help you.*

‘Guardian?’ Jack whispered, feeling his knees go weak.

‘Damn it, North,’ Bunnymund hissed.

‘Guardian?’ Jack said again, his voice thready. ‘Like… the ‘Guardians of Lune?’’

‘We’re fucked,’ Bunnymund said, sounding viciously cheerful. ‘Thanks, Nikolai. That’s just what we needed.’ Then he looked at Jack. ‘How in the Darkness have you heard about the Guardians of Lune? You can barely tell up from down.’

Bunnymund was glaring at him, and Jack stared between them both. His heart was beating so hard that he felt ill.

‘And no,’ Bunnymund continued, pointing at Jack with a paw but looking at North. ‘He’s too young, he’s too naïve, and trust me, he’s never taken anything seriously. Take a look at his rap sheet, even without Crossholt’s bias, this one always gets into trouble. He’s definitely not a Guardian.’

Footsteps came to a halt by the door that North had returned through, and they all looked around to see Pitchiner standing there looking quietly furious.

‘Pitch!’ North said, either oblivious to the increasingly tense atmosphere, or working unsuccessfully to defuse it. ‘You are here!’

‘I am here,’ Pitchiner said coldly. He glanced briefly at Jack, and then folded his arms, glaring between Bunnymund and North. ‘Can I not trust you to go two hours without bringing up this ridiculous nonsense about whatever you think Guardians are? It’s bad enough that you pollute each other with your words, you’re trying to infect him too? And for what? He’s a recruit who failed his initiation and ended up acquiring a measure of magical power that he has zero control over. That is all.’

‘I am thinking just because you lost your wonder a long time ago, doesn’t mean you are knowing what you’re talking about,’ North said, his smile a little dangerous.

‘I know that if the Tsar ever finds out who ‘the Guardians of Lune’ are, he’ll execute every single one of them publically. Do you remember the last time we had a public execution? Such a terribly
long time ago. So very entertaining. The people come out in droves: morbid curiosity, you see. What do you think it will do to Lune, to know who those Guardians are?'

Jack wanted to hide. Wanted to be a fly on the wall to watch this conversation. He could feel the power every one of these people held. North practically vibrated with it. Bunnymund was an alchemist and the Disciplinarian and a magician. Pitchiner was the Royal Admiral. The tension was palpable.

‘We’re always grateful for your confidence,’ North said smoothly.

‘It only extends so far,’ Pitchiner said. ‘If you infect him with what you believe, I will personally deliver all of you to the Tsar myself, even if it means impugning myself.’

‘Here we go again,’ Bunnymund said, even as Jack stared at the Admiral in shock. ‘Getting your knickers in a twist. We just wanted to see for ourselves what’s been happening, since we know we’re only going to get bunkum from you.’

‘I may not agree with everything the Tsar of Lune puts in motion, but I do believe that the people need to feel safe, especially now.’

‘Oh, yeah, mate,’ Bunnymund said. ‘Shadows in the Palace, it’s a good time for us, isn’t it? You’re losing your war.’

‘Lune’s war,’ Pitchiner snapped. ‘I’d dearly like to see how far you get without me.’

‘How about we are all focusing on calming down?’ North said, but there was a hardness in his eyes as he glared between the two of them. ‘It’s a difficult time. And yet the mountain has given us this magic of such hope.’

‘Hope,’ Bunnymund said, scowling at him. ‘You think that’s hope? Let’s ask again: outside of all the snow and cute ice crystals and stuff, where’s Crossholt?’

Jack took a step backwards, another. Partly because he wasn’t made for this kind of conflict, and partly because there was a rising mass inside of him, like a bubble in his chest. He knew that if it rose high enough it would pop, and if it did that, he might not be able to keep himself under check. It didn’t make any sense, but he didn’t want to be near anyone when it happened.

Pitchiner turned to focus on Jack, his eyes narrowing, mouth pulling tight. Jack knew that he knew. But he couldn’t stop it. Terror and something darker tangling together, and he couldn’t lie his way through this, Bunnymund had said so. He kept seeing Crossholt’s face and alongside the shame he felt, the horror, there was a tiny part of him that felt good. That thought, spitefully, that he could do that to anyone he wanted. That he wouldn’t have to put up with any conversation that was hard again. Anything difficult, he could make people do what he wanted. He could make them.

‘Jack…’ Pitchiner said, breaking through Jack’s concentration. ‘Look at me.’

Jack couldn’t avoid meeting his eyes, and then he fell still when he felt the fear inside of him tremble and then build slowly, artificially. Pitchiner using Jack’s own fears against him. But just as quickly, the fear dispersed, and then dropped away so that Jack wasn’t calm, exactly, but his tension wasn’t building anymore. Jack still couldn’t tear his gaze away. He didn’t know that Pitchiner could do that.

When Pitchiner looked away, Jack took in a huge breath and shuddered it out, leaning against the window he’d backed into.
‘I want you to stop harassing my charge,’ Pitchiner said to North and Bunnymund. ‘He is untrained. He has an unpredictable power.’

‘He has been hurt,’ North said. ‘And he has not seen healers.’

‘Forgive me,’ Pitchiner said. ‘I was attending my own injuries, from both the attack on the Palace and Jack’s untrained magic.’

‘What?’ Jack said, mouth dry.

‘Your attack yesterday,’ Pitchiner said, flicking him the barest of glances. ‘You’re lucky you didn’t do more damage. As, apparently, am I. Now, I would like for the both of you to leave. He’s had too much excitement for one day, and I did not invite you here.’

‘I am not needing an invitation from you to move about the Palace freely,’ North said, folding his arms. ‘He is needing more than the company of a soured Admiral and your faceless servants. You cannot keep us away from him.’

‘Then we’ll just have to make a party of it, and I’ll endeavour to be here every time you visit,’ Pitchiner said, smiling broadly.

‘Come on, North,’ Bunnymund said, ‘let’s go. Can’t get much done while the guard dog is here.’

‘Dogs eat rabbits,’ Pitchiner observed mildly. ‘Tell me, who disciplines the Disciplinarian? There must be someone.’

Bunnymund made a sound of disgust, and started walking towards the door they’d entered through. North turned to leave, but then he turned back to Jack and walked up to him quickly.

‘I will be returning your staff to you as soon as I am able,’ North said soberly. ‘I will be seeing you soon, Jack.’

‘Okay,’ Jack said, looking at Pitchiner to see how much he disapproved of North saying he’d come back. Pitchiner looked unimpressed, but said nothing at all. North seemed to want to say something else, but eventually just pressed his lips together, frowning. Then he turned, and stared at Pitchiner as he walked away.

The door clicked shut behind him, and Jack pressed back into the window again when Pitchiner walked over to him.

A finger at his chin, lifting his head, and Jack averted his eyes when he realised that Pitchiner wasn’t looking at him, but at the bruises.

‘How…how badly did I hurt you?’ Jack said, voice hoarse with his neck tilted back.

‘I was already injured,’ Pitchiner said. ‘But it wouldn’t be something you’d want to repeat. It could have killed someone else. My military gear provides padding.’

‘I could’ve- Please just teach me how to not do it again.’

‘It’s not that simple,’ Pitchiner said, long fingers shifting on the collar of Jack’s shirt, and then pulling it to the side, as though trying to check how extensive the bruises were. Jack resisted the urge to close his eyes in some combination of fear and jitteriness. This close, he could feel Pitchiner’s body warmth. His fingers were careful, which surprised him, but they were also firm. Every one of his touches was sure, not hesitant.
‘Why?’ Jack said.

‘Because to learn how to control it, you will have to learn how to recognise it, and to do that it must be provoked.’ Pitchiner’s lips lifted in a smile. ‘You’re going to enjoy it even less than I did. High drama will abound.’

Jack couldn’t think about it.

‘Who trained you?’ Jack said.

‘I trained myself,’ Pitchiner said, finally stepping back from Jack and walking over to where the wall met the ceiling high window. He pressed on tile to eject the wall panel, and then shifted the ratchet so that the dark tinting returned. Jack didn’t like it, but he didn’t say anything. He knew how to change it back now. ‘I was lucky. I didn’t start showing signs of what had happened to me until I was a trained Golden Warrior and could make the Light. By then, with my privilege and background, I wasn’t committed or executed for the things I’d done. You aren’t that fortunate. You’ll need training now. Especially as you’re about as likely to make that golden light as I am to grow wings and fly.’

Pitchiner looked around the room and seemed to be assessing it. Jack could still feel that touch under his chin.

‘Admiral?’

‘We’re back to my title, are we?’ Pitchiner said, looking over and lifting his brows. ‘So what is it that you want from me now?’

‘Who- What are the Guardians of Lune?’

Pitchiner’s face shuttered and a muscle in his jaw jumped.

‘A childish fantasy and nothing more. You’d do best to put those words out of your mind, and don’t ever speak them aloud. Do it again, and I will take great delight in writing you up for the Disciplinarian myself, and he can squirm knowing there’s not a damn thing he can do about it except follow orders.’

It wasn’t the threat that made Jack realise he needed to keep quiet about it, but the oddly hunted look on Pitchiner’s face. The way his expression seemed to set in place, or how his gaze saw past Jack into some future he couldn’t bear.

But Jamie had told Jack to watch out for the Guardians of Lune, and Jack decided he didn’t have to talk about it, he could just…pay attention to those who had already been paying attention to him. North and the Spymaster, even Bunnymund, and…Sanderson?

‘You should know,’ Pitchiner said, his voice softer than before, ‘that if you bring up your knowledge of the Guardians before the Tsar, you will be directly responsible for the execution of others. It is one thing to kill people by accident, Jack. It is another to do it knowingly. It’s important to know where your line in the sand is, and I hope – for all our sakes – you make the right decision.’

It is one thing to kill people by accident.

‘I don’t want to hurt anyone else,’ Jack said. Because out of the confusion of the day, the week, that was one thing he knew for certain. He didn’t want to hurt anyone at all. He wanted to help people.
‘An intriguing sentiment,’ Pitchiner said, turning and walking back towards what Jack was starting to think as his exit.

‘It’s not just sentiment,’ Jack called after him. ‘You don’t know the first thing about me. You think it was easy for an Overland to get to where I got to?’

Pitchiner paused, placed his fingers on the doorway. He turned around, face impassive, golden eyes sharp.

‘I think you lack critical thinking and observational skills,’ Pitchiner said. ‘And I think stubbornness and determination can only get you so far, when you’re determined to stay entrenched in what you believe and stubbornly refuse to see beyond what you’ve been taught to think.’

‘Yeah,’ Jack said slowly. ‘I’m getting that.’

Pitchiner blinked, and his lips thinned, masking his surprise.

‘That whole ‘all is not what it seems’ thing,’ Jack said, wondering if he was prolonging the conversation just to get the Admiral to stay a few minutes longer. Pitchiner always left before Jack was ready for him to leave. ‘But I don’t know- I don’t know what to do. I k- I killed someone.’

Jack’s voice cracked and he forced a tremulous smile to his face, but it didn’t feel real and it didn’t feel brave.

‘They kept asking me about it,’ Jack said. ‘The Disciplinarian, he wouldn’t stop.’

‘I can have him barred from seeing you again,’ Pitchiner said.

‘I’m not made for lying about all of this stuff,’ Jack said. ‘How am I supposed to do it?’

‘Because your life depends on it,’ Pitchiner said, sighing. ‘Either you want to live or you don’t – you’ll learn.’

‘Like you?’ Jack said, lurching away from the window towards him.

‘Ah,’ Pitchiner said, a bitter smile on his face. ‘Not like me. I learned from birth. You don’t get born with golden eyes into this world, with my parents, and not learn a thing or two about deception.’

‘So how do I know if I can trust you?’ Jack said.

Pitchiner lifted both his eyebrows then, and then – amazingly – spread both of his hands as though he had no idea, then turned and walked away, closing the door behind him, leaving Jack weak-kneed and alone in his room once more.
*Just quietly ignores how long it's been*. Anyway, new chapter! And I've already got the file open to write number 12 as well. I hope everyone is going well, and I definitely have not abandoned this fic. I've made a new story bible so I can keep up with all the worldbuilding details (there's a lot, apparently) and that'll make it a lot easier from here on in! In the meantime, Jack and Pitch(iner) are making progress. Sort of. :D

Jack woke to paper bundles of clothing being placed on a low table near the doorway. He looked up from his bed, and the servant bobbed his head once in something like apology, then closed the door behind him.

Tailor Flitmouse had said that these things didn’t happen in a day, yet it had been less than twenty four hours. Jack undid the twine bows and unwrapped the paper, to see more clothes than he’d ever seen for one person in his entire life. None of it was the dress wear they’d suggested; instead, items for the day to day.

There was new soldier garb. Now he was allowed a simple black shirt – he’d graduated from the white shirt of the trainee, and this was the surest sign that someone, somewhere, considered that he had passed his Initiation. Jack smiled at the shirt itself, and then considered all the new pairs of underclothes, the pants, socks, new leather shoes, a pair of winter snow-boots, even kerchiefs and gloves.

‘Oh,’ Jack said, ‘so that’s why they measured my fingers.’

It was morning, and Jack quickly went through ablutions and tried on the new clothing, surprised at how well it fitted, how incredible it felt. It would probably all feel like that.

‘Okay,’ Jack said, ‘going up in station? Pretty cool. Liking this.’

The blue coat was already fringed with frost at the corners of the sleeves, at his neck, at the hem. He ran his hand through the white fuzz at the top of his head – all the brown hair had fallen away now. He was going to have to get used to it eventually, he supposed.

‘I’m the snow boy,’ Jack said, turning in his new clothes, feeling important. ‘I’m…I’m gonna be a mascot and bring hope to the people.’

Everything else that had happened, all the hard stuff, he was going to start putting that behind him. As for training with Pitchiner, well, Jack was just going to force whatever darkness lived inside of him down. He could do that. He’d had time to get over his shock, he was eating better, and even the bruising left over from Crossholt’s attack felt secondary. He’d dealt with much worse over the years, and it made him feel like he’d weathered a rough training session. Even that felt like an accomplishment.

He spun again, and then felt the floor under his feet begin to ice. How did it do that, if he was wearing shoes? He knew he couldn’t begin to understand, probably never would.
It seemed far easier now to keep his balance, to not slip, and then on a whim he imagined a path of ice in his room and skidded along it, arms out as he careened across the room. He laughed so hard he only just managed to get his arms out in time before he bumped into the wall.

‘Whoops!’

‘Papa’s right,’ said a stiff, girlish voice, ‘you are nothing like Fyo.’

Jack hadn’t even heard a door open. He turned and his eyes glanced past Seraphina to see Sanderson standing there. **High Priest Sanderson.** Jack stared at him, and then remembered his manners, bowing stiffly at the hips until he was staring at the floor, his face pretty close to it.

‘He says you don’t have to do that,’ Seraphina said, walking over to Jack’s bed and hopping onto it, then picking at the rumpled sheets and blankets, as though annoyed that it hadn’t yet been made.

Today, her hair was plaited into a single tail. She had flowers in her hair, red and green ones, each with dark centres that looked almost black. Her daywear was nothing like the nightgown he’d seen her in. She wore the kind of form-fitting pants a soldier might wear, and a black buttoned shirt. Over that, a vest with flowers printed all over it. A locket at her neck, and a single ring on her finger, made of some dark green metal.

She looked over at Priest Sanderson and watched the way his hands and fingers moved and then added:

‘He’s here to heal you. Are you not feeling well? That last part was me.’

‘I’m…oh,’ Jack said. ‘They sent the High Priest?’

‘Oh no, he wanted to come,’ Seraphina said, sliding off the bed.

‘Are you even supposed to be here?’

‘Well someone needs to translate,’ Seraphina said, rolling her eyes at him. ‘Papa said I’m safe whenever Sandy’s around, and I don’t think you’re dangerous anyway? Papa’s just…oh, I have a word for this. I learned it the other day. He’s overzealous.’

Priest Sanderson had turned to her and was signing quickly, it looked like he was saying a great deal. After a while, Seraphina just shrugged and said:

‘Exactly. Also, he says you should call him Sandy too.’

‘Uh huh,’ Jack said, staring at her. ‘You wouldn’t be joking, by any chance, would you?’

‘See, this is why it’s so obvious you’re a peasant,’ Seraphina said. She frowned at something Sanderson said, and then pursed her lips and scratched briefly at her wrist, as though she’d seen something fascinating on her sleeve. ‘Sorry,’ she added.

Jack had almost been avoiding looking at Sanderson properly. He was the **Priest.** Jack had seen him at the mountain, he’d been one of the last people he’d seen when he passed out. But other than that, his Priests and Priestesses had been the ones tending to Jack. Now, to have the little golden man in his room made him feel like he was being a terrible host.

‘Do you…ah…need anything? Like, tea or, I dunno? Something?’ Jack said awkwardly.

‘He’s here to heal you,’ Seraphina said, her voice gentler than before. ‘It’s not hard. You just stand
there, and then he goes-’ At this, she stood and made a strange whooshing sound and moved her hands as though indicating she was healing with light. ‘It’s easy.’

‘Oh, so I just…’ Sanderson beckoned him over, and Jack went, feeling unaccountably nervous. This was the Highest Priest. The one who probably brewed all those potions that drugged all the trainees out of their minds before the Initiation. ‘So I just stand here?’

Sanderson nodded, beaming up at Jack, like Jack had never done anything wrong in his entire life. As though he was just happy to be in Jack’s presence, which made zero sense.

Jack’s eyes widened when he saw the golden light gather at Sanderson’s hands. It wasn’t like the strident blasts of the stuff that Pitchiner made, but a soft, almost fuzzy glow.

Then Sanderson stepped towards him and the light seemed to move, suffusing Jack’s body – at first only at his hip where Sanderson was standing, and then more and more. On the back of it, aches that Jack hadn’t even been aware of were starting to vanish. Every bruised section of his skin felt painless, and then relaxed, as though he’d woken from the most restful sleep he’d ever had.

‘Weird,’ Jack muttered. ‘So weird.’

He felt a pang in his chest then. He missed Jamie. Jamie would love all of this, and probably know exactly what to do and how to act, with his upper class parents.

Sanderson stepped back and looked up at Jack as though confused, and Jack stared back in alarm. What if Sanderson had somehow found shadow possession, where no one else did?

Sanderson’s hands moved at a blur – speaking emphatically, and Jack shook his head in confusion, looking over to Seraphina. She stared at what Sanderson had just said, as though it didn’t make sense.

That’s it. I’m possessed after all. That’s it for me. It was nice while it lasted, I guess. Sort of. Bits of it were okay.

‘He says you have a lot of scarring?’ Seraphina said, as though she still wasn’t sure if that’s what she’d read in Sanderson’s signs. But Sandy nodded, and Jack felt a wave of relief so strong his knees felt weak.

‘By the Light, is that all? Seriously? Well, yeah. I mean it’s fine now. It’s just scarring. I get sent up to the Disciplinarian a lot and there’s pretty much a rule that I’m not allowed the Light afterwards. Haven’t you- I suppose you don’t have time to look at my records and stuff? I’m like… the Royal Academy brat.’ Jack etched a quick bow. ‘At your service.’

But Sanderson didn’t seem to get the joke, and he folded his arms and appeared troubled – creases in his forehead, mouth downturned at the corners. After a while, he looked over at Seraphina, and then hesitantly unfolded his arms and began signing – far more slowly this time, almost as though he wasn’t sure he wanted Seraphina to even see what he was saying.

Seraphina watched him closely, and then looked just as troubled.

‘Sandy says all trainees are meant to have access to the healing Light. It’s only…murderers and stuff. Jack, have you murdered someone?’

‘What? No!’ Jack spluttered, and thought about Crossholt and shoved that out of his head because that’s not what they meant.
Sanderson shook his head, and Jack realised that the last part hadn’t been Sanderson’s question, but Seraphina’s.

‘No,’ Jack said again, turning to Sanderson. ‘I’m…’

What could he say that wouldn’t make things more confusing? If they didn’t understand that he was just a peasant – a creche kid, an Overland, then how could he even explain it to them? He thought they all knew that this stuff happened. Pitchiner didn’t seem remotely surprised.

‘The Royal Academy knows this happens,’ Jack said finally. ‘The Royal Admiral and others, they know. It’s not all trainees, not even most, but some of us. I probably copped it a bit more than others. It’s fine.’

Sanderson looked angry, and he reached up as though to tug at one of the golden tufts of his hair. Then he signed so quickly it was almost a blur.

‘It’s not supposed to happen!’ Seraphina said, translating as he signed. ‘It’s not okay, either. Scarring is bad for battle, and it can never be fixed once it’s there. That’s the reason it’s for murderers and the worst people, because it’s permanent. They made you look like a murderer.’

Jack felt suddenly weary, despite the excitement of the morning, the new clothes, even the aches and pains gone from his body.

‘Okay?’ Jack said. ‘And?’

Sanderson’s eyes widened, and then his hands dropped. A few moments later, he sighed.

Jack looked to Seraphina, but she just watched Sanderson, looking worried. She looked back at Jack again, opened her mouth like she wanted to say something, then closed it again. Her fingers went to the locket around her neck and she touched it once, twice, then again.

‘Does Papa really know about this?’ she said.

‘I… Wouldn’t he have to? He’s the Royal Admiral.’

‘But he’s Papa.’

Have you met your father? He’s terrifying!

Jack bit into his bottom lip and then looked over at Sanderson, who still looked defeated.

‘I don’t know,’ Jack said, looking down to see frost spiralling out away from his shoes. ‘I don’t know, okay? Maybe he doesn’t know. I’m not the one you should be asking, hey. And whatever the Royal Admiral knows or doesn’t know, he does it for the sake of Lune, right? So it’s okay.’

‘No,’ Seraphina said, and then Jack startled when she actually stamped her foot on the ground. ‘No! You don’t know anything! I don’t want you, I want Fyo!’

She ran from the room, all of her stern composure gone. Jack watched horrified, and had visions of the Royal Admiral striding in at any moment to probably strangle him.

After a few more moments, Jack looked awkwardly at Sanderson. Sandy.

‘Huh, so I guess, there goes our translator?’

Sandy turned to Jack and smiled warmly, then shrugged. He turned to look at the doorway that
Seraphina had left through, worry stealing over his face again.

‘I’m sorry,’ Jack said quickly. ‘You should go after her, right? But ah…thanks for the healing Light and everything? There’s probably a more formal way I should say that, isn’t there?’

In response, Sandy made a brief waving gesture with his hand, as though indicating it didn’t really bother him either way. But then he looked apologetically to the door again, and with a raising of his eyebrows and a thinning of his lips, he held up a hand in farewell and trotted off in the direction Seraphina had fled.

Jack watched him go, then realised he was staring at an open door.

An open door.

They’d not locked it after themselves.

He hadn’t realised how much it still bothered him to be locked in this room, until he stared and realised he could just leave. He didn’t even know where he’d go. Not to the Barracks. He couldn’t visit Jamie. Cupcake probably wasn’t back yet and maybe didn’t ever want to see him again – just because he was absurdly grateful to her for saving his life, well, he might have complicated things for her.

Still, she was the closest thing to a friend that he had, and he wanted to see her again.

On a whim, he walked a little way down the corridor, turning to look back at the room that was now home. He didn’t know where to go, and after taking a few more tentative steps, he walked back into his room and sighed.

He left the door open.

*

With a body that felt whole and good – if a little colder than was normal – he couldn’t idle away the day. He cleaned his room, using towels to sop up the remainder of the ice that had melted. There was a hamper in the bathroom that looked like it would fit the used clothes and towels of maybe ten people, and he put everything in there.

Then, he began going through his drills and forms. Those he could do on his own. He improvised a sprinting circuit – from one side of the room and tapping the glass, to the other side of the room and tapping a specific point on the wall. He took down some of the weapons, including the smallsword Seraphina had picked up, and he worked.

Even on his own, he had a sense of that wrongness the Darkness had left behind.

Sometimes when he thrust forward as though to quench the Darkness, he felt a spiteful thing writhe inside of him. Wrong, it said. Turn around and attack the ones who deserve it. Don’t attack us! Join us!

It didn’t speak to him in Pippa’s voice anymore. He supposed he had left that behind in the mountain. One more hallucination, a dream that he could be called Jack-Jack one last time.

*

The lunch cloche came and went. Then one at mid-afternoon. Jack had never seen so much food, felt terribly guilty at how much of it he left behind.
'Can you...give me less? Please?' Jack said, to the young man who came to take the wheeled cart away. The boy – who looked no older than about fourteen with huge doe eyes – looked down at the food as though surprised anyone would ever ask for less.

‘Is it not to your liking, Sir?’ the boy said.

‘I just can’t eat it all,’ Jack said.

‘Oh!’ the boy looked relieved.

‘So...give me less, okay?’

‘That’s not up to me, Sir,’ the boy said, and then sketched a shallow bow and took the trolley with him and Jack stared after him. That was unhelpful. Who the hell was it up to? Was he supposed to march into some giant kitchen he didn’t know the location of and ask some cook about it? Who did he bother about it?

He made a sound of frustration and went back to his drills.

*

Jack was experimenting with the sheer joy of making snow and wind out of nothing when the Royal Admiral opened the second door – the one that always stayed locked.

Pitchiner stared at the snow, and Jack stared at him, at the novelty of seeing the Royal Admiral in clothes that weren’t special regalia, or day-to-day wear. That was a sparring outfit. He even wore the proper coat with its golden Lunar sigils and that sword at his side.

‘You upset Seraphina,’ Pitchiner said, without looking at him.

‘Yeah, I’m really looking forward to training with you now,’ Jack said. Pitchiner’s lips twitched upwards, and then he looked down at his own coat, which was swirling in an invisible wind, even though the windows weren’t open. Couldn’t open, as far as Jack knew. But he hadn’t explored that engineering contraption in the wall Bunnymund had shown him properly yet.

‘I didn’t mean it,’ Jack added. ‘I couldn’t-’

‘I know,’ Pitchiner said, looking tired then.

I don’t know anything! No one tells me anything and then I say things and some kid runs from the room looking like she’s gonna cry.

But Jack kept his mouth shut, and then with a force of will, he stopped the frost and snow. It felt like reeling something back towards himself, oddly comforting to have it there now.

‘What weapon do you favour?’ Pitchiner said, gesturing to the rack up on the wall.

‘Smallsword, I guess,’ Jack said.

‘It will do,’ Pitchiner said. Then nodded to the rack, and Jack went quickly to fetch it. ‘Follow me.’

Jack accidentally froze the hilt of the sword to his hand as he followed down the warren-like maze of the back-corridors in the palace. There was just something about knowing he was going to train with the Royal Admiral. How would he ever be good enough? It didn’t seem right. Maybe that was what Pitchiner meant every time he said he didn’t have time for this.
There must have been a thousand things he’d rather be doing.

‘How’s…your day been?’ Jack asked.

Pitchiner said nothing at all, and Jack narrowed his eyes in frustration.

‘Let me guess,’ Jack said. ‘It’s been like – super long, and you work too hard, and there’s too many things to do, and you’re stuck with training me, and I made your daughter really upset, so you’re a bit pissed.’

The slightest huff of breath came from Pitchiner, and Jack pretended that was amusement, and not frustration or anything else.

‘See,’ Jack said, ‘I’m really good at this.’

‘Are you?’ Pitchiner said, as they descended a huge spiral staircase and Jack thought that running around this place alone would be enough to keep someone fit.

‘Yep,’ Jack said, pretending that he really didn’t care about his opulent surroundings or any of it. This was normal. This was just another day.

They ended up in a large, outdoor arena. It was covered in raked sawdust, but the seating nearby looked dusty, and Jack wondered if this place didn’t see much use. Their footsteps were almost silent as they walked into the centre of the rectangular sparring space. Jack could see the branches of tall, verdant trees nearby, as though peering over the walls that hemmed them in.

‘Stay there,’ Pitchiner said, then walked about ten paces back and pointed nearby. ‘I want to see two forms from you. The one you like best, and the one you like least.’

Jack stared at him. He’d never been given an instruction so strange in his life. Usually it was just…do form number 20, or run through the Sneaking Woodfox in the Fens, regardless of how Jack felt about it.

He took a moment to think about the forms he enjoyed, the ones he didn’t. It was tempting to pick two of the forms he thought he was best at, and leave it at that.

But this was the Royal Admiral, and even after everything, Jack desperately didn’t want to get it wrong.

He performed the form he liked least, first. It was a difficult, sharp series of movements – all stabbing and bluster and bravado, about ferocity over fluidity. The footwork was difficult, the force required was alien to him. He wanted to be a soldier, yes. He wanted to protect the innocent. But he was never someone who just wanted violence. Even now, with hollows of malice in his mind that crowded into the spaces where Jack felt awkward, trying to convince him to turn those abrupt movements on something real, to hurt flesh and body and bone.

When he finished that, he took a moment to take a few breaths. To compose himself.

Then, the form he liked best. This one fluid, about dodging and feinting and then choosing one’s moment. He’d never imagined he’d love the feel of it so much – sliding from step to step, body crouched and ready to spring, the sense that he couldn’t be touched by anything, even as he could threaten and drive back the Darkness.

He hadn’t mastered it or anything, it was one of the later ones they’d learned, but he loved it so much. At the time, it made him feel like he could escape anything: Crossholt, the Darkness, anyone
that wanted to hurt him.

When he stopped, he looked behind him and was surprised to see frost and snow clinging to the sawdust.

He paused before looking at Pitchiner, worried about what he’d see on his face.

‘Interesting,’ Pitchiner said, impassive.

‘So you go for like the effusive positive reinforcement method of teaching?’

Pitchiner just stared at him, and Jack resisted the urge to grit his teeth together.

‘Sorry, Royal Admiral Pitchiner,’ Jack said.

‘Apology accepted,’ Pitchiner said, without missing a beat. ‘Now, you’re going to attack me.’

Jack almost said that he was looking forward to it, but it probably wasn’t good to annoy the Royal Admiral just before fighting. This was all going to end pretty badly, Jack just had a feeling.

Pitchiner took up a defensive stance – sword withdrawn, and Jack looked down at his thin, pointy smallsword.

*Oh man, this is going to be a disaster.*

He gripped the hilt with determination, and sprung forwards.

The sound of his back hitting sawdust – which was soft, but not *that* soft – and Jack looked up at the blue sky and bit back a laugh. But he pushed himself up without being told, and thought that this was stupid. But Pitchiner had said it wasn’t about them being equally matched, it was about being *provoked*. Or something.

Jack was determined to not let that happen.

He was knocked down over and over again. His smallsword could barely parry the large blade that Pitchiner used, and Jack was shorter than him, and didn’t have years of actual lived experience. A part of him was in awe that he was actually experiencing it. That part of him that was filled with hero-worship and had idolised the Royal Admiral for so long.

By the sixth time, pushing himself back up, Jack wondered just how long they were going to do this for. It wasn’t like being knocked down really aggravated him, anyway. That was *training*. That was definitely training with Crossholt.

Jack blinked. *Crossholt*. A blank expression, spikes of ice through his face, that horrid determination to *end* him and that awful rush of glee. How *good* it felt to kill someone.

When Pitchiner stepped towards him again, Jack panicked and forgot what he was supposed to do. He didn’t get the smallsword up fast enough. Pitchiner’s eyes widened in shock, and Jack leapt backwards – his feet hovering somewhere above the ground. He pushed outwards not with his body, but with his mind, terror clawing its way out of him. Ice responded, splintering everywhere.

Dazed, on his knees now, he opened his eyes and saw the blue-white of frozen ice and then *couldn’t* look. What if he’d killed the Royal Admiral? Jack hunched over himself, breathed out gasped plumes of frosted air, refused to look at what he’d done.

‘You have very little control over it,’ Pitchiner said, his voice calm. ‘Almost none, really.’
Jack startled and looked up, saw Pitchiner several steps to the side, bits of ice in his hair and on his coat but otherwise unscathed. But what caught Jack’s eye was the huge, spiking edifice – a defensive wall – that towered above them both.

‘I made that,’ Jack said, not quite believing it.

‘So we have two problems. One, that these abilities behave differently to whatever the Darkness may have done to your mind. Sometimes they can work in concert: cold and dark, but this was clearly defence.’

‘The thing with- the thing with my Lieutenant... That was- I was defending myself and I still – the Darkness still...’

‘It started off that way,’ Pitchiner said. ‘But that’s not how it ended. Get up. We go again.’

‘What?’ Jack said. ‘After...this?’

‘No better time to continue,’ Pitchiner said, his expression composed.

Just seeing the tower of ice was enough to make Jack buckle down on not letting it out again. A bit on the ground was okay. But not like that. Pitchiner wanted to see whatever Jack became when he killed someone, and Jack saw no sense in it. The best thing to do would just be to ignore it.

So he shoved everything away that made him feel something, and focused on fighting, and getting knocked down, and getting up again.

An hour later, Jack was bruised and wondering if Sanderson would make two house visits in a day. Pitchiner stared at him, head tilted, as though Jack had become a particularly fascinating beetle.

‘It won’t work,’ Pitchiner said, a grudging smile on his face.

‘I don’t know what you’re talking about,’ Jack said, pushing himself up and feeling a bit weak. All of Pitchiner’s moves were difficult to brace against. He brought his sword down too hard. He charged in too fast. Jack couldn’t even stand against him. He just got knocked down. He wondered if Pitchiner’s coat gave him more powers. They said the sigils granted them magical strength, after all.

Jack wished he could watch it from the sidelines. That’d be way better.

‘Maybe this isn’t going to work,’ Jack said. ‘You should just…put me with the others.’

‘I would love nothing more,’ Pitchiner said, ‘except that you can’t be trusted, and the Tsar also wishes you to learn things like comportment. I despair of you even learning a shred of it. You still don’t address me by my title.’

‘I’ve done it at least once today,’ Jack said lightly. ‘And a few times when you weren’t there. To Sandy.’

‘You mean Holy Highest Priest Sanderson, I believe?’ Pitchiner said, lifting a brow.

‘Mm-hm,’ Jack said. ‘He said I could call him Sandy. The Tsar calls you Pitch.’

Pitchiner lifted the hand not holding the sword to his eyes and muttered something in exasperation under his breath, and then glared balefully at Jack.
'If we’re going to be living near each other, don’t you think that I should be allowed to–'

‘How many lashes have you been written up for this week?’ Pitchiner said coolly.

Jack swallowed the rest of his words, and the cold lump in his mouth at the same time. This wasn’t training with a peer or a colleague. He couldn’t run his mouth. He shook his head.

‘I haven’t,’ Jack said.

‘Incredible. Keep it that way. Now, attack me again.’

Jack shifted his grip and thought of the aches in his back and hips and decided he’d just better get on with it. The sooner he showed Pitchiner that he could control whatever the Darkness had done to him, the sooner he’d probably be allowed to train with the new Initiates. He just had to stick it out.

*

Two hours later, Jack lay with his back on the sawdust and stared up at the sky – changing colours as the sun set – and thought that he didn’t need to get up, really. He could just stay here.

‘Get up,’ Pitchiner said, an edge of frustration in his voice.

‘It’s called passive resistance,’ Jack said.

He’d managed to get an idea of the ways Pitchiner liked to fight, but his reflexes still weren’t quite sharp enough to get himself anything more than a couple more minutes of dodging and ducking away, before he was flattened again.

Frustration came and went, and in its place, a grim determination to not waver – to not lash out or be cruel or any of those things – bedded down deep inside of him. It took root until he stopped feeling annoyed, until he could focus on falling as loosely as possible and leaving it at that.

‘It won’t work,’ Pitchiner said again. ‘Get up.’

Jack rolled onto his side, then onto his knees, and then finally managed to get his feet underneath himself. The smallsword was too thin to really lean on, so Jack just let it hang there. He wasn’t swaying. It was just the wind. Jack rubbed at the back of his head and then widened his stance weakly.

‘All right,’ Jack said. ‘I’m ready.’

But Pitchiner frowned and then sheathed his sword.

‘We’ll do this again tomorrow. I really enjoy how this cuts into all the other things I’d rather be doing with my day.’

Jack nodded, and then watched as Pitchiner stalked away, a thought entering his head as Pitchiner neared the exit.

‘I have no idea how to get back to my room,’ Jack called. ‘Like, seriously? None. There was a staircase, right?’

The Royal Admiral paused at the doorway, and then lifted a clenched fist like he was going to punch the doorframe. When his hand lowered, it was gentle, and he lightly rested his fingers on the glossy wood.
Jack just watched him. There was a lot to appreciate, even if Jack did think he was kind of mean. He was tall, and he’d just proven over the last few hours that he had no problems exerting himself over and over again. Jamie would call it ‘spank bank’ material, which was wrong, really. Just wrong. People did not do those kinds of things to Royal Admirals who looked like they were capable of murder. Especially now.

‘Is there a map?’ Jack said innocently.

‘Someone will be by to take you back to your rooms. It would be in your best interest to learn where you are going.’ Pitchiner paused like he was going to say something else, and then walked away.

Jack sank back to his knees. He was covered in sawdust, sweating, and he was pretty sure some of his sweat had frozen to his body. He sighed heavily.

He’d managed to keep it together. But it looked like Pitchiner wasn’t going to give up, so this was going to get tired really fast. What would Pitchiner do anyway? He hadn’t even explained what would happen.

Jack looked over at the wall of ice – giant spikes showing no signs of melting. The tall edifice was foreboding, and Jack wondered just what he’d brought out of that mountain with him.
After the Court of Five Thrones I told myself I'd never write a fic heavy with political machination ever again. And then what do I do? *Stares hard at this fic.* Also a rather intense chapter for poor Jack, but I suspect I could say that at any point in this story, oops.

The next day, Jack was kept unexpectedly busy. Three tutors came to teach him correct comportment and etiquette which was, Jack belatedly realised, far harder and more complex and more stupid than he'd ever really known. There were correct ways to get dressed and wear clothing, which meant every other way was wrong and not appropriate. There were correct ways to eat, and one of his tutors – a scrubbed up elderly person with hair so wispy it looked like it was made of thin cloud – rapped him on the wrist with a long fork every time Jack got something wrong. Which was often.

Jack’s wrists were bruised before lunchtime. Which was great, it went with all the bruises he’d acquired from training with Pitchiner. Apparently trainees that didn’t let some evil malice out of them during training didn’t get proper healing from the High Priest or something.

He could sort of understand why the Royal Admiral didn’t want to teach this kind of etiquette stuff. It was tedious and difficult, and seemed so unimportant. Jack tried his hardest to remember everything, but the information overload was intense, and he had no idea that a person was supposed to have fruits before meats – except at breakfast. Or that a person was supposed to use only one very specific kind of knife to cut soft cheese, and using any other knife was apparently the height of rudeness.

’It makes you look like the peasant you are,’ one of them said. ‘We don’t want that.’

‘That’s terrible,’ Jack drawled, staring at them and thinking this was kind of ridiculous.

It wasn’t that he disobeyed on purpose, exactly. It was just so boring. Being told that the very way he put his shirts on – from the age he was allowed to dress himself – was fundamentally wrong somehow made him resist the urge to roll his eyes. How could he be offensive to all of society? All he could think was how much they seemed to hate peasants, which was absurd, because who did they think ran the damn palace? Did their farming? Looked after the plumbing systems?

Jack tried to follow the drone of the third teacher, as she explained why standing with both hands in one’s pockets was ‘just not done, dear.’

Man, no wonder Pitchiner went about the world like all the fun and life was sucked out of him. This would destroy anyone’s will to live.

* 

That afternoon, the same time as the day before, the Royal Admiral turned up in Jack’s room once more and they went through the palace to the same arena as last time.
Jack was pretty sure he knew the way now. He hadn’t really been focusing on committing anything to memory, mostly because he wasn’t sure how long he’d be staying there. It also used skills he hadn’t needed since he was a child. Back then, when he lived with the parents he didn’t remember, he’d needed to know how to orient himself in the forests. It was such a long time ago, but once, he could remember complex directions and visual markers.

After that, when he was sent to the creche, everything was straightforward. He had his room, shared with other children. There was the eating room. The play room. The school room. There were no forests, there was no need to remember directions that were difficult anymore. Even once he went to the Barracks, it was the same.

Remembering the maze of the palace felt a bit like exercising an old, rusty part of his mind.

The arena was clear of the massive ice sculpture Jack had made the day before, but a great deal of the sawdust was sodden.

Training with Pitchiner was more of the same. Jack dug into himself and was determined to see it through. It was no different to training with Crossholt. If Pitchiner expected to see him break because of training, he had no idea who Jack really was.

After all, Crossholt himself taught Jack how to endure, how to show stamina – Jack had been commanded to do more than anyone else in his platoon. He knew what it was to get up over and over again when pitted against an enemy stronger than he was. This part was almost easy. Even the bruises and the sense of his body getting heavier and sorer as he continued – nothing about that was new.

Two hours later, Jack pushed himself up from the sawdust, panting. He steadied his grip on the smallsword, and then planted his feet into the scraps and bits of ice on the ground. If the Royal Admiral thought this was the best way to get to whatever the Darkness had done to Jack, well…

*Good practice, at least.*

Pitchiner stared at him, his expression grim.

‘I can keep going,’ Jack said, his voice strained. ‘Like, really. You want me to run forty laps now?’

Pitchiner narrowed his eyes – not in annoyance, but as though Jack was a peculiar puzzle. Jack pushed away thoughts of what he’d done to Crossholt – no one seemed to mind very much and he certainly wasn’t going to an Asylum anyway – and raised his eyebrows.

Then Pitchiner stood straighter and sheathed his sword. Just as Jack thought maybe training was over, *again*, Pitchiner gestured to the arena.

‘I’m calling your bluff,’ Pitchiner said. ‘Forty laps.’

‘Got it,’ Jack said, nodding his head and thinking that he should probably say ‘Royal Admiral’ once in a while, but it didn’t seem to be habit forming.

Running around the outer ring of the arena wasn’t easy, exactly, but it was nothing like the training he’d come to expect day to day at the Barracks. For a start, one lap around the whole of the Barracks was about fifteen laps here. He’d managed four of those for Crossholt with fresh whip marks on his back, before collapsing.

This was nothing, by comparison. Even if he was having to focus a lot on his breath, even if his legs burned and his body hurt.
When he finished the fortieth lap, he walked back to where he’d placed his smallsword, picked it up, and readied his stance again.

Pitchiner just stared at him.

‘What?’ Jack said, confused. ‘Have you just not worked with trainees for a really long time?’

He almost wanted to smile, but he figured that since Pitchiner’s sense of humour seemed to be something lost out in the war, he’d keep a lid on it.

‘You want me to do another forty?’ Jack said, because even if he wouldn’t smile, he still couldn’t quite resist. ‘Wanna call another bluff?’

That was when Pitchiner’s face slipped into outright irritation, and he turned away.

‘I don’t have time to watch you run around all day. We’ll try again tomorrow.’

‘I think it’s working great,’ Jack said, staring at his back. ‘Keeping me fit. Seeing what it’s like when a proper Golden Warrior trains. Never fallen down so much in my life.’

Pitchiner walked away, and Jack wanted to keep going, wanted to goad and annoy him and get a reaction and something more than the two or three sentences the Royal Admiral ever gave him.

Instead, he made his breathing calm down and looked around the arena. It was actually pretty cool, and he spent some time exploring it before he made himself go back to his room. The seats might have been dusty, but they were nicely made. There were tiny enamelled numbers on the back of each, as though the arena was once used for audiences to watch people fight each other.

The servants and Pitchiner didn’t seem to be locking him in anymore, which was nice. Jack wasn’t willing to give up that freedom again, so even though the rest of the palace tempted him with its ornate decorations and curious rooms, he didn’t let himself stray from the memorised route. He spent the rest of the afternoon working on his own obstacle course in his room, experimenting with the ice he’d somehow taken from the mountain.

*

The next day, Jack realised with some chagrin he was starting to remember all the rules and etiquette they insisted on piling upon him. He tied his kerchief properly, he secured his boots correctly.

He was also pretty sore, and he stood under the hot spray of the shower for far longer than usual, trying to loosen the stiffness and knots that had riddled their way into his body.

He was still ready in time for his tutors, but they didn’t show up. A few minutes later, a tall, slender, stork-like man appeared. He had sharp eyes and a beaky nose, and Jack was pretty sure all of the tutors that came to see him every day would admire this gentleman’s comportment, or something.

‘Jackson Overland?’ the man said, his voice far deeper than Jack had expected.

‘It’s Jack, actually.’

‘Mm, yes,’ the man said, staring at him. ‘If you’d come with me, please. I am Professor Sharpwood, and also attendant to the royalty of Lune. You have an appointment with the Tsar, this morning.’
Jack stared at him, and looked around his room, wondering if he was supposed to bring anything.

‘The Tsar?’ Jack said finally. ‘Did I do something wrong?’

‘Not yet,’ said Professor Sharpwood, looking down at his fingernails. They were painted blue, Jack realised, and his tufty hair was dyed blue. His eyes were black – even his corneas. He didn’t quite look like a Lune native. ‘Are you coming?’


To Jack’s surprise, they took the corridor that led to Pitchiner’s personal rooms, and then veered off down another, and then another, and then – in far less time than Jack expected – he found himself in some kind of sitting room that was so opulent and held so many decorative Lune insignias, he knew it belonged to the Tsar and Tsarina, and their rarely seen child.

Professor Sharpwood left him standing on plush carpet, by a huge buffet table with a gold framed mirror above it. Jack caught his reflection, thought at least he looked…passable. He hoped so, anyway. Then he stared at the room. Paintings hung everywhere, including portraits of the Tsar and Tsarina, and even – Jack realised with amazement – an illustration of the round-faced Tsesarevich when he must have been only three or four years old. He had the same honey brown wavy hair as his father, and eyes that seemed distracted.

‘Jack! Oh, fantastic, you’re here.’

Jack turned and bowed automatically, as low as he could. His heart was thundering. Why was this happening? Why was he alone? Shouldn’t Pitchiner be here? Wasn’t Pitchiner the one handling all of this?

‘Now, now, stand up,’ the Tsar said, his voice warm and cheery. ‘It’s so good to see you! You’re looking well, too. A bit of food, I expect, and some training. How are you?’

‘I’m…well, Your Imperial Highness,’ Jack said. ‘It’s amazing here.’

‘Of course, it must seem that way to you,’ the Tsar said. ‘Here, you can call me Gavril. It must seem all very frightening and new, and I am sympathetic, I am.’

Jack realised the Tsar was as impossibly well coiffed as he was last time. Every lock of hair perfectly in place. His boots with no scratches. Even the beauty marks by his right eye looked like they had been artfully placed there.

‘Come sit with me,’ the Tsar said, gesturing to an embroidered couch covered in skilfully wrought cushions and doilies. Jack followed him uncomfortably, and looked around the room again. He kept thinking about how Seraphina had told him she wasn’t allowed to be alone with the Tsar. He remembered how weird Pitchiner and the Spymaster had been when they’d told him not to speak of the ball of magic in the mountain.

‘It’s incredible, you’re incredible,’ the Tsar said, with a youthful enthusiasm that didn’t quite match the slight lines around his eyes or the intense way he stared at Jack. ‘Not many people come out of that mountain with extra powers, and I’d like to think of it as a sign that the mountain knows exactly what we need at this troubled time. And Jack, I think it’s you.’

‘I’m…Your Imperial-’

‘I said Gavril,’ the Tsar said, his voice hardening for a brief second. ‘Did I not?’
‘Yes, of course, sorry. Ah, Gavril.’

‘Perfect,’ the Tsar said. ‘Just perfect. Now, we’re going to be holding a parade in the city of Lune, and we’d like for you to be a big part of it. Making your snow and your frost – nothing too destructive, just something special. You’ll make people’s hearts feel lighter. Look at you, young and bright and even quite beautiful. They’ll really take to you, Jack. You’ll get to reach out to people, and that’s not something a peasant ever really imagines being able to do now, is it?’

‘Not really,’ Jack said, a little overwhelmed.

‘Of course not,’ the Tsar said. ‘It’s an immense privilege that Pitch is training you at all. You know that don’t you?’

Jack nodded, feeling ashamed now that it was being pointed out to him.

‘Normally he’d have nothing to do with someone like you,’ the Tsar said. ‘Which is really just a sign of how special you are.’

‘Special,’ Jack said, staring at him.

‘Oh yes,’ the Tsar said, and then placed his hand down on the couch, as though he was reaching out to Jack. ‘We can do so much with you. Now, as to your name, my team and I have come up with something catchier. Overland is a disposable name really, and we’re going to give you something so much better.’

‘Okay,’ Jack said.

‘From now on, you’re not to answer to Jackson Overland. It’s only Jack Frost. See? What we’re trying to do... For you to be a mascot, it has to be every part of you. In your name, even in your clothing. Flitmouse already has some direct orders from me there, and you should start seeing military uniforms in colours that suit you. You’re already wearing the blue coat I see.’

Jack looked down at it, and nodded.

*Jack Frost.* It sounded sharp and different. In a single moment he felt further away from his family and his sister than he’d ever been. Yet there was a part of him that felt excited to be praised like this, to be told that he could be special, that these important people were making time for him even when he wasn’t there. He mattered to them. He could be something *important.*

‘I like it,’ Jack said quietly.

‘Of course you do,’ the Tsar said dismissively.

Jack realised then it wouldn’t have mattered if he liked it or not, that was his name now.

‘How’s Pitchiner doing with all of this?’ the Tsar said then. ‘You can tell me. I know I must seem very lofty and distant sometimes, but I care so much about this nation and the people within it. Anything you wanted to share, I’d be happy to hear it.’

Jack wasn’t quite sure what the Tsar wanted him to say.

‘He seems okay,’ Jack said. ‘He’s training me.’

‘Yes, of course, even before you murdered someone, that was important.’

*Even before you murdered someone.*
‘I’m so sorry about that,’ Jack said, feeling strange, his heart skipping a beat. ‘I am, I didn’t-’

‘But how do you think things are with Pitchiner? Do you think the Royal Admiral doesn’t seem up to the job? Sometimes I worry about him. He’s such a close friend of mine. And he’d never tell me himself. I just…I just wish I knew how to help him.’

Jack thought of Seraphina talking about how the Royal Admiral had locked his heart in a tower or something. The Tsar looked sorrowful all of a sudden, his fingers even curled on the couch, as though it was a painful subject to think about.

‘I think he misses Fyodor,’ Jack said slowly.

The Tsar looked at him, as though he wasn’t even sure who that was. Then his eyes brightened in realisation, and he seemed to dismiss it in the same moment. Jack had the sense he’d somehow given the wrong answer.

‘I don’t know,’ Jack said, ‘he doesn’t share things with me.’

‘Well, no,’ the Tsar said, ‘I suppose he wouldn’t. You are, after all, nothing to him.’

Jack blinked. But wasn’t he meant to be special?

Jack wished it could be like before, when the Tsar was calling him important, saying he could make people happy.

‘Yeah,’ Jack said finally, feeling flat and bruised. ‘He does seem to give that impression.’

‘Such a shame, too,’ the Tsar said. ‘But Jack, I know how special you are. That might seem hard to believe, but I really want things to go well – for you, for Lune. You’re going to be in a parade!’

Jack smiled, and thought of how easily the Tsar had said: You are, after all, nothing to him.

‘Will the Royal Admiral be there?’ Jack said.

‘Pitch? Of course! He can try to avoid most social events, but this is one he can’t. The new recruits will be there. We’ll get to show off your powers, and oh, snow in the city! People will love it. I’m not sure if the mountain wants you to fight the Darkness with a sword, I believe it wants you to fight the Darkness by helping the people to realise that there is always Lightness and, well, good things and fun. That the mountain doesn’t just deliver Golden Warriors, but sometimes gifts to help the people who live in fear. And you want to help them, don’t you?’

_I want to be a Golden Warrior._

‘Yes,’ Jack said. ‘Of course.’

‘What else would you have had to look forward to anyway?’ the Tsar said then, and Jack furrowed his brows in confusion, and then looked up as the Tsar stood and walked to the mirror. He looked at himself intently for a moment, and then turned his back to it and leaned against the buffet table, his arms folded behind him.

‘I think you and I are going to be friends,’ the Tsar said, smiling.

‘You and me?’ Jack said, incredulous.

‘Of course! And I’d really like that. I feel like I can trust you. I just have such a good feeling about this, about you. I hope you feel like you can trust me. I just want to make sure this goes well for
you. Is there anything you need? Are you hungry?’

‘No, I’m… I’m being fed really well here.’

Why would the Tsar want to be friends with him? But the words were delivered so earnestly, with so much passion. It was as though the Tsar was lonely and waiting for something like this. Or, Jack wondered, maybe his friendship with the Royal Admiral wasn’t as strong as it used to be, and he was looking for something new.

‘Oh, Jack, will you make it snow for me?’

‘Now? But this room is so pretty. Are you sure? It won’t-’

‘It’s fine,’ the Tsar said. ‘Would you? I’d love to see it.’

And so Jack – without really needing to think about it – made it snow. A soft, fluffy snow, and they both watched it drift to the ground.

‘I love it,’ the Tsar said. ‘I love this. It’s going to make so many people happy.’

‘Do you think so?’ Jack said, staring at him. He wanted that so much.

‘Oh,’ the Tsar said, ‘Jack, don’t you believe me? I’m so sure. You’re going to make so many people happy. You’re Jack Frost now! You’re the soldier who fights the Darkness with fun and snow and frost. Just imagine!’

Jack shrugged awkwardly, and the Tsar gave him a sad smile.

‘Well, Jack, you’re making me happy, and we’re friends. You can always believe me, Jack. Trust me, you’re going to make so many people happy. You’ll see.’

Jack nodded, wanting it to be true. Wanting all of it to be true. It really did seem like the Tsar wanted to be friends with him. And a moment later, the Tsar came to sit down on the couch again and didn’t seem to care that snow was falling on his perfect hair and melting into it.

The Tsar reached out and took Jack’s hand in his own. The Tsar’s hands were warm, and they were a little clammy and moist. Jack wondered if that was from skin product or something, because his hands were incredibly soft, with the exception from some callouses that felt like they might be from sword-fighting or practice.

‘I’m here for you, Jack,’ said the Tsar. ‘I’m just a regular gentleman, despite what everyone says. It would be splendid if you could call me Gavril, and we can be friends. We’ll meet again soon, all right? I want to stay longer, but you would not believe the amount of paperwork and strategy meetings I have on a day to day basis.’

‘I can’t even imagine,’ Jack said in awe.

‘Professor Sharpwood will be by to take you back to your room. If you have need of anything, or you don’t like the way the Royal Admiral is treating you, just tell me, all right? I want to look after you. People need you.’

‘Okay,’ Jack said, knowing that his smile was awkward.

The Tsar squeezed his hand and then looked around at the snow and laughed to himself.

‘What a wonder you are,’ the Tsar said, and then he stood and walked from the room, waving
without turning around.

Jack sat on the couch feeling a bit like he’d been struck with a heavy object. But in his heart he felt the glow of being called special by someone who really was special.

He just wanted to cradle that feeling and nurture it. He wanted to be the Tsar’s friend. No one would believe it, they’d have to notice him then.

‘I’m Jack Frost now,’ Jack said quietly.

Then he waited for Professor Sharpwood to come while fidgeting, still feeling a bit wary and strange, unable to shake the way he’d felt when the Tsar had said: You are, after all, nothing to him.

*

The afternoon came, and Jack prepared himself for training, polishing the smallsword, making sure he was wearing the right clothing. He felt a bit out of sorts. When he saw the Tsar last time, the Spymaster and Pitchiner had both cautioned him about what he said, they both made such a big deal out of it.

He was worried about what Pitchiner would make of it all, now.

The Tsar wanted to be his friend. Jack couldn’t just think ‘Gavril’ casually. He couldn’t. The man was more than just…a regular person. He was the saviour of Lune. Before the Darkness came, he was the one who protected the small planet from incursion from much larger, more populated planets. He and his family before him had a right to rule the planet as they saw fit, and they ruled it with great care, and even allowed refugees from the planets they’d had to defend themselves against. Jack remembered being taught in that creche school, just how compassionate that was.

That person – the Tsar – wanted to be his friend. Jack marvelled at the idea of it.

Pitchiner turned up, gestured for Jack to follow him, and said nothing at all about the meeting with the Tsar.

Jack stared at his back, and as they made their way to the arena, Jack wondered if Pitchiner even knew.

But…weren’t they friends? Wouldn’t the Tsar have told him?

‘Uh,’ Jack said hesitantly. ‘Those etiquette tutors are pretty cool. They taught me a lot of new stuff today.’

Pitchiner did nothing more than make a dismissive sound of acknowledgement, and Jack felt a pricking of fear.

Was he supposed to keep the meeting a secret? But why? The Tsar had been so nice to him, and called him special and asked about Pitchiner’s welfare. Jack remembered now more than one person had mentioned that Pitchiner’s status as Royal Admiral might not be as secure as it once was. The Tsar was probably fishing for information. Jack tried to imagine it – the Royal Admiral failing to protect Lune. Could that be why the Darkness kept pressing closer and closer?

Jack pressed his lips together, unsure of what to do. He could just say nothing. It wasn’t like Pitchiner cared about him anyway, really. He just wanted to make sure Jack didn’t accidentally kill a whole bunch of innocent people.
You are, after all, nothing to him.

Jack squared his shoulders and kept following. He shoved away his fears. Another useless afternoon of training that didn’t even really teach him anything new, except how it was possible to hit the ground *that* often and still get up again.

*

Jack could tell that Pitchiner was annoyed that Jack hadn’t ‘broken’ yet or shown his ‘darkness’ or whatever he was supposed to be doing. All of Pitchiner’s attacks were far more sustained and brutal – if Jack didn’t get up fast enough, Pitchiner dragged him up now, and went again; whether Jack was ready or not.

Laughter was banked in Jack’s lungs. Pitchiner had *no idea* what kind of person Jack was, and that was becoming more and more obvious. He’d thought the Royal Admiral would know beyond a doubt what he was doing. Did soldiers really break that quickly?

But Jack knew that some of the trainees really did. Especially those who weren’t picked on by their Lieutenant.

After about half an hour, Pitchiner dragged Jack up by fisting his hand at his shirt. Jack’s feet just about cleared the floor, trailing in the sawdust, and he coughed.

Shock and then something very like fury passed over Pitchiner’s face, his gold eyes narrowing, his grey skin flushed.

‘Forty laps?’ Jack suggested as lightly as he could, given his throat was pressed into Pitchiner’s knuckles.

He didn’t notice it at first. Pitchiner just stared at him, and Jack kept thinking it was outrage or annoyance or something else. The tendrils of fear that spread within him were subtle, tiny roots finding their way through his mind until the smile fell off his face and he tried blinking away from that stare only to realise that he *couldn’t*.

The fear grew, expanded, and Jack’s hands came up and clenched Pitchiner’s wrist and his legs flailed, but that only made the pressure against his throat worse and then he thought he was *suffocating* and that Pitchiner would do this until he *died*. His heart hammered like it had when he saw the Tsar, he was gasping and-

Pitchiner looked away quickly, severing the connection, and then he lowered Jack so that his feet were on the ground properly. It took Jack a little while longer to feel he could stand.

‘I should have done that on the first day,’ Pitchiner muttered to himself. ‘Get your sword up, attack me.’

‘What?’ Jack said, his mouth dry.

‘Are you honestly so worthless that you can’t understand basic commands? Will writing you up for lashes make you obey me?’

Jack’s grip on his sword faltered.

He could be *whipped* for this?
‘I don’t understand—’

‘You’ve earned yourself five lashes with the Disciplinarian. Now attack me.’

Jack couldn’t quite comprehend what was happening. It shouldn’t have been surprising. But after everything – even upsetting Seraphina, even murdering Crossholt – Pitchiner hadn’t done anything like this.

Jack took a hesitant step forwards, his sword up. He felt like the fear hadn’t properly gone away. His heart was still pounding, pressing nausea into his throat.

Another step forwards, and he was pushed backwards, and then Pitchiner swept his legs with the back of his sword – a move Jack was coming to hate – and Jack stared up at the afternoon sky.

‘Get up,’ Pitchiner snapped. ‘I cannot believe I have to waste my time on you.’

Jack thought back to what the Tsar had said and pushed himself upright slowly. He looked sidelong at Pitchiner, and felt – for the first time since the first training session – a flash of malice. Jack looked down at the sawdust, alarmed. It was almost as though he could feel the frost building inside of him, wanting to splinter outwards and destroy.

‘You don’t have to, though,’ Jack said. ‘You don’t have to waste your time.’

‘No? I can’t tell you how much I’m looking forward to you killing even more innocent people. Are you going to listen to me? Shall I start adding lashes for every time you don’t use my title as you should?’

‘But—’

‘That’s another five lashes. I’m not sure creche kids can count that high, so I’ll tell you – it’s ten.’

‘I haven’t killed anyone else,’ Jack said, his body getting colder, his breath pluming in front of him.

‘You tried to kill me – twice now, actually. Do you not remember? Are you so useless?’

Jack grit his teeth and stepped forward, attacking, and was knocked down even faster than normal. A flash of spite blossomed in his gut, made his head hurt. The smallsword was nothing – it was a stupid weapon. But he could do so much with his ice. The Royal Admiral thought he was so high and mighty and important, but he had no idea what Jack could do now.

Jack grit his teeth and rolled to his side, alarmed at how quickly it was taking over his ability to think clearly. Whatever the darkness had left behind, it didn’t feel alien, it just felt normal. Jack looked up at Pitchiner and imagined ice shards going through his heart, his eyes, splintering him apart until there was nothing but blood.

A bolt of fear then, tangling up in his spine, making him feel clumsy and slow.

‘Wait—’ Jack said.

‘Get up,’ Pitchiner snarled.

The sawdust was icy and gritty beneath his hands. He wanted to pick up handfuls and fling them into Pitchiner’s face, wanted to drive icicles into him.

‘No,’ Jack said.
‘Ten lashes plus ten lashes is twenty. Dear me, we are getting stubborn. Or perhaps you like it? There are some people who do, you know.’

A harsh exhale and Jack forced himself upright, and then he made himself walk away from Pitchiner, gritting his teeth with the willpower it took to just not attack.

The hilt of a sword poked him hard between his shoulder-blades, and Jack went down to one knee. The ground beneath him frosted all at once; a sharp, crackling sound. This wasn’t pretty spirals, but a starburst of shards, each one as sharp as a knife.

‘Don’t walk away from me,’ Pitchiner said. ‘I am the Royal Admiral of Lune and you are nothing more than a mistake from that mountain.’

Jack almost said: You can’t talk to me that way.

Except the Royal Admiral of Lune could talk to him that way.

‘Is this how brave you were, when your sister was taken?’ the Royal Admiral said quietly, his voice a taunt.

It was as though Jack lost consciousness for a moment. Cold flooded him. And then he wasn’t even inside of himself as he turned, as he sprinted towards Pitchiner with his hands outstretched and ice spreading from his body, from the air around him. An inhuman sound crawled out of his throat and he let loose all the ice that had built around him in a single, shocking movement.

He staggered, exhausted, malice and fear tangling inside of him. Bits of frost still hung in the air around him, and he thought that he was Jack Frost now. He wondered what the Tsar would say if he saw this.

Jack looked up slowly, part of him wanting the satisfaction of seeing the Royal Admiral obliterated to bits of blood and bone, part of him so sick with terror his stomach heaved.

Pitchiner stood, but he looked lopsided. He supported himself on his sword. Almost all of the shards of ice had been knocked away, piled on the ground around him. His breathing was heavy.

Jack realised the icicles had torn apart his sacred coat with its gold embroidered sigils.

And there, through Pitchiner’s thigh, a thick icicle that jutted.

Jack’s hand covered his mouth, he felt faint.

‘There it is,’ Pitchiner said, sounding too composed for someone who looked like he’d just survived a sentient, furious blizzard. ‘Relentless training isn’t difficult for you at all, is it? Your record says you’re lacking, but it’s more of Crossholt’s lies. Physical stamina isn’t what you lack. But emotional rigour? You don’t seem to have a shred of it.’

Blood had bloomed and then frozen around the icicle. Pitchiner looked down at it and shifted his weight, then grunted. A minute later, he lowered his hand to the icicle and tried pulling it out. A cracking, cracking sound, but it refused to move.

‘Of course,’ Pitchiner muttered. ‘I can’t heal this until it’s gone.’

‘I can’t control it,’ Jack said, his voice shaking and muffled by his own palm.

‘I know,’ Pitchiner said, shifting his weight so that he was half-leaning on the sword once more. ‘You will.’
‘How?’ Jack said, his arm dropping. ‘I’m not even- I don’t- It’s like it’s not even me.’

‘It is, however,’ Pitchiner said. ‘And it’s shocking how easily it’s triggered, once one knows how.’

Jack thought he should go and fetch a healer or something, and then he felt the pieces of the puzzle slot into place and felt so stupid.

‘The fear-trick,’ Jack said. ‘You figured out what to do.’

Jack realised that with only a handful of well-placed insults, he’d been ready to kill someone. Not just kill them, but annihilate them, tear them apart and make sure they could never hurt him again. He realised it’d probably work again, too. Crossholt had insulted him, again and again, and the combination of terror and hatred had turned his ice powers into that.

Pitchiner grasped the icicle with his hand and this time yanked it so hard that it came free, blood oozing sluggishly from the cold wound. He made a short, clenched sound of pain, and then shoved his fingers directly into the wound, the same light that Sandy had used on Jack, pouring into his thigh. Several minutes of harsh panting, and Pitchiner wiped his bloodied, shaking hand on his ruined coat and then seemed to notice just how badly it had been damaged.

‘I also know,’ Pitchiner said, poking fingers at one of the tears in his coat, ‘that you don’t want to tell me about your meeting with the Tsar.’

It didn’t matter if they were out in the open, if the sky was right there. Jack felt cornered.

‘Did you know?’ Jack said finally.

‘No,’ Pitchiner said, squaring his weight on both legs and then sheathing his sword.

‘You can read minds?’

‘No,’ Pitchiner said, frowning. ‘But the things you are afraid of are...not ineloquent. I’m exemplary at interpreting them. The best, actually. I’m not the Royal Admiral for nothing. As for the rest of it, best not to talk here. We’ll train again tomorrow. Come along.’

Jack followed, and then faltered to a stop, remembering that he’d left his smallsword on the ground when he’d turned his hands into a weapon. He walked back and picked it up, passing the bloodstained icicle.

He thought of Crossholt, his mouth going cottony dry.

‘Come along, Jack,’ Pitchiner said, his voice less hard than it had been before.

Jack already knew that he wasn’t going to share the details of his meeting with the Tsar, with the Royal Admiral. He didn’t know who to trust. Eventually, he looked up and hesitated just short of meeting Pitchiner’s eyes. Even though they were separated from each other by a good distance, he didn’t want to feel the level of fear Pitchiner could create in him any time soon.

‘When should I go see the Disciplinarian?’ Jack said. ‘I’d just kind of prefer to get it out of the way.’

‘I was bluffing.’

Jack couldn’t help himself, he met Pitchiner’s gaze and didn’t quite know what to say. After a moment, Pitchiner sighed and looked skywards, and then grimaced when he looked at Jack.
‘Obviously I can’t use it again, but it did the trick. Don’t think this means I won’t use it for actionable offenses in the future.’

‘But me...not calling you by your title and stuff, that’s-’

‘Jack, the whip would probably kill you by the time you actually learned to address me with the respect I deserve. In the meantime, we have other, more pressing things to talk about.’

Pitchiner turned and walked away briskly, and Jack stared at his back before realising he was meant to follow this time. He rushed after him, thinking that they could teach him rules and etiquette, but he didn’t think he’d ever get all the tricks these people seemed to play on each other.
Stops and Starts

Chapter Notes

This chapter title not only describes the chapter itself but also how the goddamn chapter came together, lol. :D (Hence the delay!)

To Jack’s surprise, he wasn’t taken back to his own room, but instead taken to the circular domed space that Jack thought of as Pitchiner’s sundial rotunda. Even though he still didn’t think the plinth and stone sculpture in the middle of the room was a sundial. Above him, the constellations of Lune – painted onto the ceiling – didn’t move. The whole cavernous room felt like the night sky, and Jack resisted the urge to wring his hands as he tried to remember that he was standing on the floor, not floating alone in space.

Pitchiner went down a new corridor – clearly expecting Jack to follow him – this one not tiled prettily or painted with war scenes, but instead with galaxies. Bursts of colour and light appeared amongst stretches of blackness. The lights above were dim, and Jack felt like the shadows here could breathe if they wanted to. He knew it wasn’t quite living Darkness, but it wasn’t comfortable. In a world that privileged the light, this was…weird.

He had the sudden sense that he was being taken somewhere awful. Maybe Pitchiner was still lying to him. Maybe they weren’t just going to have a discussion. Maybe he was going to be interrogated, tortured even. After all, the Admiral had the power to do that with impunity, didn’t he?

Jack’s steps slowed, then stopped.

After a moment, Pitchiner turned and looked at him, his face cast in darkness, only the bridge of his nose properly lit.

‘Do I have to order you to follow me?’ Pitchiner said.

Jack stared at him. Pitchiner didn’t sound angry so much as exhausted.

‘I guess not,’ Jack said, looking down at Pitchiner’s legs. It was too dark to see the place where the icicle had just been. Pitchiner walked like it was nothing at all. Jack thought even after being healed, he’d still want to limp after something that bad had happened. He couldn’t imagine just shrugging it off.

Jack followed him again, and soon doors appeared in the corridor, marked out in gilt sigils. Jack thought he could feel the magic in these. Though he didn’t know what the magic were for, and he didn’t know why there needed to be so much of it.

At the end, two large double doors made of what looked like solid gold. But as the doors swung open to Pitchiner’s touch, Jack saw that they were made of wood, and that the gold was only a veneer. They were also some of the thickest, strongest doors Jack had ever seen.

Pitchiner walked in like he owned the place, which – Jack supposed, stumbling to a halt again and staring – was true.
Just as he knew instinctively he’d been in the living spaces of the Tsar and Tsarina earlier in the day, he knew that this was where Pitchiner lived. From a handful of medals framed on the wall, even though Jack knew he had many, many more to frame; he didn’t wear them all either. To the dark wooden furniture that was all carefully made, though almost spare. To bookshelves of tomes – many with blank spines – and the small doll of pale blue and white felt that rested propped against a book-end in the shape of a wicked, black horse. The doll was resting too high for a young child to reach; perhaps Seraphina had grown out of it, and Pitchiner had decided to keep it.

‘Wait there,’ Pitchiner said, then went through another door before closing it behind him.

There was a time when Jack would have sold part of his soul to end up somewhere like this. Even now, he could almost hear Jamie whistling in appreciation on Jack’s behalf.

The room was at least as big as whatever lounge or sitting room he’d been invited to when he’d seen the Tsar. But unlike the Tsar’s space, there was almost no gold to be seen that wasn’t embroidered on fabric.

Jack thought about walking over to the bookshelves and taking a closer look, but he had a sneaking suspicion that Pitchiner probably wanted him to stay and not move.

It gave him time to think about what he’d just done to Pitchiner, what he’d just felt like doing. The only reason Pitchiner wasn’t dead, was because he was the Admiral and trained to deal with worse, probably. The only reason he wasn’t injured was because of that healing light.

Jack didn’t think it was fair that he could feel cold and shivery, when he could make snow and his body temperature wasn’t what it used to be, but there it was. He placed his hands on his elbows and felt new frost moving over his clothing.

It felt like forever before Pitchiner returned, and when he did, his clothing was fresh, he held a mug of steaming liquid – probably tea – in his hands. He was wearing another Warrior’s robe, this one with protective sigils that hadn’t been torn. Jack looked down to Pitchiner’s leg, but of course it wouldn’t even need a bandage.

Pitchiner looked down at his own thigh and sighed.

‘It’s rather easy to see how you managed to defeat Crossholt so quickly. Even in the beginning when I was...afflicted, I was still only trying to kill people with a sword or my bare hands. The Light isn’t really made for murdering fellow citizens. Which I remember finding rather unfortunate in the moment.’

Jack shifted his weight from leg to leg, and watched as Pitchiner sat down in a chair by a coffee table. He sipped quietly and delicately at whatever he was drinking. Jack wondered if Pitchiner was being deliberately rude by not offering Jack anything, or if Jack mattered so little it wasn’t even offensive.

‘Why didn’t you want me to know about the meeting with the Tsar, Jack?’

A nervous laugh, and Jack wanted to clap his hand over his mouth. He already sounded guilty. He had nothing to feel guilty about! The Tsar just wanted to be his friend. Pitchiner didn’t even look all that threatening. He was sitting down. He wasn’t even yelling at Jack for injuring his leg. Crossholt would have lost his mind.

Yeah, and then you killed him. So he won’t be doing that anymore.

‘Jack?’
‘You’re not helping me,’ Jack said, his gaze glancing past Pitchiner’s, not wanting to make eye contact like he had before. ‘You just push me until I do something stupid, and I learned nothing. What was that?’

‘I believe this game is ‘you answer my questions’ and not ‘Admiral Pitchiner listens to the whining of an upstart.’’

‘Uh huh,’ Jack said, his gaze caught on what was clearly a children’s drawing hung on the wall. It was of some flowers that Jack didn’t recognise, in deep blue and silver. It jarred for some reason. Pitchiner was The Admiral. He had a framed kid’s drawing on his wall. He was the kind of father who got drawings from his daughter and found a good frame for them – better than the frames for his medals.

_That doesn’t mean you can trust him._

‘I don’t know,’ Jack said, looking at the silver knobs on a chest of drawers. ‘My life seems complicated enough, I guess. I just- I didn’t know how you’d react about the meeting. Can you blame me though? After what you just did?’

‘What was the meeting about?’ Pitchiner replied. When Jack darted a glance at him, he was surprised to see Pitchiner looking down at his mug.

‘Uh, the parade,’ Jack said. ‘Apparently I’m... I mean he told me I’m Jack Frost now. And I have to like- Make snow and stuff. For the people.’

‘Ah,’ Pitchiner said, lips curling in an unpleasant smile. ‘His mascot.’

‘Yeah,’ Jack said. ‘What’s wrong with that? You don’t think people could have something to enjoy once in a while? You think it should be super seriousness all the time?’

‘Do you think,’ Pitchiner said, looking up as Jack made himself look away, ‘that with the recent attack on the Palace, people should be forgetting to stay wary?’

‘You think that a few hours of a parade will make them forget?’

‘Don’t think that because you spent a few minutes with the Tsar, you can speak to me like we’re equals. We are not.’

‘Yeah,’ Jack said. ‘Got the message several times already. You know, with the whole me being useless and a peasant – like oh no not another Overland - and everything else. I get it.’

Jack saw Pitchiner open his mouth like he was going to say something, but then he closed it again. He put the mug down on the coffee table and leaned back, sighing.

‘It was just about the parade,’ Jack said. ‘That’s all. And I didn’t want to tell you because you’re intimidating and you locked me in a room for days with no food and you treat me like I’m dirt and-’

‘You’re lying to me,’ Pitchiner said. ‘If you won’t tell me the real reason, I can’t- well, I can make you, but I’m going to give you the benefit of the doubt and not do that at this moment. But don’t lie to me.’

‘All the things I just said are true,’ Jack said, frowning.

‘Yes. It’s a clever thing, to lie by telling a version of the truth. You wouldn’t believe how adept the
Tsar is, at doing the same. You can’t trust him, Jack.’

Jack stared at Pitchiner, thoughts skittering in all directions. He forgot to look away, and stared instead. Pitchiner looked back calmly, as though waiting for something.

‘Why not?’ Jack said, his voice shaky. ‘Because he’s nice to me?’

‘Is he?’ Pitchiner said, looking curious, eyebrows lifting.

Jack felt uncomfortable. There were a few things the Tsar had said that hadn’t been exactly nice, but then there were all the other things and- They were going to recreate Jack into something wonderful for the people. A parade meant Jack would be visible, he’d be seen and believed in. People would have to treat him with respect. He wouldn’t just be the boy who sometimes walked back from the Disciplinarian’s Tower with fresh whip marks on his back.

‘Yeah,’ Jack said, ‘because he can see- He sees that I can help! Unlike you and everyone else here. Why shouldn’t I trust him? He’s trying to help the people. You’re just trying to keep your job – you let the Darkness into the city! Into the Palace!’

Pitchiner’s hands gripped the wooden armrests hard, an ugly snarl on his face. Jack saw it – the malice that crept across his expression, it was the same thing that Jack had felt only minutes ago when the ice had blasted out of him. But seeing it on Pitchiner’s face, knowing it was directed at him-

Jack took a step backwards, but already Pitchiner was settling back down in the chair, jaw tight, eyes askance.

‘Why shouldn’t I trust him?’ Jack said shakily. ‘None of you tell me anything. Not you, not even your daughter, who just said that she wasn’t allowed to be alone in a room with him. Not the Guardians, who—’

‘Don’t get in the habit of calling them that,’ Pitchiner spat.

Jack rubbed at the top of his head trying to release some tension. He walked over to a mantle over a fireplace that had burnt down to coals. The heat felt sharp, even though he was sure it wasn’t. His breathing was too fast.

‘None of you tell me anything,’ Jack said, trying to calm himself. He didn’t even know why he was getting so upset. They were all so far above him in station. They didn’t have to tell him anything.

‘Here’s one thing I will tell you,’ Pitchiner said, sounding as though he was also trying to stay calm. ‘The Tsar does what he thinks is best for Lune, but he does not particularly care for who he steps on or harms along the way. You may find that statement the height of irony coming from me, but there it is. Jack, he will ply you with what you want most, to get what he wishes from you. He will make you feel as though you are the sun, or a star.’

‘When I’m nothing,’ Jack said bitterly. ‘I get it.’

Jack already knew that part. Pitchiner just didn’t understand. The Admiral was like the sun or a star already. But Jack also knew that even if he was nothing now, he could become something. It wasn’t just about what he could become to the Tsar – though that mattered to him a great deal – but to others. Maybe he’d just matter. And if he couldn’t make the Light, then he could settle for this. It would be more than he could have imagined for himself anyway.

Pitchiner didn’t say anything for a long time, and when Jack looked over, he was surprised to see
Pitchiner’s expression was pained. A faint strain at the corner of his eyes, the way his mouth was pinched at the corners.

‘So what now?’ Jack said, feeling tired.

‘I’m beginning to entertain the idea that I’ve gone about this the wrong way, and I don’t enjoy being wrong.’

‘Sucks, huh?’

‘Mm,’ Pitchiner said.

Jack didn’t even really know what Pitchiner meant. His hand drifted to the hilt of his smallsword and then away from it again.

‘How did you do that, before?’ Jack said hesitantly. ‘When I brought up the attack on the Palace, I know- I know you wanted to attack me. How do you just...make it go away?’

Pitchiner’s eyes widened, as though he hadn’t expected Jack to realise what was happening. Perhaps Pitchiner didn’t know what his own face looked like in those moments. Or maybe other people just thought it was...righteous anger or something.

But Jack knew.

‘You have to stop running from it,’ Pitchiner said, ‘which I think will be your greatest challenge. And you won’t ever be able to make the Light until you stop running from it.’

‘Yeah, because I really feel like I’m going to make the Light when all I’m thinking about is murder.’

‘It takes time, and it takes practice,’ Pitchiner said. ‘And you must get used to experiencing those feelings in a safe environment. Where we train is – for now – the only safe environment. You can’t kill me, no matter what you might think, and I can heal whatever damage you do. It’s unpleasant for the both of us, but that is the only way.’

Jack’s chest felt tight, and he nodded a little, but said nothing. He didn’t even want to think about having to feel like that again.

‘Do you think of it a lot then? Murder and stuff?’

‘Oh, everyone needs a hobby,’ Pitchiner said drily.

Jack looked at him, startled, and Pitchiner only smirked.

‘Maybe I’m just going to start calling you Pitch,’ Jack risked saying.

Pitchiner scowled at him, he opened his mouth to reply when the double doors behind them burst open.

Jack whirled to see two other Golden Warriors entering. Behind them, two children. Seraphina, who saw Jack and then hid something behind her back while squinting at him – Jack realised it was a doll and resisted the urge to smile, and a small boy with pale blue eyes and the same honey golden hair as the Tsar.

It wasn’t quite a gasp that came out of his throat, but the strangled sound he made had everyone looking at him. The Tsar’s child was one of the most protected people ever. Most had never even
seen him. Now, Jack was right there, only a few feet away from him. He felt the urge to go to his knees and prostrate himself, but Seraphina running over to Pitchiner stopped him at the last moment.

‘She’s such a Daddy’s girl,’ said the woman, smiling fondly at Seraphina. ‘It doesn’t matter how many sweets I give her.’

‘Oh please tell me that’s exactly what you did, Eva,’ Pitchiner said, looking up with a withering gaze.

‘Only for you, darling,’ Eva said, blowing a kiss that seemed laden with just as much sarcasm. Even so, Jack thought there was a kind of warmth and affection there. He was kind of glad he was invisible for once.

Except that he wasn’t. The Tsar’s child was staring at him. And the other Golden Warrior was looking him over. He was tall and handsome, and Jack knew of him through reputation. Anton the Brave – associate of the Admiral and known for the bright colours he dyed his hair. Today it was deep forest green. Anton’s gaze suddenly rooted to Jack’s feet, and Jack looked down to see frost moving out in unfettered, chaotic swirls over the rugs and carpet.

‘Does that always happen?’ Anton said with a slow smile. ‘Or are you just happy to see me?’

‘High society makes him nervous,’ Pitchiner said.

‘Oh, we’re not high society, darling,’ Eva said, as she walked casually through Pitchiner’s lounge and then towards the door Pitchiner had taken before.

‘Actually, we are,’ Pitchiner said. ‘You simply don’t behave like high society.’

‘Ohhh, I’d never have guessed. What would we do if we didn’t have you to tell us how this worked?’ she drawled, and then closed the door behind her.

‘So! You must be the kid everyone’s talking about,’ Anton said, walking over and extending a hand. ‘I’m Anton. The Brave. Have you heard of me? Never mind, everyone has.’

He reached forwards and grasped Jack’s hand, shaking it firmly. Then he let go and held up his hand to Jack’s face, and Jack could see bits of ice all over Anton’s fingers. Just as Jack started to stammer an apology, Anton grinned.

‘Not much of a kid though, are you?’ Anton said, looking Jack over again. ‘I was practically expecting a child, from the way Pitch harped on. Goodness, old man,’ Anton said, walking over and clapping Pitchiner on the shoulder, ‘you must be getting downright geriatric at this point.’

Anton went to the couch near Pitchiner’s chair and sat down, he crossed his legs and spread his arms across the back of the cushions like he spent all his time in Pitchiner’s rooms. Seraphina stood quietly by Pitchiner’s chair, watching Jack as if expecting something.

Then, a tapping at the side of his hip and Jack just about squawked, felt like he was going to jump out of his skin. When he looked down, the Tsesarevich was gazing up at him solemnly.

‘Uh...’ Jack tried to think of what he was supposed to say, even though he’d heard it so many times. ‘Hi, ah, Your Imperial Highness the Successor Tsesarevich Lunanoff.’

‘Oh boy,’ Anton said. ‘Titles.’
‘Amusing really,’ Pitchiner remarked, ‘when you consider he never addresses me with any sort of propriety.’

‘Yeah, but does anyone?’ Anton said. ‘I mean aside from like- What should he be calling you? Royal Admiral of the Lunanoff Military Fleet of Golden Warriors Pitchiner?’

‘It’s a start.’

Jack was still staring at the Tsesarevich, who didn’t seem to have heard Jack at all, or registered that Jack had spoken.

After a few seconds, the child raised his hands and signed fluidly, never looking away.

Seraphina cleared her throat. ‘Mihail wants to know if you were in the mountain. But Mihail, you know already, everyone in training goes there.’

The Tsesarevich glanced quickly at Seraphina, and then looked up at Jack again. After a minute, he looked down at the frost on the floor and scraped the toe of his boot over it. Unlike his father’s perfect boots, the Tsesarevich’s were scuffed and covered in mud. Then, he took a few steps sideways and stared at some point on the wall. As though there was a person there instead, he raised his arms once more and signed again.

‘Mihail wants to know if anyone spoke to you in there, if you heard them. Not the Darkness, but the-’

‘That’s enough,’ Pitchiner said, clearing his throat and standing.

‘Sorry, Papa,’ Seraphina said, and it was perhaps the first time Jack had heard her sound remotely contrite. ‘Sorry, Mihail. We can talk later.’

The Tsesarevich didn’t look away from the wall, and Jack wondered if there was something wrong with him. He didn’t seem to behave at all like a young child.

On an impulse, Jack said:

‘I heard my sister.’

The Tsesarevich turned and looked up at him, and though his expression was still blank, Jack felt like it meant something. Though what could it mean? Was it just a child fascinated with the ritual of initiation?

Then the Tsesarevich lifted his hands to sign again, but paused, looking then quickly at Anton and Pitchiner. He lowered his arms again and turned, walking from the room calmly. He had to stand on tiptoe to pull the double doors open, but no one rushed to help him, and he closed them on his own.

‘Shouldn’t…he have a guard or – I dunno, something?’ Jack said, staring at the closed doors.

‘He’s safe in the Palace,’ Anton said reassuringly. Then he coughed and added. ‘Not counting the ambush. Do we count that now?’

‘Yes,’ Pitchiner said, and Jack watched as Pitchiner strode from the room, gesturing for Jack to follow him.

‘Was nice meeting you,’ Anton called, and Jack looked over his shoulder at him. Anton smiled
easily, waved a lazy hand. Jack waved back, feeling warm somehow. Unlike everything else that had happened, Anton just seemed kind of decent. Like how Jamie might have turned out, if he’d actually become a Golden Warrior. ‘You can show us cool snow stuff next time.’

‘Okay,’ Jack said. ‘Sure. Bye, Miss Seraphina.’

‘Goodbye,’ she said, the doll still behind her back.

When the doors closed behind them, Pitchiner looked for a moment like he was going to sag against them, but then he straightened. Jack couldn’t see the Tsesarevich anywhere.

‘Go back to your room,’ Pitchiner said without even looking at him. ‘Master Lunanoff is a wanderer, the Light only knows where he’s gone.’

Jack watched him stride off, and then Pitchiner disappeared behind one of the gilt doors down his galaxy-lined corridor.

‘Okay then,’ Jack said, and walked back to his room, feeling like the day had been super weird.

* 

The next day his etiquette lessons resumed as usual – Jack’s wrists seemed like they’d sport bruises forever, because as he picked up what they taught him, they layered new lessons into everything. It wasn’t enough now that he picked up the right fork, he had to pick it up the right way. His wrist had to be limp but not too limp, he had to rest his thumb just so along the side, and it could only ever descend towards his food at a forty five degree angle. He could never stab a piece of meat again.

That was something peasants did.

‘But it makes more sense to do it that way?’ Jack said, staring at the fork incredulously, and then biting his lip when the jut of bone at his wrist was rapped sharply with the flat of a butter knife.

Jack vowed that when no one was watching, he was going to stab all his food with a fork. Even the stupid peas.

Still, he did what they wanted – or tried to, anyway. He could tell they were trying to prepare him for public appearances, and it left Jack feeling a fluttery nervy sensation in his chest and gut. He wanted it and dreaded it at the same time.

He was ready for training, but Pitchiner never came, and it occurred to Jack as he watched the day turn to dusk that they needed some way of communicating. Except he knew Pitchiner would never use it.

‘Too good for it or something,’ Jack muttered, kicking at the training mat and deciding to push himself through some different exercises. He wondered if he was allowed to go to the arena on his own. He had no idea what the rules were. He was starting to feel a bit like an unwanted horse, stabled away when unneeded, and brought out only for the owner to remember why they hadn’t wanted the horse in the first place.

Jack wore himself out on the training mats, and then showered and began exploring some of the panels along the walls in his room. He’d learned that if he pushed the long rectangular ones, they would open and reveal drawers, or a long rack of many clothes. One even opened to reveal a low shelf of journals. Jack opened one, realised it was Fyodor’s journal, and hastily put it away.
He found a boardgame he didn’t recognise and took it out, wondering if he could figure out the rules as he went. He also found some small plush toys. One was a Golden Warrior with eyes made of citrine. Another was a corn-doll. It was well made, but smelt faintly of mildew.

Then he made it snow in the corner of a room that he wouldn’t walk across later. They probably hated that the snow melted but he tried to sop up what he could later. He seemed to have an excess of towels provided to him these days for his melting ice.

Jack was creating frost shapes across the windows – he’d only just realised he could, and was quietly bouncing on the balls of his feet as he made a rabbit, and then a sword, and now a more complicated warship – when there was a knock at his door.

The door opened, and Jack’s hand slid with a squeak down the window, as he stared at the Engineer of Wonders. And in the Engineer’s giant grasp was Jack’s stick – but it was no longer a stick. It had a crook on the end, added in the silvery meteorite metal that they forged the swords of the Golden Warriors with.

‘I am apologising for taking so long,’ North said, without introduction of fanfare. He walked right up to Jack, towering over him, and held it out. ‘But it is being stubborn and sneaky, this stick you took from the mountain. I thought first an object for striking, like a hammer or mace! But no, the stick did not want this. And then I thought a spear! To drive the Darkness away! But no, the stick is not wanting this either.’

‘So you made a shepherd’s crook?’ Jack said, taking it in his hands.

The moment he held it, his doubt vanished. Ice crept along it, as though it was meant to be there. Jack’s heart beat faster, he turned it, looked at the hook and thought of how he was meant to use it. He didn’t know yet, but somehow, North had made it more than what Jack could have imagined.

‘Wow,’ Jack said. ‘Sir Engineer, you didn’t have to bring this yourself though. I mean, thank you, but I know you’re busy, and I know-’

‘Jack, Jack,’ the Engineer said, walking over and sitting on Jack’s bed. ‘You must call me North. None of this ‘Sir’ or ‘Engineer’ nonsense. You want I should call you Sir Jack?’

Jack spun the staff in his hands and said – without quite thinking about it:

‘It does have a nice ring to it.’

Then he realised who he was talking to, and offered a look of apology. But North waved it away, placing his palms flat on Jack’s bed and looking up at the ceiling.

‘What a day in the Workshop,’ North said. ‘It is good to leave and visit. I have been thinking about you, and I am hearing from Tooth that they are wanting to make many great things of you. Jack Frost! This- This is something I like. The name fits. But how are you, Jack? This must all be so new to you.’

‘Newish,’ Jack said carefully.

‘It is not really being my kind of world,’ North said with a sigh. ‘The Palace is grand and mighty, but I like my Workshop where it smells of motor oil and crackles with magic. You should come there some time! I have new hydrofoils that need new owners.’

‘What, seriously?’
‘I am being completely serious!’ North said, grinning. Then he briefly stroked at his pointed black beard, looking around with his clear blue eyes. He stared for a long time at the shapes Jack had been making on the windows, and his lips stretched into a smile that was gentle.

‘You are being an artist, Jack,’ North said, looking over at him with that same smile.

‘What? These? The ice just kind of does it.’

‘Yes, it would! It is magic you are taking from the mountain. It will do what you will it to do. But you have an artistic eye like me. Do you think I could make the things that I make, if I was not having the mind of an artist? You and I, we have a lot in common.’

Jack started to nod and then thought of what else he’d taken out of the mountain with him. He felt like a fraud. Even Pitchiner could at least make the golden light. Though he’d hinted today that Jack might have a chance of doing it too, though the cost seemed too high.

‘What is wrong?’ North said quietly, and Jack shook his head and then spun away. He trailed the staff along the ground, hating how quickly he’d been dragged back into a muddle of thoughts. Wasn’t it going to be a new day?

‘You know, I don’t actually know if I belong here. And no one ever gives me a straight answer. About anything.’

‘What are you wanting a straight answer about?’

Jack paused and then turned back. North was now perched on the edge of the bed, his hands down in the mattress. He leaned forwards, watched Jack with a sharp gaze.

‘Who are the Guardians of Lune?’ Jack said, feeling daring and numb at the same time.

North’s expression didn’t shift for a few moments, and then he clasped his hands in his lap, his gaze going to the floor. He stood and walked over to the window, pressing his hand next to the sword that Jack had made with his ice.

‘See?’ Jack said. ‘You won’t tell me. But you know Jamie told me to look for them, if I ever- I don’t know. That’s where he went. With them. So I don’t get it, okay? I just don’t get it. Obviously it’s not a great thing because Pitchiner keeps talking about execution even though that hasn’t happened in forever, and you all keep coming here and it obviously means something and I get that there’s like four thousand secrets and I can’t know any of them but seriously – can I just know one?’

‘That is not being a small secret,’ North said, but he turned towards Jack, and there was a faint smile on his face.

‘Can you just tell me where Jamie is? If he’s safe?’

North hesitated and then said: ‘I don’t know who Jamie is.’

‘Jamie, you know, the one who lived with me in the Barracks. My best friend. He’s like, gone, and he told me that he was with the Guardians of Lune but that’s like- You’re a part of that, right? He’s a deserter. I just want to know that he’s safe.’

Jack was breathing fast, and he knocked the crook of the staff nervously against the window, frost spidering out every time.
‘I am finding out for you,’ North said eventually. ‘I can find out.’

‘Why are you helping people desert? That’s treason.’

‘It is not an easy thing to answer, and yet it is the simplest thing in the world,’ North said. ‘We swear an oath to protect the children of Lune. That is what we do. And you, Jack, I think you are meant to join us. I think that is why you are not telling the Tsar of all these things that you know.’

Jack stared at him and couldn’t think.

‘Jamie isn’t a child,’ Jack said, thinking that of all the replies to say in his trembling voice, that was probably the stupidest.

‘Eh, there is being grey area,’ North said, shrugging. ‘Over time we are finding ways to protect many people.’

‘You and…Sandy and the Spymaster and the Disciplinarian,’ Jack said. ‘Who would all be killed if the Tsar knew. Right now.’

‘It is delicate subject.’

‘And I’m meant to keep this a secret?’

‘You have been doing it so far, yes?’ North said.

He didn’t even look frightened. Like it didn’t even occur to him that this might test Jack’s loyalty. Jack almost laughed, and then forced himself to stay calm. He looked over his staff and pressed his lips together.

‘You encourage people to not fight the Darkness,’ Jack said. ‘That’s what you do. I know a lot of trainees are scared of initiation, but you just...it hurts the military. And everyone.’

‘Many of those people could never pass an initiation,’ North said soberly. ‘Many are never having a real choice. If they are born with golden eyes, they cannot live any other life. If they are born in the outreaches and show aptitude early, they cannot choose another path afterwards. If, like you, they are choosing it for themselves, they cannot change their minds. They are either dying in that mountain, or dying in an Asylum, or they are lucky and become a Golden Warrior, and they are dying at the whims of the Darkness.’

North looked at Jack fiercely, as though daring Jack to say it was any different.

‘There’s already hardly enough Warriors as it is,’ Jack said weakly. ‘The attack on the Palace- Even like, the other day, when you got shadow sickness, that’s like-’

‘-Jack, I am wanting to tell you everything I am knowing, truly. But I can see you are having trouble with this already. Maybe Pitch will explain things better.’

‘He doesn’t tell me anything,’ Jack said, too tired to even shout it, despite the surge of anger he felt. On its heels, a bite of something dark and mean, as though he could just make North tell him. Alarm followed behind it, and Jack tried to shove his emotions away as hard as possible.

‘Jack, I want you to come here for a moment,’ North said gently, pointing beside him. ‘Come on, no need to be frightened. Just stand here and look up at the stars with me.’

Jack walked over cautiously, but North only looked out of the window, and eventually Jack did the
'See how beautiful the stars are,' North said, with a smile.

'Yeah,' Jack said, not really sure where this was going.

'What were you taught about the stars when you were little? What did they teach you?'

'Uh, well, giant balls of gas. They give us a light that doesn’t banish the Darkness, but lets us live. They shine light on lots of different planets out there. And sometimes they do weird things.’

‘Yes,’ North said, laughing, ‘sometimes they do very strange things. Now, Jack, what if – from the moment you were born – someone told you that all the stars out there were the souls of the departed Golden Warriors, looking down upon us?’

‘But they’re not,’ Jack said. ‘I mean it’s nice, but they’re just- They’re not.’

‘But what if you were told from the very beginning, as a child? What if everyone told you? Your teachers, your parents, your friends, even strangers, it was even being written in every book.’

Jack shrugged. He opened his mouth to reply, then went still and looked at North sidelong. North was already looking at him, watching for something.

Ice flowed in layers from Jack’s hand where he gripped his staff.

‘Sometimes, Jack,’ North said, almost sadly, ‘when you try and tell someone who believes that the stars are the souls of Warriors, that the stars are simply sources of light in the sky – that is being a very hard thing. It seems obvious because we know the truth of the stars, but it only seems obvious because we were taught this. In this, we were fortunate that we were taught the correct thing. But Jack, it is not always like this. If – as an example – you thought it would be for the good of Lune to lie to all of your people, you might choose to do that. And if you had enough power, enough wealth, you could make sure that everyone is sharing in this lie.’

‘And you don’t think I’m ready for it,’ Jack said. ‘To know what it is. But it’s something to do with why you’re helping people desert instead of fighting the Darkness?’

‘Yes,’ North said. ‘And it is also why some people come out of that mountain with magic, instead of the Light only. Also, Jack, it is not an easy thing to know, what we are knowing.’

‘You know all you’ve done is tell me that you can’t actually tell me anything,’ Jack said, rapping the glass in frustration, a wheel of frost emerging with a sharp rip of sound. ‘Thanks.’

North exhaled shortly. Jack thought maybe North would yell – Jack had seen him yelling before and it was frightening even from a distance. But instead, North touched his fingers to the wheel of ice and turned to look over his shoulder at Jack.

‘I will say this,’ North said. ‘Ask yourself why we fight the Darkness now, instead of other worlds as we once did. And ask yourself why those worlds don’t join us in that fight. The Palace is full of stories painted on these walls of how it once was. Pitch is old enough to remember. You are knowing the Golden Warriors, we don’t age like everyone else, some of us remember. All you know is this grand fighting of Light and Dark, and yes, we must fight the Dark or it will be our ruin. But once upon a time, Jack, it wasn’t our foe – it was not in our books and we were not needing Priests of Light. So where did it come from? Why does it only ever get worse? These...these are things you should never bring up around the Tsar. But talk to the Admiral, be private, be persistent. Pitch is weary and no longer believes in true glory. But he was once...’
North looked off into the distance and then shook his head.

‘Things were once so different, Jack,’ North said. ‘But you are needing to look deeper. This is not something I can give to you. I would give you so much, because I see you have a good heart and a good spirit. But I cannot give you the answers you want tonight.’

Jack nodded, thinking that North had at least given him something. Somewhere to start. Even though he was frustrated, he felt grateful too. His smile was weak, but it was real, and North beamed at him – almost looking relieved. Still, Jack could tell that he was going to leave. The visit hadn’t lasted hardly any time at all.

‘I will ask about Jamie for you,’ North said quietly. ‘But if he found us, then he is safe. I promise.’

‘Will I ever be able to talk to him again?’ Jack said.

North’s face looked pained for a moment, and then he grasped the collar of his long red coat.

‘Who is knowing, Jack? But not now. And not soon.’

‘Yeah,’ Jack said. ‘I figured. Thanks anyway. And for this,’ he said, holding up the staff. ‘I mean, really. It feels right, somehow. It’s not even really a weapon but it just... I dunno. I still can’t really believe you’re here and talking to me?’

‘Why not, Jack?’ North said, grinning. ‘We are both children of the creches, yes? We are being the same, you and I. And now I must go back to the Workshop, it never rests! I will be seeing you soon, Jack. But remember, you can come and see me whenever you wish.’

North nodded to himself, and then walked from the room, closing the door behind him. Jack noticed he used the entrance that all the servants seemed to use, and looked towards the door that led to Pitchiner’s rooms and the sundial rotunda.

In the end, he stayed up far too late, making patterns on the glass, thinking about the jumbles of information he had and failing to put it all together.
It’s official, Jack thought, *I look like a prince.*

He stared at himself in the mirror as tailor Flitmouse and his entourage hovered around him. They pulled at a hem, as though the millimetre of difference would be noticeable to others. They fussed with collars and cuffs. They stared in the mirror at his clothing, at him, without really *seeing* him.

Jack stared at the clothing too.

It was the cape, basically. It was that they’d given him a pale blue cape with bright silver sigils skirting the edges that felt like magic even though Jack couldn’t tell what any of them were for. It was an alphabet he wasn’t privileged enough to learn. He traced his fingers over the embroidery and frost swirled prettily.

One of the seamstresses went to smack his fingers away and he jerked his hand back before she could touch them.

Flitmouse only said:

‘Oh *let* him. It’s weatherproofed, remember?’

‘Yes, but...*now?*’ she said, looking at the frost with profound concern.

Jack touched the white shirt and its collar, not sure what to think. A sky-blue vest, a long-sleeved white shirt, and pale suede boots that felt velvety and soft enough that Jack had to stop himself from rubbing his cheek against them. Pants in a slightly darker brown, all of it fitting obscenely well.

It was his parade outfit, but it was basically his uniform too. More than one cape in varying shades of blue, more than one vest, more than one shirt. A series of pants and boots.

Jack had felt mild dismay that he was back to white shirts – the cardinal sign of a trainee – after he’d so recently been cleared to wear black. But they told him that he could wear whatever he wanted in private. Everything else was for public appearances.

He held his staff out to his side, looked at the belt and scabbard for the smallsword. He’d been given white fingerless gloves made out of a buttery leather. They had grip on the inside, and were smooth and shiny at the back of his hands.

He had to admit, with his white hair growing out in wild tufts, his blue-silver eyes staring back at him in the mirror – he couldn’t see the gold unless he leaned in close – he looked like *someone.* Not just a nobody, but a *somebody.*
‘You guys are amazing,’ Jack said, and Flitmouse rolled his eyes and shot him a withering look, as though Jack had just somehow insulted his children and his ancestors all at once, and done a bad job of it.

‘I don’t think he needs the hat,’ one of the seamstresses said. ‘You were right, Flitmouse.’

‘As if that was ever in question,’ Flitmouse muttered.

‘Oh yes,’ another said, ‘positively omniscient when it comes to fabric.’

Flitmouse lowered his black rimmed spectacles long enough to glare, and then they all chuckled together and began to pack up.

Jack watched them and wished that he could somehow be their friend. It was a silly thing to want, but he liked the way they spoke to each other. As though it was an easy thing to work together and snark and joke like that. He missed it.

‘So do you- You all have a busy day ahead?’

Flitmouse turned around and looked at Jack with raised eyebrows, as though surprised that Jack could even speak beyond saying that something was comfortable.

Clearly looking like a prince wasn’t the same as being one. He grimaced in something like apology, and then touched his fingers awkwardly to the hem of the cape as he turned away. It was only as low as his waist, but it was the heaviest thing he wore.

He didn’t turn around as the others left, only sighed when he heard the door close.

‘I finish work between seven and eight in the evening, most evenings,’ tailor Flitmouse said sharply. Jack spun and stared, and Flitmouse was standing by the door staring at him, a rectangular piece of card in his hands. ‘I want notice before you visit and you will bring me tea. Are you going to take this or not?’

Jack stepped forwards and took the card and looked at it, realising it wasn’t a Palace address. For some reason, he’d just assumed that Flitmouse lived in the Palace.

‘Tea?’ Jack said. ‘How do I give you notice? What?’

‘Yes, tea,’ Flitmouse said, narrowing his eyes. ‘There are a thousand servants in this Palace, ask one of them to pass along a message. Has the Royal Admiral not assigned you one of his yet? Honestly, Vera has no idea what she’s doing at the best of times, you’d best assign yourself someone who comes to you regularly. As for ‘what,’ I’m regretting the decision to invite you to my home. That’s what. But I’m hoping you’re not entirely gormless.’

When Jack kept staring, Flitmouse made a sound of contempt with his tongue.

‘Friends, Master Jack, I’m suggesting we do whatever one does to become that.’

‘You’re really bad at this,’ Jack said. Then he laughed, bewildered, a little pleased.

Flitmouse looked like he wanted to fidget with his coat, and his mouth tightened, but then he shrugged.

‘I’m a tailor,’ Flitmouse said, ‘I don’t have to be good at it.’

‘Right,’ Jack said. ‘Pretty good at being a tailor, though.’
'Pretty good?' Flitmouse said, staring at him. ‘I’m the best in all of Lune. Remember, if you visit, bring tea. I’ll not be offended if you change your mind. Farewell.’

Tailor Flitmouse opened the door and closed it loudly behind him, and Jack stared down at the address – just off the main square – and couldn’t quite believe that had just happened.

*

Jack’s life had taken on something of a routine in the lead up to the parade. He was coached on etiquette in the mornings. In the afternoon, he trained with Pitchiner about half of the week. Jack never knew when Pitchiner would show up, and Pitchiner never said whether or not he’d be there the next day. If Pitchiner didn’t show up, Jack trained himself.

They’d moved away from Pitchiner reaching for Jack’s darkness. When Jack had asked about it, Pitchiner had only said:

‘There’s a great deal more you can stand to learn now. You’re missing out on the exercises they’re putting the new recruits through. So I shall put you through them.’

Jack wondered if it was as gruelling for the others as it was for him. It gave him a chance to enjoy his own stamina, and he liked that Pitchiner still sometimes seemed surprised at everything Jack was capable of. But the Admiral was exacting and demanded nothing less than perfection. Jack was corrected all the way down to the exact place his foot rested on the floor, and even how much pressure he placed in the ball or heel of his foot.

At least he seemed to be insulting Jack a lot less. In fact, Jack wouldn’t have said he was being nicer, exactly, but he was certainly being a lot less mean.

On the days where Jack was left to his own devices after his tutors had left, he experimented with his ice. Sometimes he went down to the arena with his staff and smallsword and tried to see how he could work with both.

The meteorite metal that made the crook of the staff was incredibly light, but very hardy. After treating it gingerly, he realised that the wood and the metal both seemed unlikely to snap or break or splinter. North had treated them both somehow in a way that made the staff very strong. Jack thought it might double as some kind of shield, or blocking device.

Every time he swept it across the ground though, he felt the wind stirring around him, smelled snow in the air. Even as he wondered what kind of weapon it would be, he sometimes spun it in his hands and imagined a breeze whirling around him, and it would just happen. He didn’t understand it, but it filled him with joy every time.

Gingerly, he began exploring that side of his powers. Not just the snow and the ice and the frost, but the winds as well. The more he came to summon the winds, the more he realised it was almost reflexive. If he stayed open to it, and thought about breezes, they were there. They tickled him and touched him and tousled his hair. It was like being surrounded by very friendly animals that might leap towards him and then bound away in an instant. They invited him to play and leap and sometimes – he thought – they wanted him to fly.

He couldn’t make himself fly again. He tried running and jumping into the air, but he fell and bruised himself on the hilt of his sword. He tried jumping off some of the rings of chairs in the arena, succumbing to gravity instantly. He willed himself into the air by scrunching up his eyes and holding the staff as tightly as possible, and his feet never lifted off the ground.
Sometimes it seemed like a dream that he could do it at all.

* 

Three days before the parade, Professor Sharpwood came to visit him just as Jack was getting ready for bed. With his stern face and a single gesture with his hand, he indicated that Jack should follow him. Jack thought of the Tsar with a thrill of fear and excitement in his heart, and then looked down at his black slacks and the black shirt he was wearing to bed and frowned.

‘Should I change?’ Jack said.

Professor Sharpwood shook his head once, and gestured again.

Nervously, Jack followed down the still-lit corridors, looking closely at the paintings on the walls. Where wars were depicted, it was always warriors fighting other warriors, other nations. There was no Living Darkness and no Light. The Golden Warriors wore their black and gold, but they fought with swords and shields and drew blood, bodies littering battlefields.

Not all the paintings were of victories, either, Jack realised. Some showed clear defeats. Every painting was so carefully rendered, yet the yellowed colours made it easy to not peer too closely. Jack realised he could see Pitchiner on the battlefield, a younger North back when he was trim and sported only black – not his signature red coat.

Soon, Jack found himself in the same living room as before. The one with paintings of the Tsar, Tsarina and Tsesarevich on the walls. The one with the gold and ornate fixings. As Jack looked around, he realised it was so different to Pitchiner’s space.

Jack fidgeted, tried to keep his ice under control – he had a much better grasp of it these days, but when he was nervous, he tended to forget it. He could already feel it crisping up bits of the clothing he was wearing.

When the Tsar came, five minutes later, he was alone again. He seemed a bit more relaxed than last time, and he smiled warmly at Jack, but his hair was still in place, and Jack wondered if he was the kind of person who hated mess of any kind. But he didn’t seem to mind it when Jack made snow or frost. Maybe he just thought image was really important.

‘Jack! I trust you’re well?’ the Tsar walked over and stood beside Jack, looking at the portraits.

‘Yes, I really am, Your High- ah, Gavril.’

‘Oh? Are we on first name terms now?’ the Tsar said, looking sidelong with something sharp in his gaze, then chuckled at Jack’s shift in expression. ‘I’m only joking, Jack. Don’t look so affronted! Oh goodness! You can take a joke, can’t you?’

‘Ah, yeah,’ Jack said, feeling ice creep a bit further along his clothing. He tried to laugh, but it was just as nervous as the rest of him. Even so, the Tsar seemed oblivious to Jack’s discomfort, and Jack winced, thinking that if he ever wanted to get along with these people, he’d have to pick up their sense of humour a lot faster.

‘Are you excited about the parade?’ the Tsar said. Then he reached out quickly and ruffled Jack’s hair. ‘And look at this, now. Growing in white. Remarkable!’

Jack could still feel the tingle of the Tsar’s touch, even as the Tsar turned away and walked to
another point in the room, his fingers ghosting over some flowers in an enamel and gold vase.

‘I’m- I guess I’m excited,’ Jack said. ‘It’s a great opportunity.’

‘It is,’ the Tsar enthused. ‘Honestly, I find them exciting and I don’t think it will matter what age I am. Have your tutors instructed you on the best ways to behave while there?’

‘Yeah,’ Jack said. ‘Mostly smiling and waving and then they said to do some ‘nice snow things.’ So I guess just, light snow maybe? The fluffy kind?’

‘You can control it to that degree?’ the Tsar said, looking both surprised and impressed as he turned to Jack. The strength of his regard felt warming, and Jack knew he would have flushed strongly, if his body wasn’t so much colder now.

‘I’ve been practicing,’ Jack said. ‘I can do all sorts of things. Frost shapes and patterns and stuff.’

‘As long as it’s not destructive, you’re welcome to use it in the parade. Anything lethal we’ll save for when you’re out with the rest of the Warriors, mm?’

‘I’m- I’m still going to be allowed to go out on missions?’ Jack said.

Until this point, he just hadn’t known. The implication had been strong that Jack would maybe just be a mascot, and not a proper Warrior. Pitchiner was training him, but Jack wondered if he would have done that anyway, regardless of what they’d decided for Jack.

‘Of course,’ the Tsar said, rolling his eyes. ‘We wouldn’t have you in here if you were that useless. The Royal Admiral seems to believe that you may be capable of producing the Light after all, though he’s seen no signs of it. He’s often remarkably accurate when applying insights to recruits.’

‘Oh, yeah,’ Jack said, nodding. The idea of Pitchiner and the Tsar talking together about Jack was disconcerting.

‘He says you have a lot of potential,’ the Tsar continued, ‘so I wouldn’t want to find myself disappointed in you, Jack.’

‘No,’ Jack said, staring. Pitchiner had said what? Then, the idea of disappointing the Tsar, wasn’t that like disappointing the whole of Lune?

Standing here in a room with him, it was hard to remember all the warnings he’d been given. He just felt special. These meetings – probably secret – he’d bet that Pitchiner didn’t know about this one either, they were like small treasures that Jack could experience. The Tsar never seemed to mind if Jack was dressed up or not, even though the Tsar looked so perfectly put together, there was something casual and at ease about him. Like he was choosing to show Jack this other side of himself.

It made Jack feel important.

‘I mean, I don’t want to disappoint you,’ Jack said.

The smile the Tsar gave him was sweet, and then he moved away from the vase and walked over to one of the couches. He leaned over the back of it, resting his arms on the top of a cushion while watching Jack intently.
‘When I was younger,’ the Tsar said, ‘you know, when I was the Tsesarevich – such a long time ago now – I remember being in this Palace and thinking I’d never be able to live up to the responsibility of being the Tsar, of looking after Lune. All the spaces here seemed larger than life, and then there was me, a silly young child, and I felt so small in this place. I don’t know if you’ll understand that, quite, but I wonder- You must understand somewhat.’

Jack hesitated, then nodded. ‘I mean I’m nothing like- But this place is intimidating. It’s all kind of intimidating.’

‘And me too, I imagine,’ the Tsar said, smiling ruefully. ‘You remind me of me, when I was younger. In a way. You don’t have to feel so alone when you’re here. I hoped you’d reach out to me after our last meeting, and was saddened when you didn’t.’

That was startling, and Jack looked down, seeing ice flood in spirals on the carpet. Then he saw that the Tsar was looking at the ice too, and stammered out an apology.

‘You still don’t trust me at all,’ the Tsar said, looking dismayed. ‘It’s not often that the protector of this fine nation extends trust to someone, only to have it rejected.’

‘No- I, I’m not- I wouldn’t, Your M- shit, Gavril, I wouldn’t,’ Jack blurted, not understanding the tumult of feelings but knowing he wanted them to go away. ‘I- I really want to trust you.’

‘It seems like if you really wanted it, you would,’ the Tsar said benignly. ‘Maybe it is like the mountain. You really wanted to become a Warrior, but couldn’t quite do it, could you?’

The Tsar smiled at Jack’s expression. It wasn’t a cruel smile, but it made Jack feel like he was hopeless, somehow.

‘I do trust you,’ Jack said, wishing that he didn’t sound so shaken. He’d been feeling so good. How come he had to ruin it? ‘Of course I trust you, you look after all of Lune.’

‘I do,’ the Tsar said. ‘Not alone, though. There’s a lot of people who help me. You as well, Jack. I hope. But you’ll have to try harder when it comes to showing me your trust. Anyway, I didn’t wish to see you tonight for that.’

Jack felt awful, and tried not to look upset, even though it was difficult to keep his breathing steady.

‘I’m really excited about the parade,’ Jack said, wishing that he sounded cheerier. Still, his voice was steady at least, if a bit strained. ‘I’m really grateful you’re helping me.’

The Tsar narrowed his eyes, as though he didn’t believe Jack, and thought perhaps Jack might be buttering him up. Jack felt weak. It seemed like everything he did was wrong. If he could have just trusted the Tsar in the first place, he could’ve fixed it and not ended up in a situation like this. He’d thought it would have been rude to reach out all this time.

‘I’m sorry,’ Jack added.

‘Don’t do that,’ the Tsar said, standing then. ‘I can’t abide by weakness. If you’re not pleased with how this evening has gone, then it is simple enough to change your behaviour in the future. Yes?’

Jack nodded, and the Tsar nodded too, that sharpness in his eyes disappearing once more. He seemed boyish again, and he beamed.

‘Look, let’s put all that behind us for now and talk about the parade. I just want to run through it all quickly with you, and then I’ll leave you be. Sound simple enough?’
Jack nodded again, tried to look upbeat and cheerful. He tried to force the turmoil inside of him away, thinking of it as weakness. Thinking that this had all gone so much worse than he’d expected. As the Tsar sat down on the sofa and indicated Jack should sit next to him, he promised himself he’d try harder, do better.

He didn’t know how yet, but he’d figure it out.

*

In the distance, the pounding of the military drums. Jack could feel them through the cobblestones. He stood apart from the others in the Palace grounds, listening to the distant clamour of the City of Lune crowds, even as he looked around staring. There were so many people he didn’t know or recognise.

He’d spotted Anton the Brave in formal military regalia, along with Eva, and the Royal Admiral had been glimpsed, but otherwise he’d been directed to the right place to stand by his tutors, who had then vanished. He couldn’t see the Tsar or the Tsarina – they’d come out in a protected carriage, and if the crowd was lucky, they might wave their hands or draw back the curtains so that they could be seen.

Jack spun his staff in his hand, accidentally icing it to his palm three times out of nerves. Apparently he didn’t get sweaty palms anymore, he just iced things.

Eventually, the huge wrought iron gates leading away from the Palace opened and Jack thought they’d get ready to march, but instead, an influx of younger folk streamed in, dressed all in black and carrying weapons that flashed with the shine that meant they hadn’t yet seen battle.

It was the new recruits. The ones that survived the Mountain. Jack stood on tiptoe, peering as much as he could, trying to see who he recognised. For a moment he forgot that Jamie was gone and expected to see him there, searching out Jack.

Instead, he took an involuntary step forward just as Cupcake stepped out of the crowd of recruits and stared at him. He raised his free hand to wave at her, but she turned away. His heart hurt. Maybe she wanted nothing to do with him. But then, after talking to a few of the others – who also looked over at Jack – she peeled off from the group and jogged over to him. She wore a sword at her side, and Jack could see just how gold her eyes were. Golder than most. She was going to be one of the best.

“You are such a sight for sore eyes, I swear,’ Jack said. He almost reached out and hugged her, but he realised they still hardly knew each other.

She came right up to him, gazing warily.

‘By the Light,’ she said. ‘They said there’d be something special from the mountain, but I didn’t think it’d be you until they told us today. Guess you’re not an Overland anymore.’

‘Once an Overland, always an etcetera,’ Jack said, laughing. ‘How- how are you?’

‘Yeah,’ Cupcake said, shrugging. Jack realised that was going to be the sum total of her answer. She still spoke in that gruff, abrasive way, as though she was ready to fight at a moment’s notice.

‘Thanks for- for everything. Saving my life and you know, all that.’

‘Yeah,’ Cupcake said, her lips quirking in a smile.
‘Do you think I’ve maybe earned a chance to learn your real name?’

Cupcake laughed then, the sound rough and coming deep from her chest. She looked around and then her shoulders relaxed as she met Jack’s eyes again.

‘You know it. My parents had a weird sense of humour.’

‘No way,’ Jack said, grinning. ‘Really?’

‘I mean I tell everyone it’s a nickname, but yeah, I wish.’ She rolled her eyes and then looked back towards the crowd of the other new recruits. They were all laughing and crowding around each other, and Jack knew they were all probably friends, or splitting off into cliques, sharing their experience of trekking down the mountain together and knowing they’d survived.

‘They say you’re training with the Royal Admiral,’ Cupcake said.

‘Uh huh,’ Jack said. For a moment he thought about talking it up, but he knew that Cupcake would see through it. She seemed like the kind of person who wouldn’t appreciate being lied to.

‘Gotta say, didn’t seem that special to me when you were half-dead in that mountain,’ Cupcake said. ‘I mean, I literally carried your ass out of there.’

‘You sure did,’ Jack said. ‘And...yeah, it’s been kind of weird? Wild? I don’t even know. I can make ice and stuff. The Tsar thinks it’s cool.’

‘The Tsar?’ Cupcake’s eyes widened and for a moment her face was all awe. Her broad hands lifted, fingers splaying, as though she could clutch the wonder of it. ‘The Tsar speaks to you? You’re not shitting me?’

‘No,’ Jack said, biting his bottom lip. He could show off a little bit, couldn’t he? ‘We have like- he wants us to be friends.’

‘Wow,’ Cupcake said, staring at him.

The wonder transformed, and Jack realised the moment he’d lost her with what he’d said. With a handful of words, her whole demeanour changed. She stood straighter, her face became closed off and respectful and polite. The kind of face you’d show to a commanding officer, not a friend.

‘Wow,’ Cupcake said again. ‘That’s big. That’s really big. Well. I should get back to the others.’

‘Wait,’ Jack said, as she turned. ‘Just- Can we be friends?’

Oh, man, that’s embarrassing. Just asking like that. Really, Jack? You’re that desperate?

Cupcake turned to him, wary.

‘I dunno, man. You’re gonna be in the Palace. I’m in the Barracks. And you’re- you’re a whole different league now.’ She waved her hand above her head to indicate how high.

‘I’m really not,’ Jack said in a rush. ‘I mess up all the time, I have no idea what I’m doing. I’m- I’m pretty sure the Royal Admiral can’t stand me and I don’t understand anything, and like, you saved my ass once, right? So you could just do it again by like...talking to me?’

Cupcake stared at him, and then after a beat her nostrils flared on a single bark of laughter.

‘Dude, tone it down. Okay, okay, you sure know how to twist a girl’s arm. If I had any interest in
boys at all, you’d be doing it for me. All that neediness and just- you know, pathetic crap dressed up all nice and shit.’

‘Right?’ Jack said, raising an arm and mock flexing. ‘It’s the magic recipe.’

‘I really do have to get back though. Come find me sometime. I’m gonna tell everyone else you’re cool so I can get some cred.’

‘Oh, actually, that works really well for me at the moment. I need some cred. Tell everyone I’m cool. Super cool.’

Cupcake’s face squished into one of disappointment and she said:

‘You’re ruining it.’

Then she flashed a quick grin and walked off back to the main group. Jack watched them enfold her into their ranks, many still looking over her shoulders at Jack.

The lighter feeling in his heart didn’t vanish, and he carried it as they began to get organised into the parade line and the drums continued their rhythm nearby, exciting audience and parade members both.

*

All the Golden Warriors that could be spared – including retirees and new recruits, made up the bulk of the ranks of the parade. Jack was to walk beside Pitchiner, and they were to head the best of the Golden Warriors. Immediately Jack wondered why. What was the purpose of putting Jack before everyone else?

‘Shouldn’t I be with the new recruits?’ Jack whispered. The clamour hid his voice from those around him, and he wasn’t even sure the Admiral had heard him, until Pitchiner tilted his head a little and looked at Jack sidelong.

‘This wasn’t my choice,’ Pitchiner said. ‘But this is where protégés stand, apparently.’

‘Protégé.’

‘If you’ll notice, I used my sarcastic voice when I said that.’

‘I don’t know, that’s the voice you use all the time. So it just sounds really sincere.’

Jack felt his heart sink, thinking of how he’d ruined things with the Tsar, and seemed to be doing it again. He and Pitchiner weren’t friends, and it was obvious that Pitchiner didn’t even want him here. Perhaps Pitchiner wanted him behind the new recruits or something, a sign that Jack didn’t really belong anywhere.

Snow. All you have to do is make some snow, and smile, wave, maybe do some frost shapes. That’s all. Then it’ll be over.

‘Jack,’ Pitchiner said, his voice closer than before. Jack looked up, startled, to see that Pitchiner leaning towards him, as though not wanting others to hear what he was saying. ‘They’ve put you here to make it look as though I’m training someone to become my equal. Most will assume that you are the student only, never think on it more. But those who write the press, others, will realise that I am no longer intended to be seen as a solitary military figure. He’s making it clear I’m replaceable.’
Jack blinked, then stared. The drums were getting louder now. The lines of Golden Warriors behind him didn’t shift – they were too well trained for that – but those who weren’t military were beginning to jostle and shift in anticipation. The crowds beyond the huge gates were getting louder. Nearby, two horses bucked their heads in their carriage leathers.

‘I couldn’t replace you,’ Jack said.

Pitchiner rolled his eyes as though that much was self-evident. But then something troubled passed over his face and he said:

‘He wants others to believe I could be. All in all, I may not be Royal Admiral much longer.’

Jack thought of the few secret meetings he’d had with the Tsar. Thought of the Tsar always asking Jack – with apparent concern - how Pitchiner was doing, as though Jack was always about to reveal that the Royal Admiral just wasn’t coping. He thought about how Pitchiner wasn’t told about the meetings.

Two warring parts stirred inside of him. First, a distrust in Pitchiner. Perhaps things were falling apart because he really was the wrong person to be in charge of the military. After all, the Tsar wouldn’t work against him like this – humiliate him like this – if it wasn’t true.

But the second was a cautiousness. A sense that the Royal Admiral had done so much for Lune, for so long. He’d kept Lune safe for over a century, had been in the military longer than anyone else, and to respond to that with public humiliation seemed underhanded. A sorry way to repay decades of service.

‘Is there anything I can do?’ Jack said.

Pitchiner’s face went still, and then his eyebrows pulled together.

‘No,’ he said. ‘You must play your part.’

‘But-’

‘That’s enough,’ Pitchiner said, and stood again, drawing himself up to his full height. Jack wondered how much all his clothing weighed. Pitchiner wore a ceremonial coat of heavy felt, the sigils looked like real gold instead of gold thread. Beneath that, he seemed packed into layers of clothing. But he still looked regal, and – Jack realised with a slight wince – he still looked stunning.

Great. So that part of you is never going to go away. Just great.

Runners came down the ranks, making sure that everyone was standing properly. One paused and looked at Jack’s staff, as though not sure he was holding it formally enough, but Pitchiner waved him off.

At the beginning and ends of the lines, with some immaculately timed signal that Jack didn’t understand, the drumming started with new intent, followed by the chimes and bells of Lune music. A roar from the citizens of the City of Lune, and Jack knew – even as his heart beat somewhere near his throat – that the Tsar and Tsarina were in the parade.

The Golden Warriors behind Pitchiner didn’t shift an inch. It was obvious they’d all done this before.

Then, slowly – but all at the same time – they began to move, cued in by the runners with their
golden flags.

A drone from midway down the parade line, somewhere behind them. The Highest Priests of Lune had begun their wordless songs of prayer. Jack knew they would have started singing these songs on the trek back from the mountain, but he’d not been there to hear it. Hearing it now, he shivered, his hand tightened on his staff.

He felt wonder, listening to that music. He wasn’t dead. He’d survived the mountain. He wasn’t in an Asylum. He was living in the palace. Even though things felt difficult a lot of the time, he knew he was so lucky to be standing here beside the Royal Admiral, taking part in something he’d only heard breathless tales of when he’d been a child.

Then he remembered that this was, in part, a public humiliation of the Royal Admiral and he took a deep breath and sighed it out. He wanted so badly for Pitchiner to be lying. He just wanted this all to be good.

The roars and cheers of the crowd became louder, and Jack held back on making the snow, knowing they’d announce him first. He looked up at the gates looming, licked nervously at his lips even though they kept telling him to stop doing that, and found himself thinking:

*At least it’s a pretty day today. Blue skies. They’ll definitely know the snow is coming from me, that’s something.*

The parade itself became a bit of a blur. All his life Jack had never imagined seeing something like this, let alone being in it. But in the end – his senses saturated with the noise of the drums, the crowds, the called orders from runners, the increasing cold of his own body as he suddenly worried that his frost powers would fail – his mind stopped connecting with what was around him. It became blurs of colour, sound, texture.

He could tell when it was his time to wow the crowds. Heard the name ‘Jack Frost!’ announced loudly through the crowd and then swept his staff across the air. Frost and snow followed. Huge, fluffy flakes of snow drifted up and began falling across everyone, and Jack brought forth animals made of frost – sparrows, the large hedgehogs that everyone adored and jumping rabbits all delicately wrought from ice particles. He heard laughter and joy in response, his name being called eagerly.

The Golden Warriors behind him – with Pitchiner at their lead – all at once made a surfeit of golden Light, and Jack felt it move through him. It was sweet and pure. Unbidden, a glimmer of hatred stirred in Jack’s gut. It had lain dormant for days, he’d almost wondered if it was gone after the last time Pitchiner had provoked it. Instead, in response to the Light all around him, he felt a quick pulse of sickening malice. He would destroy them.

Thankfully he had so many things to be focusing on; the marching, the snow, making sure his ice remained gentle and joyful, that the cruel impulse within faded. It became nothing at all when the Light died down. Jack breathed heavily, unable to hear his own breath over the sound of everything else.

*Hours later, Jack and the others were back within the confines of the Palace gates. He stood there looking at his staff. A few people clapped him on the back. At one point he caught North walking purposefully towards him with a smile on his face, before someone else called him away and he*
disappeared into the crowd. Jack didn’t even know he’d been part of the parade.

Pitchiner had vanished, and Jack was left near the Golden Warriors. Most paid no attention to him, and those that did sometimes stared disapprovingly. Jack wondered if it was because of him, or because his presence next to Pitchiner was meant to humiliate. Maybe it was both.

He was overwhelmed. Even when the Shadows had attacked the platform months ago, he’d not felt like this. Even Jamie getting shadow sickness hadn’t left his ears ringing and his gut feeling hollow.

‘Well, hello there, Master Frost,’ said a warm voice, and Jack looked up to see Anton the Brave – his hair a neon green now – and the other Golden Warrior, Eva, standing next to him. Anton was smiling at him. ‘Ready for the main course?’

‘The what?’ Jack said, looking around, confused. Was there going to be another parade? Or some kind of formal dinner? Was that what all the etiquette tutoring was for? He wasn’t sure he’d remember all the different forks and their purposes at this point, let alone all the angles and proper ways of eating all the different foods.

‘It’s the best part of these stodgy ceremonial events, you know, darling,’ Eva said.

‘What is?’

‘You’d think Pitch would tell you these things, but obviously he likes the element of surprise,’ Anton said. ‘Young Master Frost, we have an after-party to attend.’

‘An after-’ Jack stared at him, and Anton grinned, his teeth flashing.

‘See, you do that innocence thing so well.’ Anton snapped his fingers once. ‘I think I might like to see you drunk.’

‘At the very least tipsy,’ Eva said. Her voice was frosty, but her smile was sweet. Jack realised he hadn’t noticed it before, but her resemblance to Seraphina was striking. Even their throaty voices were similar.

‘I don’t think I’m allowed-’

‘No, no, don’t say that,’ Anton said, face falling. ‘You’ll break a fellow’s heart. Look at you, all dressed up, and somewhere to go. Say you’ll make an evening of it with us. We want to get to know you.’

He stepped forwards and held out his arm, crooked at the elbow. It was an unmistakeable invitation.

Jack looked around and couldn’t see any familiar faces. No Cupcake, no Pitchiner, none of the supposed Guardians.

With a deep breath, he stepped forwards and slid his free arm in the space that Anton had left between his arm and his side. Anton shifted so that he was standing closer to Jack, his body heat from the parade radiating.

‘Look at that, Eva, I got the pretty one,’ Anton said, though he didn’t look away from Jack.

‘You always get the pretty ones,’ Eva said, as though deeply bored. But she met Jack’s eyes and winked.
Jack, still hearing the echoes of the drums, walked with them up the entryway stairs into the Palace, wondering what an after-party would look like, and hoping it would be quieter than everything that had just happened.
Er, so, I could've written 'fun drunk Jack' but instead you get Jack thinking 'look I had a really long day and this is REALLY overwhelming drunk Jack.' I'm sure some of you won't mind a bit. :D

‘That’s another ballroom,’ Anton said, waving towards it. Jack looked at the finely dressed people milling about. Some of them surely hadn’t been at the parade. Wouldn’t he have noticed? They were wearing exquisite, fanciful costumes. Some had masques. Others wore headpieces that were hugely feathered and jewelled, or sculpted in felt and dyed in glittering pigments.

‘That’s like the third?’ Jack said. ‘How many ballrooms are there?’

‘As many as there are stars in the firmament,’ Eva said drily.

Jack was surprised when they bypassed another ballroom and ended up in some kind of sprawling lounge. Servants milled with plates of champagne and hors d’oeuvres, and there were more Golden Warriors here than elsewhere, still in their formal clothing. Anton shook the hands of about ten people as they passed, smiling and offering brief greetings. Eva spoke to no one, and at one point made a haughty sound in the back of her throat as someone stepped towards her and then quickly moved away again.

Everything was piling on top of him. The noise of the different bands playing – here a string quartet, but surprisingly loud given they were right there in the room with everyone else – was chafing. Jack felt too warm, but ice spilled from his feet as he walked and it trailed from his staff. There were sometimes sounds of pounding drums, or the blast of a horn, in another room in the distance something like twenty people would roar with laughter at once, or there would be a mysterious bang that vibrated through the floor and made Jack tense with alarm, even as no one else took notice.

There’d been nothing like this in the creches. He’d seen in a couple of books, gauzy impressions of what parties might look like at the Palace, but there were only ever about ten people in those illustrations. Those people always looked calm and quiet and civilised, and very pretty.

Anton walked over to a table that only had liquor, wine and spirits upon it. He waved away the attending servant and poured Eva a glass of something a honeyed red, then himself something clear that smelled of ice, and then he offered Jack a tall flute of something that looked like it could have been distilled from the Light.

‘Champagne,’ Anton said, gesturing at it. ‘Not the regular stuff. You’ll like it, it’s sweet. Has bubbles. You can even ice the glass if you want.’

Can I?

Jack looked at his hand and shifted it so that he was incorrectly holding the bulb of the glass instead of the stem. Tiny frost crystals crept out from his fingers and he stared in amazement, and then quickly shifted to hold the glass correctly. His tutors probably weren’t here, but what was the
point of all that training if not for moments like this?

Anton turned and looked out over the crowd, as though searching for someone. He leaned back casually into the table, and no one else approached them.

Jack sipped at the champagne and thought that it was actually pretty good, and drank half the glass down before painted fingernails bumped into his mouth. Jack startled, and realised that Eva’s hand had covered the top of his glass.

‘Not that fast,’ Eva said, staring at him.

‘It’s good though,’ Jack said.

Eva didn’t look away for a long time. She didn’t even blink. Jack thought more and more that she was so much like Seraphina.

‘Did I do something wrong?’ Jack said, swallowing.

‘The ingénue,’ Eva said, smirking. Though she looked at him, she didn’t even seem to be talking to him.

‘Eva,’ Anton chided, turning back. ‘You’re not supposed to tell him how innocent and adorable he is. That’s my job.’

Oh, that’s because she wasn’t talking to me.

‘Then why not give him a bottle of champagne and be done with it?’

‘Mm, in amongst this jungle? Maybe not tonight. It’s true though,’ Anton added, looking down at Jack and winking. ‘Innocent and adorable. I find myself wondering how on point it is though, you bunking down with Pitch and all. They wouldn’t do that unless there was a reason for it. And the ice is a pretty parlour trick, but that wouldn’t be the reason.’

‘I don’t know really,’ Jack said, thinking of how he’d been told he wasn’t a good liar. ‘It was all up to the Tsar. Pitch didn’t really get much of a say.’

*If they get to call him Pitch, then so do I.*

‘The Tsar is good at that,’ Anton said, his voice markedly quieter than before. He kept looking around and then paused, going still. Jack followed his gaze and saw the Tsar all the way across the room, with the Tsarina, Pitchiner, and other people who could only be nobility. ‘This room is really rather crowded, isn’t it?’

‘I could have told you that when we entered,’ Eva said, and then took three bottles up in her hands. She handed one to Anton, and then led them from the room. The only people who seemed to notice, were people promising Anton that he share a drink with them later.

Jack passed pockets of people that had crowded together gossiping, laughing, even arguing. He tried to look around for Cupcake or any of the other trainees, but couldn’t see them.

Another lounge, this one with no Warriors and only people of high nobility. Anton made a beeline towards a darker section of the room with overstuffed sofas and huge furs draped over them.

‘There,’ Anton said, throwing himself back into a sofa and sighing. ‘That’s better.’

‘Did we just...escape the Tsar?’ Jack said. He kept his voice quiet, but they were far enough from
the others that he didn’t think they could hear.

‘Oh no,’ Anton said, widening his eyes on purpose, ‘we wouldn’t ever do that. The Tsar is everywhere. He’s everything. Why, he’s ubiquitous!’

‘We get tired of it sometimes,’ Eva supplied, as Anton dropped the sarcasm and rubbed at his forehead with the heel of his palm.

‘The Tsar?’ Jack said, looking between them. He hadn’t decided where to sit yet. Next to Eva, who seemed cold but also weirdly protective, or next to Anton, who was friendly enough, but...Jack had no idea what that meant anymore.

‘Politics,’ Anton said. ‘I didn’t become a soldier for politics. I became a soldier to stick it to the Darkness.’

‘The post-Darkness wave,’ Eva said. ‘He’s a baby.’

‘Like, two hundred years old,’ Anton said. ‘You have to stop doing that, or I’m going to start going on about how you’re ancient again.’

‘Do,’ Eva said, smiling warmly. ‘It just means I can tell everyone how well I’ve aged. Better than this wine, anyway.’

‘Stop drinking it then,’ Anton said, scowling at her.

‘No,’ Eva said. ‘Shan’t.’

‘Oh, here we go,’ Anton said. He looked at Jack and patted the cushion next to him. Jack thought of the Tsar, and then shook his head slightly at Anton. He felt queasy doing it, because Anton had been so nice to him, but-

‘No?’ Anton said. ‘Understandable. You hardly know us. I mean, except by reputation. But that’s all spin and public relations and so on. It doesn’t really tell you much about us, does it?’

‘Introductions then,’ Eva said, drinking from the bottle of wine and not seeming to care that even Jack knew that was rude. ‘I’m Eva. Once Rear Admiral and now Captain of the Fleet. I like fine wine, gardening whenever I have time for it, which is never, and Anton follows me around like a little lost puppy. But that’s because he likes to be spanked.’

Jack blinked, and Anton only laughed and shrugged and then lay down on the couch and cosied into the furs.

‘You,’ Eva continued, looking at Jack through narrowed eyes, ‘are Jack Frost, formerly Jackson Overland, once under the fine care of Lieutenant Crossholt – now missing and presumed dead, we’ll see what the press says whenever public relations decides to get their word out, yes? More stripes taken than almost any other trainee, and not quite a Golden Warrior, but something.’

‘That’s, yep,’ Jack said.

‘And shy,’ Eva added, smiling at him. Jack thought of the spanking comment she’d said earlier and wondered if he was just imagining his cheeks getting hot.

‘You know,’ Jack said, gulping down the rest of his champagne, ‘there’s like no one who would’ve ever said that about me before I came here.’
'Oh?' Anton said, rolling up into a sitting position. He crossed his legs, rested his elbow on his knee and his chin on his hand with an impish smile. ‘Shy Jack with a heart of mischief? Do tell.’

‘That’s it, you summed it up,’ Jack said.

‘Anton’s a clumsy flirt,’ Eva said, looking over at Anton fondly. ‘But he means well.’

‘I have a reputation,’ Anton said, trying to look offended. ‘Though honestly, the little lost puppy bit wasn’t so far off. And I do like being spanked. I like spanking too though. Shy boys with hearts of mischief. See? I am a clumsy flirt. I’m just not drunk enough for this.’

Jack cleared his throat and rubbed at the back of his neck. He tried to imagine how he’d put the situation he found himself in to someone else.

*Hey Jamie, guess what, Anton the Brave – yeah that Anton the Brave – is kinda propositioning me and I think it’s legitimate. Also spanking? Like...what?*

‘So you’re both uh, together?’ Jack ventured. ‘Like a couple? Even though you flirt?’

‘Sort of,’ Anton said, pouring himself a second drink. ‘A lot of the time I’m with Eva, but not when she’s with Pitch – although okay sometimes when she’s with Pitch. But then it’s like two tops driving the whole thing and I just end up tired. And sometimes it’s just me and Pitch, but only when he needs to vent a bit, because I can take a bit of a thrashing. And I’m sometimes with Oxsana, and then there was those years where I lived with Anatoly and I think he hooked up with Vladimir and I know Oxsana was with him so I guess that somehow...’ Anton looked at the fingers he was holding up and frowned. ‘I’m missing a lot. But Eva and I live together so yes, a couple. I have rooms of my own though, if you’re worried about where we’d sleep together.’

‘Wasn’t...hadn’t actually gotten that far,’ Jack said, clearing his throat when he realised how his voice sounded. ‘You’re like- Anton the Speedy.’

Eva snorted and then covered her mouth and looked away.

‘That’s not flattering,’ Anton said, sighing.

‘Anton the Premature,’ Eva added, from behind her fingers.

‘See,’ Anton said, gesturing at Eva while looking at Jack. ‘Now it’s a thing. She’ll do this for months.’

‘Thank you,’ Eva said to Jack, looking at him with bright, pleased eyes. ‘I do love teasing him.’

‘Yeah,’ Jack said, ‘you guys are really forward, you know that, right?’

‘Life’s short,’ Eva said, sipping at her wine. ‘And it’s more fun. You’d prefer us to be opaque and stuffy? Oh, see, here’s Pitch now, right on time. He’ll do a remarkable job.’

‘You mean he’s looking for us?’ Anton said.

But Pitchiner stopped when he saw Jack, and then gestured with two fingers. It was clear that Jack was supposed to go, and he went to place the champagne glass on a table, only to have it gracefully taken by Eva.

‘Come back to us,’ Eva said. ‘We’ll be right here.’

‘We mean it,’ Anton said, suddenly serious. ‘We’re not moving. Ask someone to direct you to the
‘Hunting lounge,’ Jack managed.

‘Good luck,’ Anton said, looking past Jack at Pitchiner.

All at once he had an image of Pitchiner spanking Anton, and his brain malfunctioned after that. He stared blankly, and Pitchiner looked at him with exasperation, and then beckoned again.

*Oh, right.*

Jack walked over, and Pitchiner looked him over critically. Then he turned and Jack knew that once more, Pitchiner just expected him to follow. Jack looked over his shoulder at Anton and Eva, and they were watching, saying nothing at all. It was disturbing.

Had he done something wrong?

As they walked down the corridor, Pitchiner only said:

‘The Tsar wishes for your company.’

‘Oh,’ Jack said, mouth dry. ‘Me?’

‘You caused quite the stir during the parade. The only reason you don’t have more people draping themselves all over you is because Anton and Eva are quite the guard.’

‘Oh,’ Jack said.

He had to walk unnaturally fast to keep up with Pitchiner’s long stride. Pitchiner was still in that heavy felt coat. It must have felt stifling in the warmth of the Palace. Jack looked up to the back of his head, felt intimidated.

‘Will you be there?’ Jack said suddenly.

Pitchiner’s steps didn’t falter, but they did slow. Then he looked over his shoulder, blinking down at Jack.

‘I beg your pardon?’

‘Will you stay?’ Jack said. ‘When I meet people?’

‘I intend to,’ Pitchiner said, and Jack nodded, feeling relieved. He didn’t *like* the Royal Admiral, exactly, but the idea of meeting a bunch of nobility while the Tsar was there was terrifying. Pitchiner was probably staying to make sure Jack didn’t embarrass him or something, but that was fine. Jack wanted him to stay to make sure that didn’t happen too.

They were back in the lounge that was almost packed with Warriors and Nobility now. Jack saw the Tsar – even more immaculate and handsome than usual – and the Tsarina, the nobles around them, and gulped. He wished he had some more of that sweet champagne.

The Tsar beamed when he saw them both.

‘Ah, excellent, thank you so much Kozmotis. Now, I believe Nestor wished to have an urgent conversation with you?’

The Tsar was simultaneously gesturing Jack closer, while giving Pitchiner a pointed look.
‘Nestor can wait,’ Pitchiner said, smiling. ‘It’s been too long since I’ve been graced with the company of your friends.’

‘That’s only because you so strongly dislike all this frivolity, don’t you, Koz? Really, Nestor insisted he speak to you as soon as possible. I believe he’s in the White Ballroom? Yes?’

Jack didn’t know if the other nobles could read the tension, because they were mostly staring at him and the frost pouring from beneath his fine shoes. Maybe there was no tension, and he was imagining it. Pitchiner only inclined his head slightly and then turned and left.

The Tsar placed his hand between Jack’s shoulder blades and Jack felt light-headed. Pitchiner had said he would stay, but – well, it wasn’t like he could when the Tsar had sent him away. Jack missed his presence.

‘The poor dear looks like he’s going to faint,’ said one of the noblewomen, reaching for a drink on one of the trays held by servants hovering behind them. ‘What a shock it must be, your first parade, yes? Here.’

Jack took the flute of champagne and smiled in thanks.

‘That ice is remarkable,’ said a plump man, and Jack looked at him, trying not to stare at all the tiny ceramic birds crafted on the headpiece he wore. ‘What is it like? Does it hurt?’

‘No,’ Jack said, taking a sip of the champagne to give him time to think. ‘It just feels natural. It’s just a part of me now.’

That was when the questions became a bombardment. Jack was glad when the Tsar helped him field some of them, but for the most part, Jack was fending for himself. They were almost all about his ice, the snow, what it felt like to be an ambassador – which Jack wasn’t sure he was, an ambassador for what, exactly? – and they asked him about the Palace and his training.

He finished the champagne surprisingly fast, and then had multiple drinks pressed towards him. He didn’t know what to select, knowing that they were trying to curry favour. The Tsar picked for him, selecting a tumbler with a deep, gold liquid inside of it.

Jack thought of how the Tsar said Jack could go to him whenever he was upset or alarmed. With his hand beginning to fuse to the glass from his ice, he tried to catch the Tsar’s eye. When that didn’t work, he tentatively ventured:

‘Your Imperial Majesty? May I have a word, please? Just quickly?’

‘Of course,’ the Tsar said, his eyes twinkling. Jack almost felt weak with relief, knowing that he’d done the right thing, using his formal title around the others.

The Tsar led him away to a quiet corner, and Jack looked down at his glass. He sipped at it quickly, and then coughed as the stuff burned down his throat.

‘What is it, Jack?’ the Tsar said, offering that same benign smile.

‘I’m just- I’m not sure I can... It’s been a long day. I just- Can I meet these people later, or- You said to come to you if I was upset? Or unhappy?’

The Tsar’s smile slowly vanished from his face, and then his eyes began to narrow. He looked down his nose at Jack, and then tilted his head, his lips lifting into some bemused smile.
‘You’re unhappy with me giving you an opportunity to meet these esteemed nobles?’

Jack shook his head automatically. That sounded like a bad thing to be unhappy with.

‘You’re unhappy with being an important part of a parade for the citizens of Lune?’ the Tsar said, lifting an eyebrow.

‘No, it’s just- Look, you said you- That when you were younger, you sometimes felt overwhelmed and stuff. Right? It’s like that.’

The Tsar’s expression became one of sympathy, and he reached out and placed a warm hand on Jack’s shoulder. He leaned in close and met Jack’s eyes steadily.

‘Don’t be stupid,’ he said quietly. ‘This isn’t nearly the same, and you need to learn quickly how to handle yourself. You are acquitting yourself reasonably well. It won’t be for much longer. You’re stronger than this, Jack. I believe you are.’

Jack nodded, because he could be stronger. Maybe he should have just waited longer. Maybe he wasn’t meant to seek the Tsar out unless he was really upset and not just tired. Besides, the Tsar believed in him. Jack could do it.

‘I’m sorry,’ Jack said.

‘Oh,’ the Tsar said, looking down briefly in disgust. ‘No weakness, now, Jack. Strength, remember?’

‘Right, yeah,’ Jack said.

‘Drink some more of that,’ the Tsar added, reaching up and tapping Jack’s glass with a manicured fingernail. ‘It will help.’

‘I’ve had some already.’

‘Not enough, plainly,’ the Tsar said, laughing softly. ‘Now, let’s go back. No more interruptions like this. Don’t disappoint me.’

They turned and the Tsar’s hand was at the small of Jack’s back again, steering him back into the crowd that never seemed to tire of asking him questions.

*

The next hour became a blur of bright colours, sharp spears of laughter, and his throat was hot from so much liquor. Glass after glass, and he’d accidentally cracked the last glass with his ice. He just couldn’t keep a proper handle on it, apologised for it, but the nobles seemed to find it amusing, and Jack floated on an uneasy but pleased cloud.

They liked him. It was kind of nice.

*It’s super nice. Really super nice. None of them care that I was an Overland. I bet most of them don’t even know.*

The Tsar disappeared at some point, and Jack did tricks for the nobles and showed them little frost animals even though he felt worn and the frost crystals sometimes fell apart into a shower of diamond dust before it was ready to. They were much harder to make now, and he had to squint at them sometimes, not sure what animal he was supposed to be making in the first place.
Sometimes flashes of the day crept into his mind. He’d recall the trumpeting of horns and feel like his body was vibrating. He’d sense that huge wash of Light and feel the darkness inside of him shift and move, alert. Eva’s fingers bumping against his lips as she urged him to drink less. Pitchiner walking beside him seeming so tall and immoveable and strong.

Jack excused himself clumsily, the Tsar nowhere in sight. He felt feverish.

He wove out of the room, not recognising anyone.

The murals on the walls had taken on a bright surrealism. It almost looked as though the Warriors were moving. Swirling slowly around. He tried to shake the strangeness away, but that only made things worse.

He had no idea how to find a balcony. Just somewhere to breathe.

He was lost, frustration picked at his insides. He clenched the fist not holding his staff and forced himself to take a few deep breaths. He just needed air. He needed to not feel so warm.

It took far too long for him to remember that he could flag a servant. They looked him over critically, and then set down their plate of drinks and led him down a side corridor near one of the many ballrooms. At the end, a narrow door opened onto a sprawling, empty balcony. There were open double glass doors spilling out onto the balcony from the ballroom, but no one was near him. It was a chill, brisk evening. Likely too cold for the others.

Jack tumbled out, muttering thanks even though the servant had already vanished.

He leaned his staff against the balcony railing and clutched the stone with both hands, gulping down huge breaths.

It’s fine. This is fine.

Fear had woven thick through him. Whatever malice the darkness inside him had access to was growing. He’d felt trapped for too long. He was overheated and annoyed. Flashes kept peppering his mind with images he didn’t want to see:

Crossholt with the bolt of ice through his body and those open, dead eyes and how good it had felt. Pitchiner with ice through his thigh and trying to tug it free and failing. The nobles that pressed drinks into his hands frozen together and the ice tinged with red. Crushing instruments and musicians both to just get them to stop.

Horror made him swallow bile and burning liquor, but beneath that, a deep-seated pleasure at all he could bring forth if he just let his ice loose.


The images wouldn’t disappear, and Jack swayed away to the other side of the balcony, staring over the edge. They weren’t so very far from the ground. A cold wind wrapped around him, and Jack closed his eyes in relief.

He could do this.

No one would ever know the sorts of things he thought sometimes.

His whole corner of balcony was iced, and he couldn’t seem to get a full grasp on his mind. He just wanted to hurt someone. Just once. Just to get it out of his system.
‘Oh yeah, mate,’ came another voice, ‘yeah, just need a breather. You know me and these things. Bloody parties, yeah?’

*Oh come on,* Jack thought, pressing his forehead to the balcony. He couldn’t even look. He was going to lose all grasp of his mind. Every breath felt like a little slip down a spiral that led all the way into nothingness.

‘Hey,’ said Bunnymund, ‘what are you doing out here?’

*Deep breaths,* Jack told himself.

‘Taking a breather,’ Jack said, his voice a rasp. ‘Like you.’

He heard Bunnymund come closer and forced himself to straighten. He couldn’t help it. He had to look as well. Not looking made him think that Bunnymund was approaching with a whip.

But when Bunnymund saw him, his ears lay flat.

‘What’s wrong?’ Bunnymund said.

‘Nothing,’ Jack said. ‘Really. I’m just tired.’

Bunnymund clearly didn’t buy it, but then his shoulders rose and fell in a huge sigh, and he came over and leaned his back against the balcony, watching Jack. He was in his Alchemist’s costume. It was pretty. Violet and blue and green and brown, covered in sigils and geometric patterns, with a belt that still held his sickle boomerang and other things Jack wasn’t sure of. A magical staff jutted from behind him, but Jack didn’t know if he’d ever used it, or if it was just there for show, like the masques and hats some of the nobles wore.

*If you let go of your ice now, he couldn’t ever whip you again. Don’t you want that? Ever. He’d never touch you again.*

Jack’s jaw clenched down and he made himself look away, hissing through his teeth.

‘Hey,’ Bunnymund said, his voice softer. ‘Jackson, talk-’

‘It’s Jack!’ Jack snapped, ice splintering out from beneath his hands and causing icicles to form.

Jackson Overland was the one who was sent for punishment all the time. But Jack Frost had *never* gone. Jack Frost didn’t get whipped. He didn’t need to see the Disciplinarian. *Ever.*

Bunnymund held up his paws and his ears twitched.

‘Now, now, don’t get your knickers in a knot. Jack, then. Rightio, that’s fine.’

Jack listened to his breathing. He squinted at Bunnymund and saw him blur and then become two. This was so stupid. It had never really *bothered* him to be sent to the Disciplinarian over and over again. That was just how life was. And yet seeing him now, especially because Bunnymund wasn’t being an outright asshole...

‘Honestly,’ Bunnymund said, his face gentling. ‘If you want to get out of here, we can go take a walk. Even go to my tower or somewhere else. I get it, mate. The Palace does this to people.’

Jack’s head dropped and he stared at the ground, at the ice that spread and spread.
The Disciplinarian’s tower.

Layer upon layer of memory seeped into him. He could feel the places where all his scars caught on the fabric of his shirt. He could feel how his arms ached from holding onto the cross and how his teeth and jaw were sore from biting down on the leather roll to stop him from screaming and screaming and-

One moment he thought he might be starting to calm down and then it was as though the darkness inside him just petted him gently on the shoulder and said:

*Let us handle it.*

Jack nodded faintly, had a moment to feel sick with terror, and then everything went black.

*

‘...What did the Tsar say?’

‘Only that I need to get him under hand faster. As though this process is ever speedy. It wasn’t with *me.*’

‘I wasn’t there for that part. It’s hard to believe that he was like you used to be. You’ve talked about it but until tonight it was hard to imagine. It’s *still* hard to imagine.’

Jack made a faint, pained sound. His throat hurt. He felt exhausted. He knew he was lying down, and from the soft barrier at his right, he knew he was on a sofa.

A parade, and then the after-party, and *then*- 

Jack’s eyes widened and the ceiling seemed to fall upon him. Pitch’s ceiling. He was in his lounge. He closed his eyes, flinched, gasped:

‘Is the Disciplinarian okay?’

‘You don’t remember?’ that was Pitch. Jack turned and let his eyes open just a bit. His vision was still blurring. There were two Pitch’s.

‘Did I hurt him?’

‘You *tried,*’ Pitch said. ‘The balcony you were on had turned brittle from your ice. Instead of aiming accurately at him, you broke off the section you were on and fell. You don’t remember?’

‘He said something about the tower,’ Jack said, shaking his head. A headache crested and he stopped moving. ‘Is he really okay? Am I going to be sent to him?’

He felt fractious, and took a moment then to just hold his breath and focus on not crying because that would be the final straw. He couldn’t even feel the darkness now. It was as dormant as it ever was.

‘I thought it was gone,’ Jack whispered, when he could trust his voice.

Anton appeared behind Pitch, his hair a neon green blur, holding a glass of clear liquid. Jack reeled back from it, thinking it was more of all the drinks they’d been wanting to give him. All those nobles pressing glasses into his hands, promising him he’d like it.

‘It’s just water,’ Anton said, and then passed it to Pitch. Anton looked concerned, he offered a
smile that was more of a grimace.

A wave of nausea and Jack sank back to the sofa, groaning and pressing the back of his hand to his head. The ice was glorious.

‘You got him drunk,’ Pitch hissed, sounding furious then.

‘Not us, comrade,’ Anton said. ‘I might find it hard to believe he was like you used to be, but I know better than to get him wasted. We gave him the light stuff, Eva made him drink it slowly. We wanted him buzzed, not...this. Do you think the Tsar knew what he was doing?’

‘Surprisingly, no. He thinks this sort of thing is easy to manage. I’ve never much indicated otherwise. He would have assumed Jack had that side of matters under control by now. What an absolute mess of a day.’

Jack listened, glad they weren’t peppering him with questions. Pitch had only said ‘do you remember?’ twice, and didn’t seem all that bothered that Jack hadn’t actually responded.

‘Pitch?’ Jack said, ‘I didn’t hurt him? The Disciplinarian?’

‘You can’t call me that,’ Pitch said, though his protest was weak. Jack thought he’d probably keep on calling him Pitch anyway. Everyone else did.

‘He’s not hurt,’ Anton said, focusing on the part of the question that Jack actually wanted answered.

‘Is he mad?’

‘Just surprised,’ Anton continued. ‘He’s in the older guard like Pitch, so he knows a bit of what you’re dealing with at least. You’re not getting sent to him.’

Jack nodded, feeling sleep beckon. He thought he should wake up properly and make sure the Tsar wasn’t mad either. But he knew the Tsar would be mad. He’d have that disappointed face. Which was the same as the whole of Lune being disappointed in him, even if none of the other citizens knew it yet.

Jack wasn’t as strong as the Tsar believed him to be. The thought of it bedded down as a strong, suffocating ache in his chest. He didn’t want to think about how upset Pitch was. Jack had been avoiding the darkness in training. He knew Pitch hadn’t wanted him to do that.

A soft sigh, and Jack curled onto his side, shutting the world out. He was glad that the darkness inside of him couldn’t really do anything once he was asleep.

* *

Much later, Jack heard voices and this time stayed still and thought strongly about sleep again. He wanted to sleep again.

‘I should have followed or something,’ Anton said.

‘It wasn’t your fault, Anton. It’s beyond clear that the Tsar wants him for himself somehow, or wishes him to become a spy.’

‘I absolutely should have followed and stayed nearby. The Tsar barely cares I exist. He wouldn’t have sent me away as he did you. I regret I’ve been a rather poor date to the boy,’ Anton replied.
A pause, and then:

‘Date?’ Pitch hissed it, keeping his voice quiet.

‘Of course,’ Anton said. ‘He’s beautiful. Don’t tell me you don’t see it?’

‘He’s- He’s a trainee.’

‘So?’ Anton laughed quietly. ‘Also you’re incorrect, he’s not a trainee. He may not be a fully-fledged Golden Warrior, but that doesn’t matter, does it? He’s of age and he’s very sweet. Are you seriously telling me you find him sorely ugly? What, does his visage cause you pain?’

‘Yes,’ Pitch said flatly. ‘But not for the reasons you state.’

‘Your cynicism is so inspiring. Have you given up on everything at this point?’

‘No,’ Pitch said.

Another long pause, and then Anton added in an undertone:

‘Seraphina aside.’

Pitch said nothing at all then, and after a while, Anton swore and then muttered something under his breath.

‘You can’t keep going on like this, friend. You just can’t.’

‘I’d thank you to stay quiet about it.’

‘I know things look bad right now, but things aren’t over. You’re still the Royal Admiral. The Golden Warriors look up to you like crazy. Those folks would give their lives to you and then some. Even tonight you handled well. The excuse you gave – an accident because of Jack’s ice, since he’s still getting the hang of his powers – telling everyone that balcony needed some work anyway. Bunny went along with it, right?’

‘Anton, I’m tired,’ Pitch said.

‘Yes, rousing speeches are not what you need right now. I’m going to go out there and find Eva. Just, go easy on him.’

‘No,’ Pitch said. ‘That’s not my job. That doesn’t sound like me. Have you learned nothing of my character at all?’

Though Pitch sounded cold, Anton still laughed, and then he sighed.

‘Leave it to me then. I think he’s pretty. I think Eva thinks he’s a little bit like a lost rabbit or something. But you know how she looks at the twinks. It’s like a fox that’s caught movement in the undergrowth. Actually you do that sometimes. I thought you used to like twinks.’

A long silence and then Anton said:

‘You can’t hold a torch for Fyodor forever.’

‘I’m not holding it,’ Pitch said. ‘I’ve destroyed it. I’m not interested in burning any kind of flame for anyone, ever again. I have my responsibilities and the people I care for, and that’s that. It’s a closed door.’
‘It’s a sad day when your daughter’s tales are more right about the world than you are.’

‘Anton, you are dismissed,’ Pitch bit out.

Jack waited for what would be said next, but instead he heard soft footsteps as Anton walked out of the room and closed the door quietly behind him. Then, the sound of Pitch sitting somewhere nearby. Maybe the armchair Jack had seen him in before.

He wanted to think about everything he’d just heard, but he was already slipping towards sleep again. Whatever he’d had to drink throughout the night had been strong. He suspected the darkness, when it came forth, had used up the rest of his resources. Jack didn’t feel like he’d had much left to spare in the first place.

*And it’s still there. Even now. Even when I can’t tell.*

Jack shuddered and curled in on himself, his fingers digging into his chest. He could hardly feel it through the layers of fabric he wore. Maybe that was a good thing. If his fingers touched skin, he wasn’t sure he’d be able to stop himself from trying to claw out all the wrong inside of himself.
A Different Way

Chapter Notes

Note: It has come to my attention that notifications didn't go out to everyone for chapter 15. PLEASE check to see you've read the after party chapter before reading this one, it obviously won't make much sense otherwise.

New tags: Hypnosis.

I have no idea how people are going to feel about this chapter. O.O No sense of it at all. I'm... just gonna throw it out there and see what happens.

A servant woke Jack early in the morning and guided Jack back to his own room, where he’d managed to get the light blue cape off his shoulders and then fallen asleep face first on the embroidered quilt. He thought fuzzily that this was the room of a boy who Pitch had loved. His very last thought was:

*My life is so weird now.*

He woke with a splitting headache, running to the bathroom to throw up bile and alcohol that burned. Jack wiped at his mouth, and drank cold water straight from the faucet, gasping as he tried to keep more heaving at bay. Parts of the night were a blur.

The Tsar had just left him with all those nobles. Jack had embarrassed himself, he’d attacked Bunnymund. He’d attacked the Disciplinarian.

‘Yeah,’ Jack muttered to himself as he stripped off in preparation for what he hoped would be the longest shower in his entire life, ‘he’s gonna go so light on you the next time you see him. Probably carve that whip down to your spine or something. Crap.’

He managed to steal about a minute of pure peace while he was in the shower, under warm water that felt truly hot, even though he knew it wasn’t. He let it slick down his hair and began to wash himself, only to hit a sore point on his hips. When he looked down, he saw a large black bruise and his forehead creased.

Pitch had said he’d fallen. He’d cracked the balcony and fallen.

Jack inventoried the damage. There wasn’t much. A few big, opaque bruises that looked nasty and likely went to the bone, and one graze where he must have hit the ground directly. Otherwise, he’d taken way worse, and he dismissed it.

But it was harder to dismiss the troubling thoughts that chased their tails in his brain.

In the end, the shower didn’t last as long as he wanted. The warm water couldn’t melt the ice that was forming on the tiles fast enough, and Jack exited the shower casting an abashed look at the drain he’d iced over.

*
The etiquette tutors came, and not two minutes later, they all turned in surprise when Pitch entered, pinning the tutors with a disapproving gaze.

‘You are all dismissed today,’ Pitch said, waving his hand at them as though the fact that they hadn’t already left was annoying.

One opened her mouth to protest – the one who always smacked Jack’s wrists and left him with bruises – but then wisely closed it. They all hurried out. Jack fleetingly wished he could join them.

For a long moment, Jack felt the weight of Pitch’s gaze on him. Jack couldn’t read his expression at all.

‘Am I in trouble?’ Jack said. ‘After yesterday?’

‘I’m surprised you’re not more hungover.’

‘Oh,’ Jack said, rubbing at the back of his neck. ‘Well, y’know, throwing up all that crap probably helped a bit. I have a headache, but it’s nothing.’

‘Is that so?’ Pitch said, as though the headache might be more than nothing.

‘Yeah,’ Jack said, frowning. ‘I can handle it. If we’re training, I can train.’

‘I don’t doubt that,’ Pitch said, with a faint smile. ‘We’re doing a different kind of training today. Leave your sword. Leave your staff. Follow me.’

‘Yep,’ Jack said, smoothing his hands down his shirt nervously. ‘Gotcha.’

Jack saw him rolling his eyes even as he turned away. Maybe the lack of formal title still annoyed him. Maybe it was something else.

*I’m never going to understand him.*

Even after listening in on his conversations with Anton, Jack was only aware of how much he was missing. Pitch had been in love with Fyodor, and Fyodor had died. So Seraphina and Pitch both missed him, though it seemed like Seraphina couldn’t really talk to her father about it.

It was obvious that Anton was not only worried about Jack, but also Pitch.

*He’s probably worried about everyone. You don’t become that brave without wanting to protect people.*

Jack veered towards the training arena, before realising that Pitch wasn’t going that way. Jack changed direction straight away, then focused on trying to memorise the number of doors they passed through, because he knew that Pitch would expect him to remember.

Eventually they slowed down a long, narrow corridor. Jack resisted the urge to roll his eyes. Whoever had created this place didn’t do it with anything like common sense. Jack thought if there were ever a place where he’d open a door to a wall, or find a staircase to nowhere, it’d be here.

Then Pitch pulled a black key from his pocket and inserted it into the lock of a black door.

It swung creakily open into a space that was just opaque darkness. It reminded Jack of the mountain, and he stepped back, staring at it.

Pitch walked straight into the dark, vanishing, and then a moment later lights flared to life along
the rim of a circular room with a domed roof. The tiles were black. The walls were made of the
same tiles. The ceiling curved over them and might have been a deep blue, but it was hard to tell.

‘Oh,’ Jack said, craning his neck without taking another step forward. ‘Crossholt talked about
these. I’m not- You- We’re going to be in here?’

‘Come in,’ Pitch said, waiting by the door and the panel that controlled the lighting. Jack stared,
knowing that Pitch could plunge them into total darkness whenever he wanted. His heartbeat sped
up, but he swallowed and stepped forward anyway.

His boots echoed on the tiles. The room amplified everything. There wasn’t a shred of fabric to
muffle the sound of Jack’s breathing.

‘Just...thought I’d let you know I’m not a fan,’ Jack said, voice echoing.

‘I’ll leave the lights on,’ Pitch said. ‘It’s a tad too early in your training to plunge you into the dark
just yet.’

‘Oh, thank the Light,’ Jack said, even as Pitch chuckled behind him. ‘Then- What are we doing
here?’

‘Meditating,’ Pitch said calmly. ‘Specifically, you’ll be meditating. I want to know what you recall
before blacking out.’

‘You can just ask me,’ Jack said nervously.

‘You’ll lie,’ Pitch said, closing the black door and walking deeper into the room, pointing to where
he wanted Jack to no doubt sit.

‘I might not lie,’ Jack said.

‘You’re lying right now,’ Pitch said. ‘For someone who is terrible at it, you do it a frightful
amount. Likely more than even you realise.’

‘So I’m a liar now?’ Jack said, sitting down and crossing his legs, looking around the room and
hoping that the lights didn’t suddenly go out. Jack’s hip hurt where the bruise and graze was, but it
wasn’t terrible.

‘If the shoe fits,’ Pitch said, lowering himself in one smooth, graceful movement. Jack wondered
how often he meditated. It had to be a lot.

Jack folded his hands in his lap, he picked at his fingers. Pitch stared at him steadily, with that
weird golden gaze. Even on a stone floor, sitting before him, he just looked tall and aristocratic. It
wasn’t fair.

It’s crazy intimidating.

And meditation? It had never been Jack’s strong suit. He knew how to do all the right things with
his breathing, but then he’d just let his thoughts wander while everyone else focused on mantras or
‘perfect nothingness’ or whatever. He’d even imagined doing stuff with the Royal Admiral.

The Royal Admiral who was sitting right in front of him.

Can’t think about that anymore.

Jack stared down at the black tiles and hated that the stutter in his breathing was so much louder
than usual.

His line of sight was interrupted when Pitch presented him with a vial of golden liquid. Jack squinted at it, and then took it carefully, reminding himself not to freeze it accidentally.

‘Drink it,’ Pitch said quietly.

‘Is this like...the mountain?’ Jack said, clearing his throat. He looked up and Pitch’s face was unreadable. Jack looked down at the liquid, turning the glass vial in his fingers and seeing that it clung like oil.

‘It will make you more suggestible,’ Pitch said calmly.

It wasn’t strange for the Royal Military to administer drugs to their soldiers. To help them in battle. To help them meditate. To make them pliant, or afraid, or willing. They were fighting a supernatural enemy, and they used whatever was at their disposal to make their soldiers better.

Jack normally didn’t mind, but after the night he’d had, he could feel his heart trip over itself. He almost gagged.

‘Can we- Can we try it first without this?’ Jack said, closing his fingers over the vial and knowing that it was stupid. This was the Royal Admiral, he couldn’t just-

‘If you like,’ Pitch said. Jack looked up in surprise, but still couldn’t pick Pitch’s expression. He didn’t look irritated or impatient or anything. ‘But you aren’t inclined to be honest about this, and if I sense you’re lying to me, you will take it.’

‘Is it really that important?’ Jack said. But then he shook his head to ward off Pitch’s response, because he knew that it was. He’d attacked the Disciplinarian, he’d broken a part of the Palace. He’d done it all during a great party of nobles and soldiers. He could have killed someone. He could have killed a lot of people.

Pitch thankfully didn’t rub it in, and Jack set the vial down on the tiles. He had to try and not lie about things he didn’t even want to think about.

No problem. Dealing with Crossholt was way worse.

‘Okay,’ Jack said. ‘What do you need me to do?’

‘There is a circle,’ Pitch said evenly, his voice deepening, ‘with a golden dot in the centre.’

Right, Jack thought, seeing it immediately. Induction technique.

He was familiar with this, though he hadn’t done it much. In the beginning, when he was a child and then a young teen, they used it a lot. Usually in the rigours of testing to figure out what everyone in the creche would end up doing. The sessions always left him a bit muzzy, and Jack was surprised Pitch wanted him to take the golden oil on top of this. It wasn’t really necessary. Did Pitch think he was that likely to lie?

He saw the circle – which in his mind was always black – and the spot of light in the centre that glowed and pulsed in his mind’s eye. Immediately, his breathing began to slow. Pitch didn’t even need to ask. Jack’s body knew the steps innately. First his eyelids would relax, and then his jaw and his forehead and his neck, and then his fingers would fall into a loose curl in his lap and he would feel as though he were sinking and looking up at the light as though from a great distance.
'That’s very good,’ Pitch said slowly and with a warmth that Jack wasn’t used to. Maybe he was imagining it.

Pitch occasionally asked him to slow his breathing further, or coaxed him to fall deeper within himself. Sometimes he offered gentle praise or reminded Jack to stay with his focus on the pulse of light.

But this wasn’t like a standard breathing exercise where he was supposed to enter profound emptiness and become aware of his smallness and hugeness in the universe at the same time. It was easier to have something to focus on, and Pitch – unlike Crossholt – seemed to know exactly when to encourage Jack to push further, and his interruptions never startled.

‘I am going to ask you some questions now, Jack, and whatever feelings you have in response – they cannot touch you. They are far away. Even further than the light. Clouds on another planet.’

‘Another planet,’ Jack echoed, his voice slurring.

‘Nothing can hurt you, while you stay focused on that point of light.’

Jack would have nodded, but his body felt tremendously heavy, as though he was part of the black tiles and domed like the roof above him.

The tired part of Jack’s mind – pushed to the background – knew that the hard questions were going to start soon. There were flickers of worry in the understorey of his thoughts. Easy to ignore, but there nonetheless.

‘Jack, do you ever have bad dreams about the living Darkness?’ Pitch said.

Jack hesitated, vaguely aware that it wasn’t the question he’d expected.

‘Remember,’ Pitch continued, ‘nothing can hurt you, here. It is easy to answer these questions, and once your answers are free, you will feel lighter. It’s okay, Jack.’

Jack nodded. He hung onto the question and formed a response.

‘After Pippa,’ Jack said, his voice not quite as slurred as before. It was easier to speak, even though he still felt very distant from himself. ‘I had a lot. Then nothing, and then again in the Barracks.’

‘Was it like a bad dream in the mountain?’ Pitch said, his voice modulated and careful.

‘It was just confusing,’ Jack said. ‘They’d given us so much stuff. And the Darkness wasn’t what I expected it to be. Pippa was there. And she talked to me. Sometimes the Darkness made her say mean things, but then it was just her sometimes too. Not saying mean things. It was like she’d really come back.’

Jack had a brief flash to being pinned down on the mountain after his initiation, and Pitch not letting Jack go back to get to her.

‘You didn’t let me save her,’ Jack added, thinking that he should feel more upset. He knew, somewhere, how hurt he was about that. It was too far away to matter. ‘She asked me if I was ready to let her go. She told me to be brave.’

‘And after the mountain,’ Pitch said, like he was telling a story, ‘when you emerged, you tried to attack the Golden Warriors who saved you and your friend. What were you feeling?’
‘They had their weapons out,’ Jack said. ‘After all that time of us in the mountain, and instead of welcoming us, they had their weapons out. I was... I was mad.’

‘That’s very good,’ Pitch said, and Jack frowned, not sure why that response felt so different to what he’d been expecting. ‘Jack, that’s very good. Remember, none of this can hurt you. It’s already happened, and it’s very far away. Are you still focused on that point of light?’

Was he? Jack felt himself concentrating and seeing it again. He nodded a moment later. Pitch offered a warm sound of approval, almost a hum.

‘When was the next time you felt mad like that?’ Pitch said. ‘Like when you tried to attack the Golden Warriors?’

Jack felt like his memories were speeding up, and then they froze around a moment. Around something Pitch had said to him, all that time ago.

‘I didn’t put you on the bottom of the callout list on a whim’ Jack said, mimicking Pitch’s words on that day. ‘And then I attacked you.’

‘With the ice,’ Pitch said. ‘You didn’t blackout then?’

‘I remember all of it,’ Jack said. ‘It doesn’t feel like me. But it also feels like me. I would have really hurt you.’

‘I know,’ Pitch said.

‘And you just smiled at me, like it was a joke.’

Jack wanted to feel something, but he couldn’t even grasp at the outrage he’d felt in those healing tents. Still, his hands twitched in his lap. There was a flickering of something inside of him, and he made a faint noise.

‘Jack,’ Pitch said, his voice closer than before, ‘you’re safe here. I’m not going to mock you, and you’re not going to be hurt. Remember how far these feelings are?’

‘Another planet,’ Jack murmured.

‘When was the next time you wanted to attack someone like that?’ Pitch said.

‘On the mountain,’ Jack said, because he knew – could almost see these moments like a string of events. Every place where the darkness had clawed to life inside of him was like a little black bauble weighing the string of time down. But it was contained, and he could look into it without being touched by it.

‘When on the mountain?’

‘You wouldn’t let me go back to Pippa.’

‘When I held you down on the ice?’ Pitch said. ‘In the beginning?’

‘No,’ Jack said slowly. ‘Not then. I was just desperate then. It was a bit after. I was still pinned, and you told me to get up and go after her, and you knew I couldn’t. I hated you. I would have killed you.’

‘I don’t doubt that,’ Pitch said. ‘But you didn’t attack me, did you?’
‘No,’ Jack said, frowning. Was that important?

A long silence then, followed by the sound of words being written. Jack wasn’t sure how Pitch had a notepad, and he didn’t really care. He focused on that point of light within the black circle, and let his body feel too heavy to move.

‘Why didn’t you attack me, Jack?’ Pitch said.

‘I couldn’t,’ Jack said.

‘Why didn’t you attack me?’ Pitch said again.

Jack twitched, and peered closer into that swirling blackness, contained in its little bauble.

‘I didn’t get that far,’ Jack said, feeling like that was a better answer. ‘I was scared as shit.’

A quiet huff that could have been amusement, and more writing sounds.

‘Scared of me?’ Pitch said.

‘Scared of me,’ Jack said. ‘Of how wrong I am. Of how wrong I...’

Jack’s words choked up in his throat and he was fleetingly annoyed that he was feeling something. His feelings were meant to be far away.

*Clouds on another planet.*

‘Finish the sentence please,’ Pitch said quietly.

‘I don’t want to,’ Jack said. His words were slow and sounded unaffected, but there was a stubborn knot inside of him. He fixed on the bright spot of light and watched it pulse.

‘Finish the sentence, Jack,’ Pitch said. ‘Nothing will hurt you here. Not even you.’

Jack wanted to disagree, but those feelings floated away. He stayed with the light, the black circle, and found a calm place again.

‘Of how wrong I’ve always been,’ Jack said. Pitch was right, he felt very little at all now.

‘Wrong about what?’

‘Made wrong,’ Jack whispered. ‘Just...made wrong.’

Another silence, then more scribbling sounds. Then:

‘That’s very good, Jack. Thank you.’

‘You’re welcome,’ Jack said, dazed. Pitch chuckled then, and sighed, and then asked:

‘So you haven’t always been blacking out when you’ve felt like attacking people since the mountain, have you?’

‘No,’ Jack said, glad to be talking about this again, instead of that other thing. ‘It was strong, like a rush of something, like that feeling before you’re going to puke, it just comes and you can’t stop it. But then I would stop it. Like fighting something down.’

‘When was the first time it felt different?’ Pitch said. ‘When it was harder to fight down? Or when
it affected you differently?"

‘After I’d been alone,’ Jack said, remembering how it had felt, locked in Fyodor’s room. ‘I thought maybe I’d been forgotten, or left there on purpose. Or maybe it was like an Asylum and people were waiting for me to die. Or maybe I was being starved on purpose. And then you came, and it was the Darkness that attacked the Palace and I didn’t know, and then you told me not to think about how I could have died because I’d been forgotten.’

Jack didn’t want to get much closer to that memory. He’d attacked Pitch. He hadn’t been able to keep it under control then. That was when the malice inside had felt like a friend, and then he’d run, and then- and then Crossholt.

‘I don’t want to talk about this,’ Jack said, his mouth dry.

‘All right, we’ll take a quick break, because you’re doing so well,’ Pitch said. ‘Can you tell me that? That you’re doing well?’

‘I’m...doing well?’ Jack echoed, confused.

‘Very well,’ Pitch said, his voice firm. So it wasn’t a question.

*Are you sure?*

After that, Jack was reminded to focus on the light, the circle. He was reminded to focus on his breathing and it seemed like Pitch was leading him back through all the initial stages of induction all over again.

When it was done, Jack felt calm again, and his breathing was even slower than before.

‘We’re going to talk about Crossholt,’ Pitch said. ‘But if you want this to be even easier, you can drink something sweet. Do you want that?’

Jack almost felt the vial in his hands again and he shook his head. He was dimly surprised to hear Pitch writing notes then, because it seemed like he hadn’t written anything for a while.

‘I want you to tell me how you felt when you ran from the Palace,’ Pitch said gently. ‘After you attacked me. Were you aware of your thoughts then?’

Jack nodded. ‘I thought that no one wanted me anyway, and I didn’t want to die. So I left.’

‘How often have you felt like people are going to kill you, or want to kill you, since the mountain?’

‘Lots,’ Jack said, shrugging. ‘I didn’t pass. I’m not a Warrior. They always told me that’s what would happen.’

‘They? Can you give me an example of someone who told you this?’

‘Crossholt,’ Jack whispered.

‘Ah,’ Pitch said, and then he sighed again, and Jack wondered if Pitch should be focusing on his breathing in here too. He seemed to be doing that a bit.

A long silence, and then Pitch said:

‘When you ran, you managed to fly. What was that like?’
‘So, so cool,’ Jack said. ‘But also another reminder that I came out wrong. Or worse than before. And then I thought if I wasn’t possessed, then the evil must be inside me, or that the darkness was me. And I was upset.’

‘So you flew to the Barracks. Why?’

‘I think I wanted Jamie,’ Jack said, frowning. ‘I wasn’t thinking much. I just wanted a friend, I guess. I didn’t know I was going there until I landed.’

‘Do you think the darkness took you there?’ Pitch said.

‘No,’ Jack said. ‘I just wanted something that felt like home. And I didn’t really have one.’

A brief flash of awareness, a sudden sense that he didn’t want the Royal Admiral knowing these things about him. But then it flicked away quickly, like a feather in a sharp breeze.

‘And then Crossholt was there,’ Pitch said carefully. ‘How did that make you feel?’

‘Scared,’ Jack said. That question was easy. ‘He said that it had gone wrong, and asked if I’d escaped. I just kept getting more scared and then it was like I ran out of fear and then there was just... fury.’

‘Did anything stand out in your mind when the fury came?’

‘My scars hurt,’ Jack said. ‘On my back. I just kept thinking about how bad they were. I thought it with the Disciplinarian last night too. It was one of the last things I thought about.’

‘Thank you, Jack. That’s very helpful. Do you remember thinking anything else with Crossholt?’

‘I asked him why he hated me so much,’ Jack said. ‘And then my vision got blurry. And I started shaking. And he said I should have died in the mountain. And then he came at me.’

‘You remember that?’ Pitch said. When Jack nodded, he said: ‘Do you remember anything else?’

‘Not well,’ Jack said. ‘Fighting. I fought him. But I don’t remember wanting to put ice through his wrists. It just happened. And then Crossholt looked at me again and I knew he wouldn’t just detain me but he was going to kill me and I asked him to stop and—’

‘Jack, I want you to focus on your breathing now,’ Pitch said. ‘That’s it. Slower breaths. Where’s the point of light?’

‘Oh, it’s above me,’ Jack said. He’d forgotten.

‘Are you focusing on it now?’

Jack nodded, and then he made a faint sound when he felt warm fingers touching his left wrist.

‘You’re doing very, very well,’ Pitch said.

Jack swallowed, nodded, but couldn’t make himself say it. He focused on the light and his breathing instead. With time, that sense of urgency and desperation that had built inside of him melted away. He felt his shoulders slump.

‘Jack, I’m going to ask you to go back into that memory now, but those feelings can’t hurt you here. They’re in the past, and they’re very, very far away. Okay?’
‘Okay,’ Jack said.

‘You asked him to stop, because you knew he was going to kill you. Then how did you feel?’

‘Scared,’ Jack said weakly. ‘He knew all the moves I did, and I couldn’t fight him the right way.’

‘Are you saying that the darkness wasn’t ruling your actions then?’

‘No,’ Jack said. ‘And it was so hard to hold it back, and hold my ice back, and then fight at the same time when he knew so much more than me. I know I’m supposed to die. But I didn’t want to. It was the only thing I had left. And it just- I just needed him to know just once, just once what it felt like. To be scared all the time. Like that.’

The memory went blank then and Jack sighed at the nothingness that followed. The hanging gap where he wasn’t aware of anything at all.

‘That’s the first time I blacked out,’ Jack said. ‘I came to and I was on the ground, and Crossholt was dead.’

Jack didn’t feel anything at all.

‘It helped me,’ Jack said. ‘And it wanted to help me last night.’

‘The darkness?’

‘Yeah. I thought it was my enemy. But it doesn’t seem to be. Does that mean I’m the enemy? Because it wants to be my friend?’

‘No, that’s not what it means,’ Pitch said soothingly. ‘We’re going to stop soon. You’ve had enough today. And you can rest afterwards. No training this afternoon. But first I just have a few more questions for you, all right?’

‘Yeah,’ Jack said.

‘The way you felt with Crossholt, and the Disciplinarian last night - have you ever felt this way around the Tsar?’ Pitch said.

‘No,’ Jack said immediately. ‘Never. He’s nice to me.’

‘Mm,’ Pitch said. More writing. ‘Have you ever felt this way around Seraphina? Servants? Anyone else?’

‘No,’ Jack said, shaking his head. ‘Just those Warriors after the mountain, and you, and the Disciplinarian, and Crossholt. Seraphina’s just a child.’

‘What if she made you angry?’ Pitch said.

‘She’s just a child,’ Jack said, confused.

Pitch’s fingers shifted and curled around Jack’s hand gently. Jack thought it was nice and weird. And Pitch’s skin was so warm.

‘And after Crossholt, you’ve worked very hard to keep the darkness away, haven’t you?’

‘Yeah,’ Jack said. ‘It’s not like on the mountain, where it came up all the time.’
'But where you could often control it,' Pitch said. 

'Yeah,' Jack nodded. 'It’s not like then. It’s different now.'

'When was the first time you felt it yesterday? Was it with the Disciplinarian?'

'No,' Jack said, feeling exhausted. 'It was during the parade. Everyone made their Light all at once. And it was there. In my throat.'

'That must have been hard,' Pitch said.

'I guess,' Jack said. 'I kept it under control.'

'Was that the last time you felt it before the Disciplinarian?'

'No,' Jack said. 'I was- It was- They kept giving me things to drink and the Tsar left me alone with them.' There was a hiss of breath, like Pitch was going to say something, but he was silent, so Jack continued. 'Everything got blurry and I needed some air and I could feel it inside me then. Nothing specific made it happen. It was just *there*. And I knew if I got outside I could make it go away.'

'And what happened once you were outside?'

'I had air, but I was afraid, and I kept seeing images. Crossholt dead, and other people, like I’d already attacked them. I’d imagined hurting all the loud people in the Palace. I could already see the blood and the- and the ice.'

Jack paused. Even now it was so clear, though he felt so distant from it.

'I knew it would feel good,' Jack whispered. 'If I did it.'

'Did it feel good with Crossholt?'

'For a moment,' Jack said. 'I’m sorry.'

'It’s okay,' Pitch said, his thumb stroking the outside of Jack’s wrist. 'That’s fine. It’s normal.'

'It’s not normal.'

'It’s normal to feel good when you stop someone or something from hurting you. Even if you have to hurt them in turn. Whether it’s vengeance, or righteous anger, or smug satisfaction, or joy. It’s normal.'

'I murdered someone.'

'You were fighting for your life, and you succeeded in defending yourself. It’s *normal* to feel good about that, *and* it’s normal to feel terrible about it.'

'Huh,' Jack said, thinking that might be something to ponder later.

'Indeed,' Pitch said. 'What happened after the images you were seeing?'

'I started to get it under control,' Jack said. 'And the wind was there and it was helping. But then it was like- It was like a negotiation. And I thought if I could just do it a little bit, I’d feel okay. If I could just let it out a little. Not properly. In a way that was *safe*. I knew I couldn’t, but I just wanted to hurt- I wanted to hurt someone. And then the Disciplinarian came.'
‘And then?’

‘I started to panic,’ Jack said. He almost laughed, but even laughter was far away from him. ‘I didn’t realise he made me feel like that.’

‘He’s hurt you quite badly.’

‘Yeah, but I didn’t realise it was a thing. It’s not like he’s never hurt me without a reason. I always deserve it. But I couldn’t control my breathing, and he could tell. He didn’t even want to hurt me. He was being nice.’

‘And then?’

‘He was nice, and told me we could go for a walk or something and then he said we could go to his Tower and I felt the scars on my back and then the darkness told me it would deal with everything and that was- that was the last thing I remember.’

‘It spoke to you?’

‘Yeah,’ Jack said, feeling like he’d lanced something infected now that he’d actually said it aloud. He didn’t feel good, exactly, but no one was yelling at him, and his body felt heavy and calm. ‘Yeah. It just said ‘let us deal with it’ and I thought that sounded like a pretty good idea, since I was doing a shit job at dealing with it. Except it didn’t really do a good job either, did it?’

‘It did not. We’re so close to the end now, Jack. You’ve done so very well. Just one more thing – a quick clarification. Are you saying that you were dealing with the darkness, on and off, for several hours – during the parade and afterwards in the Palace – before you blacked out?’

‘Yeah, pretty much,’ Jack said.

Writing sounds, and then Pitch was talking again, each sentence designed to bring Jack closer to some kind of relaxed awareness.

Pitch’s touch slid away, and Jack missed it for a moment. Then, in a rush, he opened his eyes and winced at the lights all around the circular room. All the feelings he’d kept at bay crept back, the first among them nausea.

He remembered everything that he’d told Pitch. Everything.

For a moment he was too numb to move. He knew induction techniques were supposed to coax honest responses but in the past they’d only ever asked him about safe things. This was the first time it had ever been used to bring things out of him that Jack hadn’t ever wanted anyone to know.

He couldn’t believe some of the things Pitch had pulled out of him, and Jack had a sudden sense of betrayal.

You weren’t supposed to find out about these things. I don’t even think about these things!

‘Take a breath,’ Pitch said, watching him as though he hadn’t just ripped all those truths out of Jack.

‘I’m going,’ Jack said, pushing himself upright and then stumbling. All his bruises flared to life and he couldn’t stop the sound of pain. His body didn’t feel quite like his own yet. It still felt heavy and a part of the room.
Pitch muttered something under his breath and then stood quickly, reaching out as though to grasp at Jack’s elbow to support him.

‘No!’ Jack said, the word echoing sharply until it felt like he’d be hearing it forever. He jerked away, his breathing ragged. ‘I’m going.’

‘Jack,’ Pitch said, and Jack could just hear the exasperation in his voice. All that gentle calm gone now that he wasn’t tricking all those things out of Jack. He hated what Pitch had done.

He made a point of walking back and stomping on it. Glass cracked, the oil oozed over the tiles.

‘Jack,’ Pitch said, and Jack was tired of hearing Pitch say his name over and over. It was a technique, he knew. But that didn’t mean he had to like it.

‘You said there was no training today. So I don’t have to have anything else to do with you until tomorrow, yeah?’ Jack said, glaring at him.

Pitch’s eyes widened, and then he looked like he was going to argue. But his shoulders sagged and he gestured towards the door.

‘Can you remember your way back?’ Pitch said, and Jack thought he sounded a little snippy. Like he had any reason to be.

‘If I can’t, I’ll flag a servant or something, like everyone tells me to do. Hope you got what you were looking for out of whatever that was.’

With that, Jack walked out and slammed the black door behind him. It wasn’t until he was halfway down the corridor that he realised he could feel it – the darkness inside of him. It had been there the entire time. It swirled and beckoned, and Jack rubbed at his face in disgust and forced it away.

He made his way back to his rooms with the help of a servant. He’d remembered most of the way, apparently, but just missed a right turn.

There he stood, looking towards the glass windows. It wasn’t even lunchtime yet. It felt like it had taken hours and hours but the sun wasn’t even high in the sky.

Jack picked up his staff and then leaned against it, closing his eyes. The things he remembered saying. About being made wrong, about not having a home, about how it had felt good to kill Crossholt.

He sat on his bed in a daze and when the lunch cart came, he’d come to something of a decision.

‘Hey,’ Jack said, and the servant startled and then stared at him. It was the kid who couldn’t have been any older than fourteen. ‘What’s your name?’

‘My name? Sir?’ the boy said. Then his cheeks coloured and he lifted the cloches while shaking his head. ‘Feliks.’

‘Are you allowed to take messages for me? Get them to people?’

‘I’ll have to clear it with the matron, but then, I don’t see why not, Sir. Are you sure you want me? There are others who have more experience.’

‘You seem cool,’ Jack said. He wished he said it with more enthusiasm, but even his weak smile was enough to have the boy beam back.
‘What’s the message?’ Feliks said.

‘Oh, right.’ Jack slid off the bed and walked to the chest of drawers near it, and pulled out the small card he’d been given. ‘Can you go to this address and see when tailor Flitmouse is free? This evening? Or maybe tomorrow evening?’

‘Is there something not right with your clothing?’ Feliks said, looking him over with an unexpectedly critical eye. Jack shook his head, looked down at himself.

‘Nah, nothing like that. Just- Might go and see him later.’

_Since I’m allowed to leave the damned Palace._

‘Really? _Flitmouse_?’

‘Yeah,’ Jack said, laughing. He recalled telling Flitmouse that he was bad at making friends, and he wondered if that was why Feliks looked so shocked.

‘Oh, well, of course, Sir. Of course I can do that. My shift ends after lunch. And then I’m back on the night shift anyway, so I can get you a message back.’

Feliks bowed quickly, and Jack opened his mouth to say it wasn’t necessary, but he must’ve said it about ten times already and they never listened to him.

As Feliks walked briskly away, Jack remembered something else.

‘Feliks?’ Jack called. ‘You wouldn’t be able to bring me some tea? Like, some good tea? Um, not brewed for me but like, in a package? For Flitmouse?’

Feliks turned and bowed again in acknowledgement, and then he was gone.

Jack let himself fall back on the bed and he stared up at the ceiling. He had no idea how it was going to go, leaving the Palace without an escort for the first time since he’d fled. But he was tired of being at everyone’s beck and call. He wanted to feel like he had some secrets for himself, something that Pitch _wouldn’t_ know, for once.
Title may change at a later date. (It's gone through three changes so far, apparently I'm finicky). Okay! :D Also happy Thanksgiving to those who celebrate it (we don't, as it's like...Australia here), and I hope you all have a great weekend.

That evening, Jack set out from the Palace dressed in what was now his official uniform, complete with sky blue cape and white shirt. He wasn’t meant to leave without it, and he didn’t want to ruin his chances of leaving by trying to slink out in his black training clothes.

He had high quality tea in a brown paper bag, and he had his staff in his other hand. The stars were already in the sky, and Jack felt strange walking unescorted.

But no one stopped him within the Palace grounds. A few people wandering about even tipped their heads politely towards him.

He didn’t exit through the Palace gates, but through a smaller service gate, and even then the guard simply looked Jack up and down and then held the wrought iron open for him. Jack stumbled over a thanks, and the guard looked like he wasn’t used to anyone acknowledging him.

The centre of the City of Lune rose around him quickly. The cobblestones, the multistorey buildings that had shopfronts in the first floor and people living in the apartments above. It was busy, and Jack clutched his staff hard, because so many people kept looking at him.

He kept thinking back to what Pitch had done to him, and then he’d veer sharply away from it. The things he’d *said*. The things Pitch had *said* to him, and just to get information. The only time Pitch would ever probably be nice to him.

‘Excuse me?’ said a young boy – he couldn’t have been more than seven – dressed in a small three piece suit, his hair coiffed. ‘Are you Jack Frost?’

‘Yeah,’ Jack said, looking down at him, and then smiling at the mother who was walking up behind him. She had a basket over her forearm, with a wedge of cheese and some fancy bread, and then a whole lot of parcels and packages. ‘That’s me.’

‘You were in the parade,’ the boy said. ‘You made it snow!’

‘I did,’ Jack said. ‘See?’

He waved his staff, and only when it started snowing around them, did Jack realise that he probably shouldn’t have done that while it was still so busy.

‘Mama! Mama, look!’

‘I can see, darling. Make sure you don’t get any in your hair.’

But the boy was clutching at it all and laughing, and Jack couldn’t stop himself from smiling, and then chuckling along to the expression on the boy’s face. Even the mother seemed happy about it,
and held her hand out to catch some of the snow. She brought it to her nose and sniffed it, and then
rubbed it in her fingers, as though checking it was real.

‘You are a marvel,’ she said, looking down at him, beaming.

‘Thanks so much,’ Jack said, thinking that he was forgetting all the etiquette he’d been taught, but
if he tried to stay good-natured, they hopefully wouldn’t care much. ‘The Tsar says not everything
has to be so serious all the time. Sometimes we all need to have a little fun, don’t we?’

Another child approached, and then another, and Jack realised a small crowd was approaching.

‘Can you make the animals?’ another child said.

‘I can do them even better today, because you’re all here. Look!’

A frost rabbit bounded around their feet, and they laughed and pointed, and Jack looked at all the
people surrounded him. They all seemed happy. It didn’t matter that he was poor, or that he came
from the creches, or that they had so much more social standing than he did.

The Tsar was right, the people needed this.

Jack set off a flurry of rabbits, and there was a smattering of applause. Jack felt a strange prickle of
fear then, and looked around, expecting to be bombarded by questions like he had by those nobles
at the after-party.

Everyone was polite, however. They praised him and told him he was a wonder, while the children
said he was the most fun soldier they’d ever met, and that fun would definitely scare the Living
Darkness away.

_They all know who I am. And they like me._

Jack offered a grin and said:

‘Well, I should be off though. I have an appointment and I don’t wish to be late.’

There, he remembered something of how he was supposed to speak and everything.

‘Be well,’ said some of the others, and a few adults reached out to shake his hand.

The children shouted after him, and then were quickly quietened, because shouting was
unbecoming. But Jack turned around and winked and waved, and they waved vigorously back,
standing on their tiptoes as though that would somehow allow them to see even more of him – even
though they could see all of him.

Jack felt warm as he made his way to Flitmouse’s house.

It turned out that Flitmouse lived in one of the taller, ramshackle buildings, that looked like it had
seen multiple extensions and none of them designed to match the other. The shopfront had
darkened curtains that didn’t show any wares, and the sign said: _Glass and Fixtures and Other
Curiosities._

Jack peered at the list of names by the side door, and saw that Flitmouse lived in the attic. He
craned his neck, and then walked around to the back of the building down a narrow, dingy allow,
and began his walk up the stairs that had all seen better days.

At the top, where the sloping tiled roofing came down to Jack’s shins and he stood on some kind of
strange decking, he knocked on a dark wooden door.

It was yanked open immediately.

‘Late,’ Flitmouse said, looking Jack up and down. ‘And your uniform is rumpled. Do you not take better care of your clothing?’

‘Hello to you too,’ Jack said, rolling his eyes. Flitmouse wasn’t dressed as fancily as he was in the Palace, but even his clothing that he wore at home was formal and angular. And there were prints upon it again. This time, on his brown coat, a pattern of cats that was nothing like Jack had ever seen.


Jack walked into the attic, surprised at how large it was, and staring up in wonder at the windows that faced right up at the night sky. The stars winked at him clearly. Flitmouse waved to a small table with a circular top, that had only two chairs by it. Then he busied himself with a kettle that looked old and rusted. Jack blinked at it – for it looked like the kind of kettle he’d known even before the creche, when he and Pippa had a mother and father that he couldn’t remember clearly.

‘The tea?’ Flitmouse said, striding over. He frowned at the paper bag and Jack wasn’t sure what was wrong with it, so he just shrugged.

‘The servant – Feliks – said it was good.’

‘You didn’t buy it?’ Flitmouse said, looking put out.

‘I don’t have- I don’t have money to buy it,’ Jack said.

‘They’re paying you a stipend though,’ Flitmouse said dismissively. ‘You have money.’

‘Yeah,’ Jack said, watching Flitmouse withdraw the tin of tea and open the lid, sniffing carefully. He made a grumbling sound that wasn’t disapproval, but some grudging acceptance of the quality. Then he pushed his glasses back up the bridge of his nose and walked back over to the counter, pulling down two mismatching, frail cups and their saucers.

There were bolts of fabric everywhere. Jack assumed that the big lump beneath huge drapes of heavy damask could have been a sofa. He wondered when Flitmouse had last seen it.

‘I don’t know if I do have money,’ Jack said, frowning. ‘Are they paying me a stipend?’

‘They pay all Golden Warriors stipends,’ Flitmouse said absentely. ‘Handsome ones. If you’re not sure how to even discover that you have wealth, perhaps you might give it to me, and I’ll take better care of it for you.’

‘Because what you need is more excuses to buy more cloth, right?’ Jack said.

He’d guessed right, when he saw the way Flitmouse affected a look of mock offense, even as his eyes glittered with good humour. At once, Jack felt a rush of warmth. By the Light, he’d not felt anything like this for a long time.

‘I’ll tell you what,’ Jack said, drawing a circle on the table and watching tiny frost spirals follow. ‘The next time I come back – if that sofa is clear – I’ll see about giving you my wealth.’

‘Oh, well, that’s impossible,’ Flitmouse said. ‘The sofa is hideous. No one should look at it.’
‘Why do you have something you hate in your home?’

‘It was a gift,’ Flitmouse spat. ‘If you must know, a past lover bequeathed it to me knowing I’d loathe it, as his ‘parting gift.’ Because I am as spiteful as he is, I kept it and pretended to adore it. Should have seen the look on his face.’

‘But you hate it,’ Jack said.

‘As well one should,’ Flitmouse said, spooning tea leaves into strainers that hung directly over the cups. ‘I always intended to reupholster the thing in something worse, and bequeath it back.’

‘That’s so petty,’ Jack laughed. Flitmouse scowled at him, but said nothing else. ‘You’re always so businesslike in the Palace.’

‘Businesslike everywhere,’ Flitmouse amended.

‘But petty,’ Jack added.

‘Everywhere,’ Flitmouse said, nodding with a faint smile.

‘So I shouldn’t make you mad?’

Flitmouse left the water to boil and came back, sitting down on the chair and looking about his attic. Eventually, he came to look up at the stars.

‘Oh, I’m always quite angry,’ Flitmouse said. ‘Nothing to be done about that. Not in Lune.’

Jack shook his head, confused, and Flitmouse tilted his head and looked at Jack, sidelong. It was as though he was making his mind up about something, and then, in a sharp clapping sound, he struck his palm against the table. It creaked in response.

‘Doesn’t it upset you? The Darkness encroaching on Lune, even getting into the Palace – because I don’t believe the press that it was a practice run – and the Royal Admiral just hanging about like social decoration? The Tsar hardly seeming to care? Shouldn’t they all be jaunting about out there, fighting off what threatens us? They wait. Like sitting ducks.’

‘There’s got to be a reason behind it,’ Jack said, frowning.

‘I know you have the look of a naïf about you,’ Flitmouse said, ‘but use your mind. You have one, don’t you? I’ve had mannequins smarter than you.’

Jack rolled his eyes, the sting of the words not nearly so sharp knowing that this was probably how Flitmouse talked to everyone. The kettle started to whistle shrilly, and Flitmouse got up and left, looking over his shoulder at Jack as though assessing him.

‘You know what you are, don’t you?’ Flitmouse said. ‘Everyone knows that you come from the creches, that you aren’t even of city stock. You’re nothing more than a pretty image for all the poor people to imagine themselves in the place of. If you can do it, maybe they can. Imagine. All of you. Collectively so stupid.’

‘Hey,’ Jack said, staring at him. ‘Hang on a minute-’

‘No,’ Flitmouse said archly. ‘That’s what you are. As to why that makes me angry, have you not noticed that no one else will ever attain what you have? You are a gimmick. You do not even know. When the Tsar’s people came to me, they told me to make you fantastical, like a dream.
Something that floats down from the skies to bestow snowy blessings. A white-blue wonder. I know what they wanted.’

Flitmouse poured the water out carefully, bending down to inspect each cup. Then he set an hourglass on the counter, the sand trickling down to count out the brewing time.

‘There’re others who have what I have,’ Jack said. ‘There was another soldier who came from the same stock I did, and she’s a Golden Warrior too. She’s going to be one of the best.’

‘Bully for her,’ Flitmouse said, leaning back against the counter and folding his arms.

‘So did I come here for you to insult me the entire time? Or do you actually want me to be here?’

Flitmouse pressed his index finger and thumb against his temples, took a quick, deep breath.

‘I want you here,’ he said, his voice less sharp than before. ‘But I did not expect to like you in the beginning, and it confounds me that they leave you so unaware, on purpose. If Lune falls tomorrow to the Darkness, it won’t be because I sat back and watched you believe that your snowy, icy antics were somehow a joy upon the world.’

‘A lot of people didn’t complain at the Parade yesterday,’ Jack said.

‘If only I’d been there, then,’ Flitmouse said, smirking. ‘I know it would have been impressive. I also think it’s a lot of flash bang because they want us all to look in the other direction. The Tsar is a great magician, and his sleight of hand is like none other.’

Jack and Flitmouse looked at each other without blinking then. Jack felt like he was being tested, somehow. He’d felt like this when the Spymaster Toothiana had asked him about how he felt about Jamie leaving. He’d felt this at other times.

‘Do you want to report me?’ Flitmouse said quietly. ‘Because of what I just said?’

‘Should I?’ Jack said carefully.

‘Should you? I’m only expressing a thought.’

‘Yeah, but–’

‘It’s only words,’ Flitmouse said. ‘I’ll do far less damage with my words than you will, with your actions.’

‘I’m not hurting anyone,’ Jack said.

Flitmouse turned and that seemed to break the tension between them. He removed the tea leaf strainers and placed the cups and saucers, and then small pots of honey and milk, onto a wooden tray. He brought it over and sat it down.

Jack took the cup and saucer carefully. He wanted to add some honey, but he knew it was expensive, and he got the sense that Flitmouse didn’t have a lot of coin at his disposal. The attic was large, but it was still just an attic.

‘Your actions will lull the people into a false sense of security, at a time when they should be worrying for their lives,’ Flitmouse said, pushing the pot of honey towards Jack with a sharp nudge. ‘Have some. It’s very good.’

‘Thanks,’ Jack said. ‘I really thought I’d be able to get away from politics tonight. You know. Just
talk about cloth or something.’

Flitmouse smiled over his cup, even as he smelled the steam that rose from it.

‘I like talking about politics,’ Flitmouse said. ‘It makes me a dangerous friend. My disposition
means I don’t have many, and my views mean I have even less than that.’

Jack knew the tea would be far too hot for him, but he added the honey and tried not to wince at the
heat clinging to his fingers.

‘Why do you work in the Palace, then?’ Jack said finally.

‘I’m Lune’s best tailor,’ Flitmouse said. ‘I know it. They know it.’

‘Yeah but you’re...’ Jack didn’t want to say ‘a seditionist.’ Firstly, it might not be true. Secondly,
Jack didn’t want it to be real.

‘Jack,’ Flitmouse said, setting down the cup and sighing, ‘we will not be struck down with
lightning for looking critically at Lune and deciding what we think about it. Even if what we think
is not so flattering towards the Tsar and his retinue. I might be wrong, and perhaps they have
everything with the Darkness in hand, but I do not think I’m wrong.’

‘Why is it so bad to give people hope?’ Jack said. ‘People stopped me on the street. They were
happy.’

Jack thought of what Pitch had said about it all. He swallowed, thinking back to it now. Was it
possible that Pitch thought the way that Flitmouse did?

*But he’s the Royal Admiral, he can’t think that way.*

Maybe that was why some of the others thought the Tsar was working against Pitch, or leading him
to retirement. Maybe that was why the Tsar wanted Jack as a spy.

Jack hadn’t even decided what to think about that yet.

After the day he’d had, he felt a bit cracked through. Places in his mind that he would have ignored
in the past, he found harder to ignore now. He could almost hear Pitch telling him that it was safe,
and nothing could hurt him, and he was doing well.

It made him feel sick and warm all at once.

Then Jack realised that Flitmouse hadn’t responded to him at all, and he looked up to see Flitmouse
studying him with that acute gaze.

‘What?’ Jack said, nervously.

‘I want to show you something,’ Flitmouse said abruptly. He stood, walked over to a dark corner
and started moving bolts of fabric about until he revealed a chest of drawers. Then, from the lowest
drawer he brought out some yellowed bits of newspaper.

He brought them over, and set them before Jack. The newspaper was ancient. It wasn’t in print
anymore and the print itself was fading. The headline was still clear:

*Village Disappears, Tsar Calls For Calm.*

Jack frowned at it, and then squinted at the paragraph in the beginning. He didn’t know all the
words. They didn’t bother teaching the creche children the best literacy. But he knew enough of them.

‘This was before the Darkness,’ Flitmouse said quietly. ‘Before we knew it existed, anyway.’

‘So what happened?’ Jack said, keeping his ice under firm control as he shifted the leaves of paper and realised that these were all different articles, some published months apart.

One of the previous headlines, three weeks before:

_Village of HusthounHaunted, Shadow Men Reported._

‘My ancestors are from from Husthoun,’ Flitmouse said, touching a manicured nail to the paper. ‘My great, great, great, _great_...something Grandmother, she wrote letters about the hauntings to her brother, who lived elsewhere. She was frightened, and had not the money to leave the village. She waited, instead, for the Tsar to save her.’

Jack swallowed the lump in his throat and looked over the other articles. They were all dismissive towards the concept of ‘Shadow Men’ and ‘Clinging Darkness’ and the villagers were mocked in article after article. Then, apparently, hundreds of people vanished overnight.

‘Were they taken by the Darkness?’ Jack said, thinking with horror back to when the Darkness had attacked the platform. The day Jamie had gotten shadow sickness, the day that Pitch had dismissed him and his skills and caused Jack to feel the determination to prove him wrong one day.

_I’d forgotten that. I’d forgotten that I felt that, after the mountain._

‘No,’ Flitmouse said. ‘They were removed by the Tsar. We don’t know why. We’re quite certain they’re not alive. About two months later the Tsar had no choice but to announce that there was a fiendish Darkness that had to be combatted. But very few mentioned Husthoun.’

Jack looked at the headlines and shook his head slightly.

‘Why were they removed? If they had _proof_ that- I mean-’

‘Because the Tsar likes things to run very smoothly in Lune,’ Flitmouse said, spreading out all the articles on the table. ‘These first reports he didn’t want, and risked chaos. All he does is for the good of Lune, yes? So these villagers and their claims had to be stopped. It’s strongly believed by some of us that back then, he thought he could eliminate the Darkness entirely from Lune, and therefore, anyone who mentioned it needed to be disappeared. So they were.’

Jack looked over all the reports and couldn’t quite think of what to say. He couldn’t really think at all. Flitmouse sipped at his tea and then said:

‘I suppose you think they were disappeared to some fun magical cloud land where fairies bless them and nothing bad ever happens to them ever again.’

It stung, hearing that.

‘I just don’t know what to say,’ Jack said.

‘Many of the people who were family members or friends outside of Husthoun never got any answers. Those who asked too loudly also disappeared.’

Jack looked up and wished he hadn’t. Flitmouse just _stared_ at him.
‘What do you want from me?’ Jack said.

‘I wanted to show you something important to me,’ Flitmouse said, ‘and my family. That’s all.’

‘Right,’ Jack said. ‘That’s all.’

‘I think it’s good to hear a lot of different things from a lot of different people. If you don’t believe me, that’s fine, but then you should seek out other answers from other people, instead of just always believing what you’ve been told.’

‘You haven’t even asked me how I’m going,’ Jack said. ‘What kind of friend are you?’

‘Oh fine. In what mood do you find yourself on this fair evening?’

‘Shit,’ Jack said, ‘honestly. Since that’s what you care about, you know. The truth. Or something. Today I was forced to reveal a ton of stuff I didn’t want to, to someone who had to do that to me because last night I went and attacked the Disciplinarian and destroyed a bunch of the Palace. Because you know, my powers are in such great shape and all. I’m doing such a good job of bringing hope to people.’

Flitmouse sat back in his chair and kept staring, but Jack was glad it was shock now, and not the sharpness of before.

‘No one in the Palace actually seems to really trust the Tsar,’ Jack said, laughing, feeling like he sounded a bit manic or hysterical. He bit the noise down. ‘Not most of the people I’ve met. Obviously not you. And none of that makes any sense to me, because as you keep pointing out over and over again, I don’t know shit, and I come from the background I come from.’

Jack almost stood, but instead he clasped his hands tight in his lap and thought the tea was probably still too hot for him.

‘What I really wanted tonight was to come over here, and talk to you about stuff that wasn’t connected to all of this, and – I don’t know – learn something about fashion or something, since I don’t know anything about it. And instead you think it’s time for some really depressing history lesson so you can what? Gloat to all your friends that you shattered how I think about the world? Is that it? Will this be the gossip tomorrow when you’re back in the Palace?’

He couldn’t make himself look up. There was silence, and Jack waited for remonstration. He was shocked to hear a small choked sound.

‘I’m sorry,’ Flitmouse said.

Jack looked up, but Flitmouse wasn’t looking at him anymore, or even the papers on the table. He was looking down into his own lap. His breathing was unsteady.

‘I’m really not…’ Flitmouse shook his head sharply and then sighed. His shoulders slumped. Then he laughed. ‘I’m not good at this at all.’

‘Yeah, well, it’s-’

‘No, I apologise,’ Flitmouse said firmly. ‘I didn’t even think about what you wanted. Or maybe I’d just assumed you wanted answers and I am ever so used to people in the palace being rather mercenary about everything. I am as well, you see. In a different way. It’s hard to be a soft person there. And you are a terribly soft person.’
‘Oh, seriously?’ Jack said.

‘It is not such a bad thing, to be soft,’ Flitmouse said, with a sharp smile, and his gaze that felt like little needles. ‘It is a habit for many of us, to prefer soft things over coarse. Silk is a luxury material, and burlap is not.’

‘You’ll carry more in a burlap sack than silk,’ Jack said, remembering a saying from his childhood.

‘And that is so,’ Flitmouse said, something suddenly wistful in his expression. ‘But there’s a place in the world for silk, not that my parents thought so.’

‘They didn’t?’

‘I was the person everyone came to, to have socks darned or the in-seams of pants mended. It was so useful, but when I said I wanted to take it further, they mocked me. I take after my father. But he was more of a blade than even me. When he mocked me, his words cut.’

‘I can believe it,’ Jack said, feeling less defensive than he had a few moments ago. Flitmouse was trying, at least, and that mattered. Jack picked up the tea and realised it was still so warm, and blew cold air over it. Tiny frost crystals fringed the edge of the liquid, and Flitmouse watched in fascination.

‘It is a wonder,’ Flitmouse said. ‘Is it not? Whatever that mountain is. Whatever it does. They say you’re a Guardian. Of Lune.’

‘Who says that?’ Jack said, clutching the cup.

‘Not many,’ Flitmouse said, looking away. ‘Some. But you evidently don’t know that you are. There is a legend. Or something of a story, perhaps. It goes that those who go into the mountain and come out with something other than just the Light – if they survive it – will become a Guardian of Lune. They are the true protectors of Lune and its citizens. And they will not always agree with the Tsar.’

Jack put the cup down and rubbed at the back of his neck, his gut turning. He thought of who he knew of as the Guardians so far, he thought of how he’d been warned of executions, how there were things he could never talk about if he didn’t want blood on his hands.

‘Why are you being so open with me?’ Jack said.

‘Because I thought you were one of them,’ Flitmouse said. ‘My intelligence was good, and I had reason to think so. I think you may still be one of them, but that they are taking their time with you. It is hard to shatter someone’s belief in something so much larger in themselves, especially when they have so little to replace it with. But you are not here for this. And I didn’t intend to reveal myself as a seditionist to someone who is not. But I don’t think you’ll report me.’

‘No,’ Jack said, feeling treasonous even as he said it. Flitmouse only chuckled – a quiet breath of sound.

‘Even if you did, I am always ready to leave in but a moment.’

‘I don’t want anyone to die because I said something,’ Jack said. He hesitated, then pushed the bits of ancient newspaper away. ‘In the Barracks, my best friend, he left. Right before the Initiation. With the Guardians. He told me to look for them, I mean he wanted me to come with him. I couldn’t do that, and I tell everyone else that he’s treasonous, but he’s my best friend first. He’s like a brother to me.’
Jack thought of North, and wondered if his next visit should be to his Workshop. North had said he would find out how Jamie was doing.

‘So no,’ Jack said, ‘I...I didn’t report him. I let him go.’

Flitmouse had his head tilted, like a curious bird. Jack thought he was beautiful, in a faceted, angular way.

‘Maybe you are one,’ Flitmouse said. ‘But you’re not like the rest of them.’

‘You know who they are?’ Jack said.

‘You tell me,’ Flitmouse said, mercurial. ‘Oh, of course I know. I’m a stickybeak. I get everywhere I’m not supposed to. But you didn’t come here for this, did you? So, come, let me teach you a little bit about cloth.’

‘Uh...’

‘You’ll love it,’ Flitmouse said, standing and offering his hand. ‘Come along, let me show you all the different grades of cotton I have, wasting away, because no one wants them right now.’

Jack stood and returned Flitmouse’s smile, and they walked deeper into the attic, and Jack tried his best to keep up with the flow of information that followed.

* 

On the way back to the Palace, it was dark, and most of the City of Lune residents were back in their homes. Jack knew it was a chilly evening, even though it didn’t feel uncomfortable. Other people’s breath plumed as they hurried wherever they were going, but Jack’s didn’t seem to do that now.

He stopped before the Disciplinarian’s Tower. Looked up to where there were lights at the very top. He knew in a detached way that the Disciplinarian had tried to be kind to him, but his skin crawled. Was that what his life was supposed to be now? He would need to try and be friends with people he’d once been terrified of?

There was a part of him that wished to apologise, too. That wished to say ‘I’m sorry.’ That desired to find out whether Bunnymund would be crueler to him in the future.

‘I’m sorry,’ Jack whispered.

He turned and continued back to the Palace. The walk was long, but Jack couldn’t bring himself to hail a carriage, and the winds around him felt friendly and peaceful.

He had a lot to think about, and he didn’t even know where to start.

* 

He sat by the control panel that changed the tinting on his windows in his room. Everything was clear now, and he could see the bright evening and the stars, and wondered if he should be scared that the Darkness was out there, and that they weren’t doing anything to thwart it. Flitmouse was right. Why was the Royal Admiral attending parties?

Jack rubbed at his forehead and tried to muddle through what had happened earlier in the day. He knew that Pitch had no real choice in the matter. Knew, even, that in telling Jack that he didn’t
have to take the drug, he was giving him more of a choice than Crossholt or many others would have.

But it humiliated him, to have talked about being made wrong, or not knowing where his home was. There were things he’d said, that he hadn’t even known. He didn’t remember flying back to the Barracks to find Jamie. He thought he’d only been escaping a fate that he wasn’t supposed to escape.

What hurt most of all was how kind Pitch had been, because he needed his answers. Kindness was probably the fastest way to get what he wanted. But being told that he was good, and okay, and… even normal, it made Jack’s chest hurt now. He knew no one would ever really tell him those things. Not ever. And certainly not when they didn’t need something from him to make him stop attacking people.

‘Made wrong,’ Jack whispered into his fingers, which had found their way to his lips as he covered his mouth.

Pitch could talk about how the Darkness had etched into him as well, but Jack knew it wasn’t the same. Pitch was raised into the higher classes, he was well-educated and he had many friends even though he didn’t have what Jack might call a ‘winning personality.’ Pitch probably had family, a mother and a father, because children who weren’t born in the poorest territories were allowed to stay in touch with their parents. Nobility especially. Pitch probably could remember the faces of his parents. Maybe they were even still alive.

Deep inside, Jack wondered if he’d allow himself to experience induction again like that, with Pitch, just to hear the praise. Just to feel those warm fingers upon his wrist, and then his hand.

But he couldn’t imagine putting aside his anger to do it. He could imagine himself sinking his teeth into Pitch’s wrist before allowing that to happen again. Freezing him still, or attacking him with ice, even. He would never let himself be tricked into revealing things like that again. Not ever.

Jack startled when the door opened and looked up, expecting it to be Pitch. Instead, it was Seraphina. She looked at Jack, and then closed the door behind her. She wore a pale green nightgown, and her hair tumbled down her back in a dark cloud. She was barefoot, and there were leaves and dirt clinging to her feet. A red flower was tucked behind her ear, a vivid glare against her skin.

‘You shouldn’t be here,’ Jack said. ‘But hi.’

‘Good evening,’ Seraphina said, walking towards him. ‘I can’t sleep.’

‘Me either,’ Jack said. ‘Is it late?’

‘Terribly,’ she said, smiling at him as though they were sharing a secret. Then she walked easily to his side and sat next to him, and looked out at the stars. Jack thought at some point, perhaps she had decided to feel more comfortable around him. Or maybe she just missed Fyodor so badly, she was pretending Jack was someone else.

‘I really like your costume,’ Seraphina said, touching the light blue cape with its frost at the edges. ‘I think it suits you.’

‘Uh, thanks,’ Jack said, laughing. ‘I didn’t get much choice in the matter.’

‘Oh, well, I’m a child, I never get to choose my own clothes,’ Seraphina said archly, as though it
wasn’t such a bad thing to have other people choosing those things. Jack agreed with her anyway. He had no idea what really suited him. And the uniform was comfortable.

‘You’re a pretty serious child,’ Jack said, looking out at the constellations. Would they even let him fly out in them? Searching out pockets of Darkness and vanquishing it?

‘Am I?’ Seraphina said. ‘Father says I can be so juvenile. And Mama says I am precocious.’

‘What do you think you are?’ Jack said, looking down at her.

Seraphina gazed up at him and then looked at her hands. They were grubby, and her fingernails had dirt packed deep beneath them.

‘I’m a princess,’ Seraphina said. ‘But a princess of plants. You all learn how to cut things down, but I am going to be the best grower of plants. And I’m going to make vines and trees that go all over, and they will be grand and flower always.’

‘Wow,’ Jack said. ‘That sounds cool.’

‘You want to see?’ Seraphina said, standing and holding her hand out. ‘Come see.’

‘Yeah?’ Jack said, not caring very much in that moment what Pitch would think. ‘Am I going to remember my way back?’

‘I’ll bring you back to your rooms,’ Seraphina said quietly. ‘It’s the least a princess can do.’

‘See, you’re already awesome at being a princess,’ Jack said, taking her hand.

Seraphina hesitated, squinted as though checking whether he was making fun of her or not. Then she nodded once, and smiled briefly.

Her hand felt so little and warm in his hand.

‘If my fingers are too cold, you don’t have to keep holding my hand,’ Jack said as he was led through the door that led to the sundial-that-wasn’t-a-sundial, and Pitch’s rooms.

‘Your fingers aren’t too cold, silly,’ Seraphina said. She sounded exasperated that she even had to say it, and Jack tried to imagine her with her parents. Did she order them around? Was she only like this very late at night when she couldn’t sleep?

Seraphina didn’t talk as they wended their way through hallways. Her steps were light and her hair was so long that it sometimes brushed across his wrist as he kept his fingers clasped in hers. He had his staff with him, and sometimes sent little swirls of frost ahead of them, and she didn’t seem bothered or excited by them at all.

Instead of taking the hall that led to Pitch’s rooms, they took another. This one painted with murals of plants and flowers and lit with an Alchemist’s light – golden and ever-glowing. They passed an open door, and as they walked past it, Jack saw a huge four poster bed covered in a gauzy green material. There were dolls and potted plants on the floor, as well as flower garlands, and what looked like a space chart.

Then they were facing wooden double doors, and Seraphina pushed her hands to them and opened them, walking inside regally.

Jack stepped past the threshold, and blinked at the jungle greenness and flashes of colour. He
looked up to the circle of night sky and realised there was no glass above them, and that this huge, circular space was some kind of garden. But it was huge. The floor beneath his feet was a tiled mosaic of flowers and vines, interspersed with tiny squares of gold.

Seraphina kept walking until she was no longer on the tiles and her feet were sinking into soft, dark, loamy soil.

‘Come on,’ Seraphina said. ‘This is Mama’s part. Not my part. It’s not all mine yet.’

‘Oh,’ Jack said. He followed, felt the difference between the cooler tiles and the warmer soil beneath his feet. It was wet too. He pushed past glossy green fronds that were as huge as his whole body. Trunks towered up above him, and clinging to their impressive girths were fungi and epiphytic plants with stunning flowers he’d never seen before, not even in books. It was hard to remember to keep walking. Pippa would have loved it.

Eventually the soil path became stepping stones, and Jack could hear running water and wasn’t sure where it was coming from. How big was this place? Jack’s breathing came faster, feeling like he’d somehow stepped into another world. The awe was making him forget everything the day had showered upon him.

‘We’re nearly there,’ Seraphina called back to him, and he followed her, trying to not to lose sight of her pale green nightgown. She was so light on her feet that he couldn’t follow the sound of her.

He looked down and saw four green frogs hunched together, breathing rapidly, the little pouches on their necks flickering. They watched him go, bronze eyes unblinking.

Then the jungle seemed to clear and in the clearing, a field of flowers and grass. A small waterfall that must have been built by someone, but looked like it had always belonged. Seraphina sat down before a patch of bright red flowers like the one she had in her hair. Jack joined her, laying down his staff so he didn’t accidentally damage anything.

He could hear sounds coming from all around them. Some of the flowers seemed to hum a pleasant melody. Others swayed in an unseen breeze, making a sound like rung bells. He could smell something rich and bready, and then something like citrus and sugar, or sweet peppermint on his tongue.

‘You really are a princess of plants, hey,’ Jack said, looking around. ‘Did you make this?’

‘The plants are making it,’ Seraphina said, ‘but I encouraged them. I like meadows, Mama likes jungles. She said we could make it work. So we are.’

‘Seraphina, this is- Thank you so much for showing me.’

Seraphina gave a small smile down at her lap then, and she looked almost shy, which seemed nothing like how she’d been the rest of the time.

‘You’re nothing like Fyodor,’ she said, looking up then. ‘You know, he was sweet and kind, but he was like- Oh, I don’t know. He didn’t like plants. He thought Mihail was stupid, when Mihail is only different than us, and thinks differently than us. But the first time Fyodor saw this place, he was so scared of crushing the flowers he couldn’t enjoy it.’

‘I’m a little scared of crushing the flowers too,’ Jack whispered, winking at her.

‘But you’re still sitting here with me,’ Seraphina said. ‘You can’t baby the plants. Where they all come from, animals walk over them all the time. They’re stronger for a little trampling. That’s
what Mama would say.’

‘That’s good advice,’ Jack said.

Seraphina picked some flowers up in her hands and handed them all to him. Jack took them and had no idea what to do with them, and then laughed. If this were Pippa, he’d know exactly what to do.

‘These aren’t for me,’ Jack said with faux seriousness. Seraphina looked up at him, her eyes widening.

‘They’re not?’

‘No, look.’ Jack reached out and tucked one into the cloud of her black hair. And then another. He thought he was being too bold, but her eyes fairly sparkled at him, and her lips were tight to hide her smile. Soon she had six more red flowers in her hair, and he cast around looking for others that he could pick.

‘Those,’ she said, a smile in her voice. She pointed at tiny white sprays of blossoms. As Jack picked them, they released a scent that was sweet and honeyed.

‘Mm, they smell good enough to eat,’ he said.

‘I know, don’t they?’ she said. ‘They’re so good.’

‘Here,’ Jack said, tucking sprigs of flowers into her hair. ‘Now you really are a princess of plants. All that’s missing is the crown.’

‘Father has given me tiaras that look like flowers,’ Seraphina said. ‘They’re in my room.’

‘Yeah? He’s a good Dad. In the meantime, I can do something about the crown.’

Jack concentrated on his ice, holding his palms flat. The crown that appeared wasn’t made of flowers – he wasn’t quite that good yet – but it was delicate and light, and Seraphina clapped her hands together in delight. Then two spots of red appeared on her cheeks and she looked mortified that she’d done it.

‘May I?’ Jack said, offering the crown to her.

‘But of course,’ she said, looking at the crown.

‘If it’s too cold, you can take it off.’

‘It’s just ice,’ she said. Then she bent her head forward and Jack eased the crown upon her head. It caught the light and glittered, and he grinned as she sat back. Even now her shoulders were poised and her nose was up, as though she could look down it at him. Jack tried to imagine all the things she would learn from her mother and father, and thought that one day people would want to follow her to the ends of the world.

‘Perfect,’ Jack said.

‘I like this,’ she said. Her fingers came up and gently touched the ice. The same tenderness she must have showed her flowers when she wasn’t concerned with giving them a little ‘trampling.’

‘Me too, hey. Thanks for coming to find me tonight. You’re good company. Why don’t you go to your father?’
‘He needs sleep,’ Seraphina said, pursing her lips. ‘He’s very tired.’

‘He’s sick?’

‘Not like that,’ Seraphina said. ‘But he doesn’t sleep much when he’s with his military. And he spends a lot of time on strategy matters and the war when he’s here. And then the Tsar wants him for so many things and sends him on errands and tasks. I hate it. I hate it here sometimes.’

The words lacked venom. She said it as though she knew it would never change, and Jack thought that no child should look that soul weary.

‘Hey,’ Jack said, standing. ‘Show me more of these flowers. Do you have favourites?’

As Seraphina stood, Jack had the sense that she knew he was trying to distract her, and that she was allowing it. But she nodded, and for a little while, they walked all over the meadow and she told him the names of plants and their scientific classification and – if they had them – their healing or edible properties.

Eventually they stepped through to the other side of the garden, and there was a large plaque upon it with the glyph-sigil writing that Jack didn’t understand. It looked amazing, though.

‘See?’ Seraphina said, pointing to it. ‘It’s a special garden.’

‘Oh, I can’t read that, sorry,’ Jack said.

Seraphina squinted up at him, and then unexpectedly said:

‘Are you so stupid?’

After the time they’d spent, Jack hadn’t expected it. She didn’t even say it with malice. But he was more worn through than he realised, and he remembered the Pippa in the mountain insulting him through the Darkness and his heart wrenched inside of him. At once, his eyes burned and he forced himself to turn away, embarrassed and horrified at his reaction.

‘Oh! No! Oh, I’m sorry!’ Seraphina said, running around to his front and taking the hand that wasn’t holding his staff in hers. ‘No, of course you’re not stupid. You can’t read?’

‘They don’t teach us that alphabet,’ Jack said, his voice strained. ‘It’s not important. You know, to creche kids.’

‘Really?’ Seraphina gasped. ‘But it’s so beautiful.’

‘Yeah,’ Jack said. ‘I know that. But it’s for nobles and rich people. And scholars, I guess. Not...us.’

‘I’m sorry,’ Seraphina said again. She sounded genuinely contrite, and Jack forced his eyes open and looked down at her. Her own eyes were sheened. ‘I’ll teach it to you.’

‘What?’

‘Well if I can learn it, you can learn it. So I’ll teach you.’

‘You- Seriously?’

‘Jack,’ Seraphina said, frowning up at him, ‘you should know by now that I’m very serious.’

‘Maybe even too serious,’ Jack added with a careful smile.
'Maybe so,' Seraphina said, smiling back.

'You’re like a tiny little adult,' Jack said.

'I know,' Seraphina said. 'It makes Papa sad. Sometimes he makes me ride his shoulders and runs around his home, because he thinks I’m too serious.'

Jack swore there was a moment he couldn’t think at all, trying to imagine that. Seraphina laughed, and she clasped his free hand with both of hers, warming it. Jack liked the feeling.

'He really does that?' Jack said, wondering if she was having him on.

'Yes,' she said. 'Mama too, sometimes. But Mama is more of a tickler.'

'Oh. Ticklers are horrifying.'

'And see, now, I tell her that, but she doesn’t believe me,' Seraphina said. Then she yawned hugely, and a few seconds later, yawned again.

'Come on,' Jack said, ‘bedtime.’

'Bedtime,' Seraphina echoed. ‘I’m walking you back first.’

‘Nah, I don’t really think that’s-’

‘I’m a princess,’ Seraphina said firmly, ‘I’m walking you back. Princesses are kind to their subjects.’

‘All right then,’ Jack said, shrugging. ‘Princess Seraphina, walk me back to my room.’

‘Yes,’ Seraphina said, her voice suddenly sleepy. ‘Oh, the crown’s starting to melt.’

Jack lifted it from her hand and turned it into a spray of diamond dust before her eyes. Seraphina smiled at it, and then looked up at Jack. She didn’t hold the awe that the citizens of Lune did. Perhaps she was used to seeing wonders and magic. But she looked pleased that he’d done it all the same.

*

Jack woke in the early dawn light, to see Pitch standing over him. He blinked up sleepy, tendrils of horror already beginning to creep through him. But at the same time, he remembered Pitch’s warm, calm voice telling him that he was very good, and he wasn’t awake enough to panic.

'I didn’t expect to find Seraphina here,' Pitch said quietly, his voice wry but gentle.

Jack looked over the other side of the bed. Beneath the covers, only her black hair visible – flowers still in it – Seraphina slept. Jack vaguely remembered thinking she was probably too tired to go back to her room anyway, and she’d crawled in without saying anything or even asking.

'Yeah,' Jack said. 'She was pretty tired.'

'Yes,' Pitch said on a sigh, looking at her. 'She never sleeps well. She has nightmares.'

Jack pushed himself upright, but Pitch waved him back down. He didn’t seem angry at all, which was miraculous. The last time Jack had seen Seraphina in the middle of the night, Pitch had come back and threatened him.
‘How are you faring, after yesterday?’ Pitch said, looking back at Jack. His voice was as gentle as it had been in the room.

That made it harder, somehow. Like he was still being tricked.

‘Great,’ Jack said, the events of the day coming back to him. And that conversation with Flitmouse, too. ‘Hey, have you heard of Husthoun?’

Pitch’s eyes widened, and then he blinked as though he couldn’t believe he’d heard the word.

‘Don’t you ever bring that up around the Tsar,’ Pitch said, his voice an urgent hiss.

‘Yeah, yeah, I’m getting that,’ Jack said, wearily. ‘I guess. Whatever. How am I after yesterday? You- I can’t believe you did what you did.’

‘You know why I had to,’ Pitch said, his voice still low and quiet.

‘I know you’re an asshole.’

‘I am still your Admiral, and you will treat me with respect.’

‘Or what?’ Jack said, staring at him. ‘What will you do? Send me to the Disciplinarian? Who I nearly killed? Is that really what you want at the moment? Or is that like...something the Tsar would disapprove of?’

Jack was shocked at himself. He hardly knew where the words came from. By the way Pitch looked at him, he seemed to feel the same way. A moment later, Pitch’s expression darkened and he glared. A muscle jumped in his jaw.

‘I’ll tell you what, hey,’ Jack continued, feeling spiteful, ‘I’ll treat you with the same respect you’ve shown me so far, and we’ll call it even.’

Muscles on both sides of Pitch’s jaw jumped.

Then he walked around to the other side of the bed and gently lifted Seraphina into his arms. She made a sleepy murmur and clung to him, pressing her face into his neck. Pitch scowled at Jack.

‘You’re training today,’ Pitch said finally. ‘It will be one of the harder sessions.’

‘Looking forward to it,’ Jack said with a tight smile.

‘Good,’ Pitch said. He managed to make the word sound like an insult, and then he walked away and left the room. Jack slumped as the tension left his body. He pressed his palms over his face and groaned.
The Admiral and the Disciplinarian

Chapter Notes

With a title like that nothing could POSSIBLY go wrong. :D Er, my beta said 'poor Jack' so many times while reading this chapter so fair warning etc. (Idk what I'd warn for though, that *I* wrote the chapter and therefore it's probably entirely what you can expect from me?)

Also, in the chapter itself, I have a note that just says: "No, Pitch, that is not how fun surprises work."

Tiredness plagued him in the morning. It made him clumsier than usual during his etiquette lessons, and it made him slide his right foot into his left pants leg when he was dressing for training. Then he kept yanking, as though that would solve the problem. It took him a good thirty seconds to work out what he’d done wrong, and then he groaned and fell backwards on his bed.

He had no idea what he’d gotten himself into anyway. Everyone said the Tsar couldn’t be trusted, but Jack didn’t think he was terrible. Could he have killed a whole village? Maybe the Darkness did, and the Tsar didn’t want to say so.

*Or maybe he did. He runs those Asylums. Plenty of people die there.*

Training wasn’t holding much appeal, especially after Pitch had said it would be harder than usual.

*Especially as Jack could still feel whatever darkness Pitch had been searching for the day before, coiling and curdling inside of him. It felt like it was just waiting for a moment. It wasn’t prodding him into behaving in any particular way, but it was there, and Jack couldn’t make it go away, or push it so far down he didn’t feel it anymore.

Pitch would probably be happy about it, but Jack still held onto stubbornness. He didn’t want to attack people with it, therefore, he wouldn’t.

That seemed simple enough. After all, it had been working for him so far.

*Except at the after-party.*

‘Come on,’ Jack complained at himself. ‘Just- Not today.’

He was still too angry at Pitch to even think about training. It didn’t matter if Pitch had his motivations. It didn’t matter that he loved his daughter or that he obviously didn’t have it out for Jack the way that he used to. It didn’t matter.

*

Jack followed Pitch to the arena that afternoon. He looked at Pitch’s robes and how they moved around him. He wondered if he’d understand the sigils if Seraphina really did teach him the proper glyphic alphabet of Lune.

*Yeah, and then I’ll be able to read it. It probably says ‘I am a gigantic dick.’*
Jack muffled a laugh, and Pitch turned to look over his shoulder, eyes narrowing. Jack scowled back.

It’d probably feel really good to swing a sword at Pitch, even if Pitch did knock him down about a hundred times per training session.

‘So how’s it going to be harder?’ Jack said, glaring at Pitch’s shoulders. ‘More laps today?’

‘Maybe,’ Pitch said, sounding indifferent.

‘You’ll fight me with like, two swords?’

‘Perhaps.’

‘Do you even know?’ Jack said. ‘Or are you just bluffing?’

‘You’ll see.’

The hand that wasn’t holding onto his staff clenched into a fist, and ice immediately covered it. He shook it away, forcing his jaw to relax. When he was younger, he’d saved pocket money to buy memorabilia of the Royal Admiral, and now he wanted to burn it all. Pitch didn’t even seem to really care that he’d just rummaged through Jack’s mind like that.

He probably doesn’t. And now that he’s used the fear trick on you, and done that, today is going to suck.

‘Just tell me,’ Jack said.

‘No,’ Pitch said. Jack swore he could almost hear a smug, crappy smile in his voice.

Jack made himself take a breath and ignore the darkness that he could still feel. It was there now. It felt like Pitch had helped Jack to open doors in his mind that would make him more aware of it, and that wasn’t any kind of real ‘help.’

It was harder to tell if he wanted to shoot ice at Pitch’s back just because he was annoyed, or if the darkness thought it would be a good idea. He couldn’t tell the difference.

Just before they took the corridor to the arena, Pitch stopped, and Jack frowned, stopping as well. Pitch turned to him and didn’t look angry, but thoughtful.

Yeah, that never promises anything good either.

‘If you feel your inner darkness as you have in the past – as you did during the Parade when we released our light – are you able to tell me?’

‘Probably,’ Jack said. Then he added: ‘But will I? I don’t know. That’s anyone’s guess, really.’

Pitch didn’t even blink, and Jack hated that he looked away then, just in case Pitch decided he’d get his revenge by making Jack feel some kind of nameless terror.

‘Someone braver wouldn’t look away from me,’ Pitch said then.

‘Yeah, well, maybe you can find them and train them instead.’

Pitch exhaled in that way that could have been amusement.
‘If only,’ he said. ‘Jack, are you able to say if the darkness is there? Or is that too difficult? I require a serious answer. You don’t have to like me, but have you abandoned your purpose so quickly? You care naught for Lune at all?’

Jack’s eyes snapped back to Pitch, shocked that Pitch would even question that. Then he thought about what Pitch had actually asked him, and he twirled his staff in his fingers, frowning. Surely it would be harder to hide the darkness inside of himself, if he had to say that it was there? It was just easier to ignore it.

‘I don’t think so,’ Jack said. ‘I mean, I don’t think I can say.’

*It’s there right now. And I’m not saying a damn thing.*

Pitch’s lips thinned, but he didn’t seem to be annoyed. After a beat, he looked at Jack’s staff, and his eyebrows lifted before he met Jack’s eyes again.

‘Are you able to signal, with your ice? Some...flare? Something small?’

Jack shifted his staff and then shot out a small burst of ice. It rose about a foot above his head, and then showered slowly back down to the ground.

‘Like that?’

‘Exactly,’ Pitch said, looking pleased. Jack thought of how pleased Pitch had sounded the morning before, and amongst all his anger, a yearning rose in his chest that he wished wasn’t there at all.

‘And you want me to do that whenever the darkness is there?’

‘If you could.’

Jack nodded to himself, and then without looking away, he set off another flare of ice from his staff.

Pitch stared at the flare of ice, and then looked back to Jack, his brow furrowing.

‘Ah,’ Pitch said carefully. ‘This will be *interesting*, then.’

‘What will be?’

‘You’ll see,’ Pitch said, and then he walked down the corridor towards the arena.

Jack clutched the staff tighter. Was Pitch going to do the fear trick thing again? *What was he going to do?* Jack wondered if he could just send about five flares directly into Pitch’s back.

*Probably not.*

Then, he cleared the entry into the arena and stopped dead.

The Disciplinarian. Right there. Right there in the arena in a full Golden Warrior get up, with his boomerangs strapped to his back and his alchemical staff at his side.

Jack felt the breath fall out of his mouth, as though he’d been punched.

‘Ha,’ Jack managed. ‘Nope.’

Jack turned around and walked straight back down the corridor.
‘To borrow a word,’ Pitch said, catching up to him quickly and grasping him by the upper arm. ‘Nope.’

‘You can’t be serious,’ Jack hissed. ‘You fucking think this is a good idea after yesterday?’

‘I think it’s already working remarkably well,’ Pitch said.

‘You’re- You– I’m...I tried to kill him.’

‘And, like me, he cannot be easily killed. I have the healing Light, Jack, everything is well in hand.’

‘I’m not doing this,’ Jack said, even as he was practically frogmarched back towards the arena.

When the Disciplinarian saw him again, he smiled and lifted a paw in greeting.

‘G’day,’ he said, and Jack thought he was probably trying to be non-threatening, but no way was he in fighting gear if he wasn’t there to fight. And no way did Pitch intend this to be non-threatening.

Jack turned to Pitch and then gripped him with his spare hand. Ice travelled over Pitch’s robes, cracking and splintering as it went.

‘I’m so not doing this,’ Jack hissed.

‘You don’t even know what we’re doing,’ Pitch said, unconcerned by the ice.

Jack didn’t even look at the Disciplinarian then. He couldn’t even think about his name. He could feel scars pulling at his shirt, even though he wasn’t aware of it the rest of the time. There was a part of him that wanted to send up so much ice they’d both leave him alone.

His free hand twitched towards the hilt of his smallsword.

_I am so not doing this_, he thought to himself, even as he was steered into the middle of the arena.

‘All right,’ Pitch said, stepping away from Jack and withdrawing his sword. ‘We’re training today. We’re not leaving until I know you have a better handle on that darkness of yours.’

The Disciplinarian came closer and Jack looked at him, jaw tightening. For that, he got a narrowed, calculated look, and the Disciplinarian’s ears dropped slightly. He cast a dubious look at Pitch.

‘You don’t think this is a little ‘too much, too soon’ mate?’

‘No,’ Pitch said smoothly. ‘I don’t. I’ve seen what he does with other methods. He’s only training himself into getting better at ignoring it, for longer periods of time. It’s too dangerous.’

‘I’m right here,’ Jack said. ‘Literally like two metres away from you.’

‘He’s also recalcitrant,’ Pitch added, as though Jack still wasn’t even there.

Jack ground his staff down into the ground and then turned away from the both of them. Then, because his anger wasn’t doing anything good, he walked several steps away and shook his head. Pitch knew, he knew that Jack would respond like this. Jack frantically tried to shove the anger away. It wasn’t working.

‘Oh I know, mate, I’ve seen his bloody file,’ the Disciplinarian said, laughing. ‘Recalcitrant isn’t
even at the top of the list. That’s way down.’

A slow breath in, and even slower one out through clenched teeth. He didn’t even want to hear what Pitch had to say to that. It was obvious they were baiting him.

‘Crossholt’s file isn’t accurate,’ Pitch said.

Jack blinked, and then turned back to stare at him.

‘What,’ the Disciplinarian said scornfully, ‘you can’t tell me none of it isn’t—’

‘I’m not saying none of it isn’t, I’m saying it’s not accurate,’ Pitch said firmly. ‘If you make conclusions about his character based off the content in his file, you’ll steer yourself wrong. And possibly get injured in the process.’

The Disciplinarian turned to look at Jack, and Jack didn’t want to meet his eyes. He didn’t want to look at either of them.

*It was easier when they were just baiting me. I think.*

‘Jack,’ Pitch said, ‘the whole point of today, is to get you to a point where you can first act on your darkness without blacking out, and then ideally learn how to give it direction.’

‘So just impossible things then, basically,’ Jack said. ‘Great. This is the stupidest thing you’ve ever done, out of all the stupid things you’ve done.’

‘Oi,’ the Disciplinarian said, ‘are you sure his file isn’t accurate? Because it sure sounds like it.’

‘This isn’t about you,’ Jack said, glaring at him and then looking away, because by the Light, he felt like he was at the top of the Disciplinarian’s tower and they were going to give him a leather bit at any moment to bite down into. He could almost taste it in his mouth.

He looked away, and thought that he should be stronger about it. Then he glared at Pitch, because this was all down to what Pitch had ripped out of his mind the day before.

‘Despite your protestations, this is about him,’ Pitch said, looking completely indifferent to Jack’s insults. Then he turned to the Disciplinarian. ‘Aster, I just want you to observe at first, to get an idea of his form.’

‘Rightio,’ the Disciplinarian said. Bunnymund. He didn’t suit a name that benign.

Pitch ordered him to move through some basic forms. Jack took a deep breath and began, but he felt the Disciplinarian’s eyes on him the entire time. It made him clumsier. It was harder to concentrate. He wanted to turn around and make sure that he wasn’t presenting his back to him, but Pitch wasn’t giving him much of a choice.

‘You can do better than that,’ Pitch snapped after the second run-through and Jack shifted his grip on the smallsword.

‘I know.’

‘Then do better.’

Jack’s eyes flashed up, nostrils flaring. The darkness inside of him swirled around, gaining momentum.
He tried to squash it down as much as possible. He closed his eyes, took some deep breaths. There. A bit more of that and he could-

-He staggered backwards and fell, arms flailing. His chest blazed with a sudden bruising pain. He hit the sawdust hard, and looked up to see the butt of Pitch’s sword facing him.

‘No,’ Pitch said. ‘Get up and run through the form again.’

The first flicker of real fear then. Because this was not how things had gone before in training, even when the Disciplinarian hadn’t been there. Pitch had always given him time to centre himself between forms and exercises. If he couldn’t take it now to sort himself out...

‘Get up,’ Pitch said. ‘Do it again.’

Jack pushed himself upright and looked nervously over at the Disciplinarian. But his face was unreadable. Jack swallowed and shook his head, trying to concentrate, and then went through the form again. He moved his sword the way he was supposed to. His footwork was good. But where he’d had aggravation before, there was fear dancing alongside it. He could feel his scars constantly.

It was when he ran through the form yet again, that he briefly imagined what it might be like to attack Pitch with his ice. It came and went as a graphic image that flared across his retinas, and he was furious when he realised that he’d briefly lost control of his ice at the same time. There was a crooked star of it on the sawdust, at the moment he’d imagined it.

He stared at it, and felt trapped.

He couldn’t just run. The only reason he was here, that they were training him, was this idea they had that he might be able to be a Golden Warrior. But Pitch had been firm – he couldn’t do that, until he got control of his darkness.

But he didn’t want to deal with it.

‘Again,’ Pitch said.

Jack opened his mouth, closed it again, still staring at the ice that wasn’t melting. It took so much longer to melt than regular ice.

‘Remember,’ Pitch added, his voice not as hard as before, ‘you can use your staff to signal when you need to.’

But Jack refused to signal with his staff, and he ran through the sword form again, forcing himself to focus on his breathing, on the details of the form.

Three more times he ran through the form, feeling no more flashes of malice or hatred. Pitch made a thoughtful sound and called the Disciplinarian over.

‘How much two-on-one training have you done, Jack?’ Pitch said.

‘Enough,’ Jack said. ‘And three-on-one, and all the other- You know, standard training.’

Whatever Crossholt could think up if he wanted me to get beaten down and didn’t want to get his hands dirty.
‘But I don’t think this is the same,’ Jack added.

It was well known that the Disciplinarian didn’t fight with a sword at all. He fought with boomerangs, which weren’t standard issue, and he fought with the magic and Light he could summon with his staff. He had a ceremonial sword, but otherwise, he was a wildcard. Jack never stood much of a chance when he sparred with Pitch.

With the both of them...

Jack knew Pitch was doing it on purpose, and he grit his teeth, holding both smallsword and staff.

‘It’s fine though,’ Jack said.

‘You can use your staff today as well, and attack with ice. I trust Aster to know to get out of the way.’

‘Bloody oath you do, I hopped out of the way at the Palace quickly enough, didn’t I?’

Pitch and the Disciplinarian shared a quick smile, and Jack ignored the feeling in his chest, or tried to. Why did everyone have to be friends with each other? Why did everyone get along while Jack was left...not quite on his own, there was Flitmouse, and Cupcake, but it wasn’t the same as this camaraderie.

‘All right,’ Pitch said, moving, ‘I’ll attack first, and then Aster will join in. Defend yourself however you wish. If you feel the darkness wishing to express itself, I want you to follow through on that. Remember, you cannot truly harm us here. We are between the two of us, among the best fighters on all of Lune.’

‘Careful, mate,’ the Disciplinarian said, ‘that was almost a compliment.’

Jack watched as they both backed off in different directions. He bit nervously at his bottom lip and then made himself stop doing it. Did he point his staff at the Disciplinarian? Or his sword?

Speed hallmarked the beginning of Pitch’s attack, and Jack had no choice but to swing his staff and smallsword towards him. He wanted to keep an eye on the Disciplinarian, and tried retreating so that he could see both at the same time. But Pitch’s attack was too concerted, and Jack couldn’t get the position he wanted. This was nothing like going up against other trainees.

The sound of an explosion behind him, a glimmer of colour in the corner of his eye, and Jack tried to swing an arm free to at least defend himself, when he felt the crack of something sharp across his back. An explosion of pain, a whip lash, and Jack staggered and then went down hard, legs swept out from under him with the flat of Pitch’s sword.

Jack took deep, gasping breaths, trying to collect himself. He dropped his sword and reached behind him, trying to feel for a tear in his shirt. Then, when he didn’t find one, he reached beneath the fabric to feel the welt on his back. He drew his hand free and saw no blood on his fingertips, and blankness ruled him for several seconds.

Then, so fast it left him dizzy, Jack turned on his hands and knees and sent a blast of ice in the Disciplinarian’s direction. His throat rasped on the sound of outrage he made, even as he clumsily got to his feet, sword in his other hand again. He completely lost sight of the Disciplinarian behind the flurry of ice he sent.

He saw several flashes of colour that must have come from the Disciplinarian’s staff – magical splashes of magenta, royal blue, gold. Then nothing.
I hope he’s dead.

The thought shocked him, and then he realised what he’d done and he dropped his sword and couldn’t even see if the Disciplinarian was alive because there was too much ice. He hadn’t even felt it building like he had at other times. It was just there.

‘Jack,’ Pitch said quietly, ‘it’s all right.’

He could hear his own breathing. Getting faster. Fear and panic tumbling through him. His back still ached from whatever the Disciplinarian had done. How had he managed to make his magic feel like that?

‘Strewth,’ came the Disciplinarian’s voice, a little muffled. The ice cracked through, fell apart into splinters and musically clinked upon the ground. The Disciplinarian stood behind it, panting for breath. His ears and whiskers were tipped with frost, but otherwise he looked fine. ‘So it works, then.’

Jack looked slowly at Pitch, and felt a slow nausea when he realised that Pitch had planned all of this based on their encounter in the black room. From the Disciplinarian using magic that felt like whip strikes, to not letting Jack calm himself down or get his focus back.

They didn’t understand how awful it was. Pitch could say he’d experienced it, but it wasn’t the same. Jack didn’t want to hurt anyone. He didn’t want to see flashes of awful things happening to people and feel glee resting behind it. He was tired of blood saturating the corners of his mind and this feeling that he could just claw his way to safety if he hurt enough people.

He was terrified of it.

‘I’m done,’ Jack said, looking between them both. ‘I quit. Whatever. I’m not a soldier. Put me in an Asylum. I don’t care. I’m done.’

He walked away, mind racing, too dull to pay attention to any of it.

He expected Pitch to run after him like before and steer him back to the arena, but it didn’t happen.

Instead, when he was at the threshold, he heard that explosion of magic again and even as his body tried to tense, he felt the crack of a whip over his back.

Just as he tried to process that the Disciplinarian had attacked him with no warning, while his back was turned, his back exploded with the pain of another lash. Agony flared through him. He swore he could feel leather cutting through him. Breathing choked to a stop in his throat.

The terror of the darkness warred with the terror he felt over those whippings, and then Jack felt himself turn, staff out.

He stalked back into the arena.

‘Why won’t you listen to me?’ he breathed. He doubted they could hear him.

The ice kept building inside of him. His hair moved in all directions with the wind that gathered around him. The gales moved wildly, as though they alone could protect him from the Disciplinarian’s magic.

‘Why won’t you both listen to me?!’ he shouted.
Then, hardly knowing what he was doing, he placed both hands on the staff and let loose.

The flurries of snow hid the worst of the ice, until it was so vast and broad it made it impossible to see Pitch or the Disciplinarian. He attacked both at the same time, letting free more ice than he ever had in the past. At the same time he couldn’t shake the image in his mind’s eye of both of them crushed by it, mangled in pieces because of it, blood oozing down on the blue-white cold and freezing still.

He swallowed bile and kept going, burning through his rage for almost an entire minute, before the ice was as tall as the jungle trees around Seraphina’s meadow.

He went to his knees, exhausted, arm shaking. The wind pushed and pulled at him, and he felt something eluding his thoughts. He was able to fly because of the wind. How had he done that?

The strangest feeling then, that he hadn’t done it at all, but the wind had done it for him. Maybe it wasn’t about controlling himself and making his body fly, but letting the wind lift him and guide him.

That thought floated away quickly, as Jack tiredly pushed himself up. The ice around the Disciplinarian broke down again, and Jack faced him, staff out. He looked over his shoulder to see if Pitch was fine. He kept saying he was unbeatable, but Jack had seen ice in his thigh before.

After about a minute, the Disciplinarian beginning to look worried, Pitch emerged through a small hole he’d cut into the wall of ice with his sword. He brushed shards of ice and frost from his shoulders and chest. He looked unfazed.

‘Did you blackout?’ he asked Jack.

‘Didn’t you hear me?’ Jack said, his voice shaking. ‘I’m not doing this.’


‘What’s wrong with you?’ Jack shouted. ‘Why do you want this? Is that why the Tsar wants to spy on you? Is that it? Because you’ve just changed sides or something?’

Pitch’s eyes widened, and the Disciplinarian looked shocked – his mouth had dropped open. Jack still refused to put his back to the Disciplinarian.

‘Never, ever again.’

‘Jack,’ Pitch said calmly, ‘the darkness inside of you is not the Living Darkness. It is you. It comes from you, and it is a part of you.’

‘Nope,’ Jack said, shaking his head. ‘It’s not.’

‘You’re not possessed, so what – then – is the problem?’ Pitch said with that same infuriating evenness.

‘It’s not me,’ Jack said. ‘I’ve never had thoughts like that before. Not once before the mountain. Never.’

‘I want you to stay with it,’ Pitch said.

‘No! I don’t want to, and you can’t make me.’

‘It’s quite evident we can, actually,’ Pitch said. ‘With the right triggers, it’s easy as pie.’
‘I don’t want to!’ Jack said. His voice cracked, it was shaking. This was humiliating. He’d never sounded like this even around the Disciplinarian. Even during the worst whippings. He’d never lost it like this.

‘You will stay with it,’ Pitch said firmly. His golden eyes were unforgiving, his whole will felt immoveable.

‘I don’t want to,’ Jack said again. ‘I’m going to lose my fucking mind.’

‘You won’t,’ Pitch said.

‘I will! I’m not like you, I’m not like- I will.’

‘You won’t,’ Pitch said, implacable. ‘You’re only dealing with yourself. Not the Living Darkness. They’re not the same. You need to learn yourself, don’t you? Remember what they teach you in training?’

‘It’s not just myself,’ Jack said. ‘It’s not me.’

‘You’re scared of yourself,’ Pitch said, his voice now scathing. ‘Did they teach you nothing, Jack?’

Jack stared at him, tried to swallow down the worst of his breathing. He felt like he was going to be sick.

*Maybe I will spy on him, for the Tsar. Who cares what the others say? The Tsar has been pretty good to me.*

‘I have never, in my life, thought or seen some of the things that the darkness shows me,’ Jack said. ‘It’s not me. It’s something else.’

‘It is a part of you, and it will never go away. Ever again. It is yours for life. You can try and squash it down, but it will sneak forth when you least expect it, and you will blackout and you will murder people because of it. Or you can learn it around people you cannot harm, and find safer ways to deal with it. It is less likely to do what you don’t want, if you give it a path, and a direction. Just because the Darkness opened those doors in your mind, doesn’t mean all of that malice and hatred isn’t yours. You always had a capacity for it, Jack. We all do.’

‘It’s true, mate,’ the Disciplinarian said.

Jack was mortified that the Disciplinarian was there in the first place, seeing all of this.

If Pitch wanted him to use his darkness, then, fine. Because it seemed almost too easy to use it now.

Jack didn’t shoot a barrage of ice from his staff this time. Instead, shafts of ice pushed up from the ground all around the Disciplinarian, who – clearly not expecting the attack – moved hurriedly away. Jack chose the moment he was distracted to shoot ice at him with his staff. His attack was more concerted this time, more strategic, and he stalked forwards wanting nothing more than to make sure he never had to hear his voice again. Not for the rest of his life.

When he stopped, the ice slid away from a protective dome of magic that glistened like oil slick. Then the dome slid away too, and the Disciplinarian lowered his staff.

‘Always thought you had a bit of a beef with me,’ the Disciplinarian said. ‘I was only ever doing my job, y’know.’
‘Yeah?’ Jack said, his voice hoarse. ‘Well, I’ve been ordered to do this, so I guess the both of us don’t have a choice.’

He sent out more of the ice. Even with exhaustion sitting heavily upon him, the ice seemed endless, and the wind around him was as furious as he was. It pushed him along the sawdust, making him move preternaturally fast. He felt himself lift onto it briefly, as he moved towards the Disciplinarian, teeth bared.

No time to be excited about that. He was tired of hearing that Pitch and the Disciplinarian were untouchable, unbeatable. It wasn’t true.

He heard a muffled sound, the Disciplinarian cursing under the sheer weight of ice falling upon him, pushing up randomly from the ground.

*How long will your magic last then, huh?* Jack thought, snarling. *Just how safe from me are you?*

‘What’s it like?’ Jack called, unable to stop himself from grinning, unable to stop the calculated joy of it. Deep down a screaming horror that he could be like this to anyone, but it was too deep now. It felt as though he’d always been this dark, cruel thing, and that the wholesome side of him was nothing more than a mask.

‘What’s it like to just have to take it?’

A boom of energy shook through Jack’s staff, and blue lightning skittered crazily from the tip, crawling along the sawdust, sending some of it sparking and popping. It wove its way around the towers of ice he’d used to imprison the Disciplinarian. Even now, his back burned.

A sob of breath then, and his energy was starting to flag. The wind rose and fell, unable to sustain itself. But he knew there was more. He knew there was more.

He dug into himself, rummaging through the darkness, the fantasies of killing, destroying, torturing the Disciplinarian into nothing but skin and blood and bits of bone. It wasn’t enough. The ice wasn’t going to be enough.

A raw cry as he found it.

‘You think—’ Jack gasped. ‘You think you’ve ever known me?’

Both hands iced to his staff, and he slammed the butt of it into the ground and then pointed it at the place where the Disciplinarian must have been beneath all that ice.

He expected more ice.

Instead, he was blinded by the sudden white-gold Light that flooded through him. It saturated the ice around him, suffused his flesh until his back didn’t hurt, until he felt warm and human again.

*I can make it?*

Jack stared at it, numb as thoughts began to abandon him. He’d poured himself out. Maybe he’d killed the Disciplinarian. He wasn’t happy about that anymore. Didn’t know if he’d be happy about anything, given that seeing the Light didn’t make him feel anything like joy or peace.

He fell, the staff sliding across the ground as he couldn’t make it support him.

A hand on his shoulder, and Jack looked up, blinking at Pitch. The Light was everywhere, he had
to shield his eyes. Why wasn’t it going away? He wasn’t even making it anymore.

‘A moment,’ Pitch said to him, and strode off decisively towards the ice.

Jack half-lay on the ground, supported by a hand on the sawdust, his legs shaking. He watched as Pitch used his sword to cut through the ice, which wouldn’t stop glowing. The ice was holding it, and it was too bright. Jack looked away again, heaved for breath. When had he become so breathless?

Then, he heard the sound of the Disciplinarian’s laughter. It didn’t sound mocking or crude. It was muffled, and it sounded relieved. A couple of minutes passed, and Jack could hear them talking to each other, but couldn’t make out their words. Then he heard footsteps approaching him.

Could he be grateful that the Disciplinarian was still alive, after all that hate? It turned out he could.

‘Careful,’ Pitch said. Jack didn’t think it was meant for him. He could hear them coming closer, and Jack knew his back was towards the Disciplinarian. Through sheer force of will he used his hands to move himself until he could shuffle so that his back wasn’t facing him.

‘I can’t believe it,’ the Disciplinarian said. ‘It’s not even fading.’

‘I’ve never seen anything like it,’ Pitch said, his voice muted.

‘It’s not even straight up ice, either. It’s wind, snow, all of it. It’s like winter itself. Crikey, I know some of us come back with magic from that mountain, but it shocks me to think of the mountain parting with this.’

‘Yet it did.’

‘And gave it to him?’

‘He’s stronger than you think,’ Pitch said. ‘Though I believe this training session has come to an end. Two days from now?’

‘Yeah, but remember, you owe me.’

‘I’m not likely to forget,’ Pitch said.

A pause, and then Jack heard the Disciplinarian come closer to him. He tensed, expecting revenge, or some bite in his voice. Some version of: ‘I’ll get you for this next time, brat.’

‘Hey there, Jack, no hard feelings, okay? You and I owe each other a long talk one day, but not now. Well, hoo roo, see you in a few days.’

Jack didn’t even have the presence of mind to raise his hand and wave farewell. He listened to Bunnymund leave, his footsteps fading until the sound of them disappeared.

His thoughts kept crashing into each other. Pitch had done all of this, manipulated all of it into happening and shown just how easy it was to pull upon Jack’s fears. It had worked, too. He’d lost control without blacking out, and no one had died. And beneath all of it, just like Pitch had posited, his Light was waiting.

The Light felt good enough while he was making it, but he thought he’d feel pure somehow, connected to everything around him. And now that it was gone, he felt the coldness of his body,
could taste ice in the back of his throat.

He sensed Pitch near him, and felt that if Pitch came any closer, he’d dig out whatever ice remained in him and try to kill him. Or if not kill him, just go for his Achilles tendons, or something equally painful. Jack didn’t even think it was the inner darkness now, driving that. His anger was so deep that it didn’t even feel bright and fiery. It was dull as stone, like a permanent fixture in his gut.

But above all of it, he felt confusion, and hurt. He swallowed and his throat hurt from all the gasping and shouting of before.

‘S’pose you’re feeling pretty happy with yourself,’ Jack said, his voice rough, biting.

‘You’re the one who made the Light,’ Pitch said calmly.

Jack managed a weary exhale of laughter, and then pushed himself up. His staff skidded and he didn’t know if he’d fall again. He felt himself shaking, glad that Pitch didn’t help him. He’d probably bite him or something equally stupid. How did these people tolerate him?

How did Anton and Eva care about him so much? How was he friends with Bunnymund? What was so good about him? It just seemed like he was a complete asshole with crappy tendencies and someone who just didn’t care about anything except some war he wasn’t even actively fighting.

Eventually Jack was standing under his own steam, and his breathing evened. He looked over at the towering edifice of ice and frost, and the light that glowed from within it. Still painful to look upon.

‘If you learn how to control it,’ Pitch said, following his gaze, ‘it could be tremendously useful to the Golden Warriors.’

‘Great,’ Jack said. ‘Can’t wait.’

Why had he wanted to be one again?

‘Did I break you?’ Pitch drawled, and Jack caught the flash of a smirk on his face as he turned away and picked up Jack’s smallsword where Jack had dropped it before. When he’d quit. When he’d quit and they hadn’t even let him walk away.

Jack accepted the sword and sheathed it, and met those golden eyes, feeling something dark and spiteful worm its way through him. He still couldn’t tell if it was the darkness or himself.

Pitch says it’s you. That it’s all you.

‘I dunno,’ Jack said, not even trying for lightness, unable to stop the bitterness. ‘Pretty sure I’ve got enough left to go for you.’

‘You’re welcome to try,’ Pitch said, ‘but you look tired. And we should get you back to your rooms.’

‘Room,’ Jack said. ‘It’s a single room. With a bathroom. I don’t have rooms. What, are you so used to saying it to everyone else, that you forget that you’ve just shoved me in the single room of your dead best friend?’

Pitch had been walking away, and then he’d stopped. When he turned around, the smirk had vanished.
'So you did?' Jack said.

He wasn’t even afraid. At this point he’d bled all the ability to care about any of it, out of himself. The first time he made the Light, he was supposed to make it among his peers, and he was supposed to feel the teamwork of it and the joy of it. Instead his back still stung from what Bunnymund had done to him. His chest ached from being hit with the butt of Pitch’s sword. There was no joy in this.

‘Careful,’ Pitch said.

‘You can dish it out, but you sure can’t take it,’ Jack said, following Pitch, legs slowly gaining their strength back. ‘Crossholt called that weakness.’

‘Ask me how much I care for the opinion of that small, miserable, dead man,’ Pitch said.

‘It’s not just me though,’ Jack said, as they entered the dark corridor. ‘It’s really not just me. Even the Tsar. You resorting to all this crap because you’re worried you can’t do your job anymore?’

Pitch’s steps slowed, and Jack felt himself begin to spark up a bit more, clenching his staff tightly. ‘Maybe—’

Pitch turned abruptly and Jack could feel the weight of Pitch’s glare. A flicker of fear then, and he looked away and still felt it, realising that Pitch wasn’t making it.

‘I would advise you to not keep bringing this matter up,’ Pitch said.

‘Or what?’ Jack said, meeting his eyes again. ‘You’ll spank me?’

He hadn’t really known that was what he was going to say until he said it. But once the words were out, the air between them went utterly still. Pitch didn’t move, and Jack couldn’t bring himself to say anything else.

Pitch stalked forwards and Jack backed up, breath coming faster, until he hit the wall behind him and grunted at the pain that flared in his back.

Pitch lifted an arm and Jack cringed away from it automatically, but Pitch did nothing more than rest his hand against the wall, by Jack’s face. He looked down at Jack and though his face seemed blank, there was something incredibly sharp in his eyes.

Then he just watched Jack, and it wasn’t intimidating at all.

Shit.

Pitch’s hand shifted until his thumb lightly touched the very back of Jack’s jaw.

‘Is that what you want, Jack?’ Pitch said, staring at him, unblinking. His voice was silky, even warm, but there was a precision to the sentence that made Jack feel as though he was pinned in place.

The tip of Pitch’s thumb was warm. As warm as the Light had made him feel.

‘N-No,’ Jack managed.

Pitch smiled.
‘Then why do you keep putting this nonsense out into the world? Almost everything that comes from your mouth... Do you think a spanking would pull you back in line?’

‘If it came from you? Probably not,’ Jack said, and then closed his eyes at his own daring. Why was he still baiting him? Why? The guy was the Royal Admiral for Light’s sake.

Pitch’s thumb drew along the underside of Jack’s jaw, and Jack swallowed, then swallowed again. It didn’t feel good. It didn’t feel sensual. It wasn’t anything at all.

Shit.

‘If it came from me, it absolutely would,’ Pitch said, still in that dangerously gentle tone of voice.

Jack said nothing else, and Pitch leaned closer.

‘Don’t tempt me,’ Pitch said in that same tone of voice. ‘You see, I have just as much darkness inside of me as you do, if not more, and I don’t think you’re ready to learn how I choose to direct it.’

Jack’s eyes opened then, and Pitch’s face was close to his. Objectively, he knew Pitch was taller than him, and broader, but this was the first time he’d really felt it since Pitch had pinned him on the mountain.

‘You did well today, Jack,’ Pitch said, ‘don’t ruin it now.’

The words made Jack blink, and they broke the spell. With a snarl, he shoved Pitch’s arm away and side-stepped, hating that he needed his staff to brace himself.

‘It was already ruined, thanks to you,’ Jack said. ‘Nothing about today matters. I don’t care how well you think I did.’

‘Don’t you?’ Pitch said, tilting his head.

Jack wanted to scream, because he still did. He still did. He hated it.

‘You made the Light today,’ Pitch added.

‘Stop it,’ Jack said, pointing the staff at him. ‘Just stop fucking with me.’

He could still feel Pitch’s touch along his jaw. It had been so tender, but it had been something else, too... Not possessive, exactly. But he had the sense that Pitch knew how to own someone. Which was exactly what he’d fantasised about, once upon a time.

‘No,’ Pitch said, ‘Regrettably, I will not stop until I know you have charge of your darkness, and your Light.’

‘Regrettably,’ Jack mocked. ‘Whatever.’

‘Do you think you’ll spy on me?’ Pitch said. ‘Has the Tsar asked it of you yet? Or is he simply enquiring as to my wellbeing?’

Jack ran a hand through his hair. It was frosted all the way through, and the delicate ice crystals broke at his touch.

‘Why does it matter to you? If you’re not doing anything wrong, it shouldn’t matter what I do.’
'Ah,’ Pitch said, smiling a little. ‘He’s nice to you, after all. Is that all it takes, Jack? A little niceness?’

It turned out there was one burst of rage left inside of him. It happened so fast. Gale force winds converged on them and before Pitch’s eyes had even finished widening, Jack had shot him through with several shards of ice. Nothing in his chest, no, at the last second he’d been able to pull that back.

But Pitch went down, ice in his arms, his legs. He looked at Jack in shock, his grey face paling.

‘Maybe that is all it takes,’ Jack bit out, ‘but it’s not like you’re ever going to find that out. Anyway, enjoy healing that, asshole.’

With that, Jack turned and forced himself to walk calmly down the corridor towards his room. As he went, he saw the glimmer of Light in the corners of his eyes that meant that Pitch was healing himself. He hated the relief that flooded him, knowing that Pitch could heal it, that he was going to be okay.
He spent the rest of his time after the training session feeling a combination of numb and scared that Pitch was going to come after him seeking retribution for what Jack had done right at the end in the corridor. As a result, he’d slept hard.

He woke early – his training at the Barracks drummed into him – and showered. His body felt sore and slow, but his thoughts raced.

The wind responded to him all the time now. He could feel it even in the bathroom. When he was mad, it was faster. When he was stressed, it moved like little cool fish against him. But aside from that, he felt more in control of himself, in control of his ice. It didn’t spiral away from him all the time. He could feel how after yesterday, it had settled down.

It made him furious.

Pitch was right. It didn’t matter if he was awful, and it didn’t matter if he had a face that Jack was starting to think was made for punching, and it didn’t even matter if he was apparently bad at being an Admiral or something because he’d been right all along. The moment Jack had actually accessed his darkness, the moment he’d not been able to run from it and gotten it out of his system, was the moment that his ice settled and he made the Light.

Jack ground his fists into the shower tiles and made a cut off growl in the back of his throat.

And Pitch was going to do it again. With Bunnymund there. He was going to do it again.

Jack knew he couldn’t just tough out the feeling of his back being lashed. He couldn’t. It made his mind crack through, which didn’t even make sense, because that had never happened when he’d been at the cross before, suffering through it.

Yeah, maybe because you knew if you didn’t tough it out, they’d just find something worse for you. Also, knowing what Crossholt’s stupid face would look like once he knew you wussed out of it.

Jack couldn’t even let himself think of what had happened in the corridor once he’d mouthed off to Pitch about being spanked. Every time he started to skirt close to Pitch standing over him like that, his thumb against Jack’s skin, it was like his brain pulled up the drawbridges and shoved Jack away.
Don’t think about that.

‘Cool,’ Jack said to himself, ‘I’ll just think about how much of an immense dick he is.’

That was totally doable.

* 

Etiquette classes happened as usual. He paid only enough attention to make sure he wasn’t scolded, and then thought about what he’d do with his afternoon. Pitch had said that they were going to continue in a few days. That probably meant he had the afternoon to himself, and that tomorrow would be a nightmare.

He took a slow breath. He needed to train, but he didn’t want to train with them. Maybe…he could find somewhere else.

A sharp rap to his wrist with a fork and Jack grunted and paid attention to what he was supposed to be doing. What was it today?

Right, the correct way to eat aspics. Disgusting, jiggling meat jelly.

‘I’m never going to eat this, like – ever,’ Jack said.

That earned him another rap to his wrist, and Jack sighed and tried to make himself concentrate.

* 

The following day, Jack woke early again, showered, dressed in what he thought of as his ‘Jack Frost uniform’ and left the Palace before his etiquette tutors showed up. He took his staff, he took a smallsword, and he felt his heart thumping in his ribcage like a frantic bird as he simply walked off the premises. He kept expecting people to come running after him, maybe his etiquette tutors, maybe a guard or something.

No one stopped him, and a few people even inclined their head to him in greeting.

Then, amazingly, he was just…free of the Palace.

Jack stood on the cobblestones out of the way of the carriages and the strange automobiles, and looked around. A part of him thought he should run back to the Palace and pretend he’d never done this. Because he’d never done this. Not since he was a very young child with Pippa, and they’d escaped the Creche for a little while to go do fun things for once. But he hadn’t done it a single time since she’d died. He’d been too focused on becoming a Golden Warrior.

That was supposed to have been one of the best days of his life, making that Light for the first time. One of the best.

It made it easier to set off away from the Palace. He didn’t have any money. He had no idea what he was going to do for food. But whatever. He’d had breakfast, and he could skip meals until he got back in the evening. And then he could ask about whatever stipend Flitmouse said they were getting for him. Maybe he could even ask Flitmouse, except Flitmouse said he never got home until about seven or eight in the evening, so visiting him was out of the question.

Jack wandered for a bit. He was interrupted a few times, until he learned that he was less likely to be stopped on the street if he walked with a bit more purpose in his stride, his chin up. Then people seemed to think he was on business.
Even if he did walk down the same street more than once because he had no idea where he was going.

Eventually he passed the Spymaster’s Tower of Memories, and he thought of going to see her – she’d been so nice to him – but then he remembered something he did need to chase up, and this time when he headed off in a new direction, there really was purpose to his step.

* 

He knew where North’s Workshop was. He’d never been, but he’d studied maps of the City of Lune from the very first week he’d arrived at the Barracks and learned that it was where they’d be heading sometimes. He’d always imagined they’d take him to the Workshop at some point, but they never did.

North’s Workshop was on the outskirts of the City, which was far larger than Jack realised. At least he was used to walking and he wasn’t carrying any heavy loads or anything, so it didn’t really bother him. The apartments and tenements looked increasingly poorer out here, though Jack saw little things that reminded him of home. People with straw birds hanging in their windows, carefully tended trees and gardens with edibles growing right there in the planters so that folks could cut down on grocery costs. If it was anything like what he vaguely remembered, maybe they all shared seeds with each other, so that they didn’t need to buy more than necessary. Or maybe there was some coin pool, where they could get collective seeds for the following year.

He lingered out here, his steps slowing. People didn’t dare interrupt him now, even though he could see some of them looking at him with something wistful on their faces.

Already he could hear Flitmouse’s voice echoing in his head:

“You’re nothing more than a pretty image for all the poor people to imagine themselves in the place of. If you can do it, maybe they can. Imagine. All of you. Collectively so stupid.’

It wasn’t that long ago that he saw nobles walking around and wouldn’t dream of interrupting them, even if it looked like they were dressed out of some fanciful, magical folktale. He’d seen North from a distance before, more than once, and just gazed. But why would he ever interrupt someone who was so high above him? Why would he risk their disdain or indifference, and why would he soil their perfect lives with his own, when he had nothing to offer?

That was how the people on the outskirts looked at him, and even though he felt like he was still one of them, he realised that he wasn’t. They wouldn’t accept him. Probably not ever again. They’d accept him as what the Tsar needed him to be, but he’d never be one of them in their eyes.

Jack kept his eyes ahead then, and tried to stop reminiscing, because it hurt too much.

* 

The houses thinned out to farmland, and then nothing at all except for snowy fields and the beginnings of forests. Eventually Jack saw the tracks and roads change before he saw the Workshop itself. These were not cobblestoned roads anymore, but heavy reinforced tarmac with steel runners built in. The kind of roads that were used to seeing ships rolled out – even the heaviest of warships. Even the air smelled different. Motor oil, fuel, a thickness of pine because they were so close to the wintertime forests with their clustering trees.

Over a snow-topped ridge, the Workshop itself finally came into view. The broad roads wound down like snakes. There, resting like they were upon an expanse of black water: the warships of
The Workshop wasn’t one huge building like Jack had thought as a child, but many clustered together. It was shipyards, hangars, an inventor’s laboratory and more besides. Jack stood there for a few moments, taking it in.

North had said he could come any time. Jack supposed he was about to find out if North meant it.

As he walked down the hill, following along the edge of the road, he felt the wind moving around him. It was so friendly. Maybe like having a hound excitedly bounding around him. Jack thought of baby goats in spring, bucking and jumping and getting into everything.

In response, he felt small little shoves at his back, as though the wind was just excited as he was about visiting North’s Workshop.

‘Okay, okay,’ Jack said, laughing, ‘I’m going.’

He held out his free hand and felt a breeze coil around him like a scarf, before sliding away and tickling at his neck and hair. At first he’d only thought of it as an extension of himself, like the frost, which didn’t seem to have any emotions but his own. But the wind was something else.

Maybe that was why he couldn’t fly just by willing it. Yesterday he’d thought that maybe he needed to let the wind lift him.

If the wind wasn’t just an extension of him, maybe he needed to ask?

Would that be weird?

‘Hey, remember when I flew?’ Jack said, feeling self-conscious.

A huge updraft around him, strong enough to dislodge snow from the ground all around him, sending it spiralling upwards. Jack’s blue cape ruffled upwards around his face, his hair got snow stuck in it, and he felt a great lift beneath his feet.

He hopped along the ground, holding out his arms, suddenly seeing how it must have worked the first time when he’d been so scared the wind must have just…must have just made it work.

The wind let him back down to the ground gently. He hadn’t truly been flying anyway, but-

‘Wow,’ Jack whispered, looking down at himself. ‘That’d make leaving the Palace way easier. Thanks.’

The wind ruffled his clothing in acknowledgement, then settled.

Now wasn’t the time to learn how to fly. But the knowledge that it was there, waited for him like a gift. He’d leave it, the anticipation already bright and sharp inside of him. A reason to escape the Palace in the morning. To find a place to learn how to fly.

* 

Jack was surprised that the yeti seemed to know who he was. They stood in the administration office, heavily furred and apparently not minding the heat. They talked to each other in a dialect that must have come from their home world, and then one stomped off with a forbidding expression on his face, beady eyes glistening.

‘So…’ Jack said, staring between the three that remained. Behind them, filing cabinets and a desk.
On the wall, framed blueprints of the earliest warship designs. Some of these weren’t North’s, but came from older engineers. ‘How’s everyone doing?’

One of the yeti rolled his eyes and shared a long-suffering look with the others, and then walked off towards another door and left, closing it behind him.

‘Not ones for small-talk, huh?’ Jack said nervously. They were huge. Two and a half times the size of him, and thickly made. He’d never seen them before except in illustrations. Rumour was that North had met them once in his days as a Golden Warrior, and some had volunteered to come back to Lune.

‘Ah, they are not being ones for much small talk at all, Jack Frost!’ North boomed, coming in through the door and smacking the yeti that had fetched him on the back in affection. Anyone else would have staggered forwards several steps. The yeti just absorbed it. His fur shuddered, and that was it. ‘Thank you, Phil, for fetching me. Come on, Jack! So good you are visiting!’

‘Really?’ Jack said, even as he followed North’s huge frame through the door. ‘Are you sure it’s not-’

He stopped when he saw the bowels of factory open up before him.

It was better than he’d ever dreamed. And he’d dreamed of it a lot.

There were the huge empty hulls of ships still being fitted out with gears and pneumatic systems, fuelled half with coal and half with magic. Along the walls were all the old and new prototypes of the hydrofoils – the tiny single-manned vehicles with solar sails to catch the light of stars and space winds all at once. Only the dragoons were allowed to fly those, and the Royal Admiral – before he’d ever been an Admiral – had been Commodore of the Dragoons.

Huge trestle tables of metal lined up by the walls of the factory, and hanging overhead were endless supplies of cabling, rotors and propellers, wires and bits of motor. The whole place smelled thickly of oils and coolants, everything seemed made of metal. It was dull and rusted, or it shone and gleamed.

Jack startled when a warm hand came down upon his shoulder. He looked up, North smiling down at him.

‘So how are you liking my Workshop?’

‘I mean,’ Jack said, gesturing at all of it, ‘I mean, just-’

North laughed. Jack wandered off towards the hydrofoils. He’d always wanted one. Several yeti looked up from their work and cast him dark looks under their hugely scruffy, furred eyebrows, but Jack ignored them. North would tell him to cut it out if he was doing anything wrong.

Jack reached out and touched one of the silver ones, running his fingers along the metal of it.

Then, his eyes widened when he saw a sleek, black hydrofoil secured in a metal fretwork. He had a small illustrated postcard with that very hydrofoil on it.

‘Is this the Mora?’ Jack said, staring back at North with wide eyes. ‘Why is she here?’

‘Pitch says she is being finicky in her old age,’ North said.

Jack didn’t get any closer. He’d collected news articles on it. North had made the Mora hydrofoil
for Pitch a long time ago, and then – always experimenting – had added more of his magic than
he’d intended to during a service. She’d gone from a reliable hydrofoil to one that had a mind of its
own, and seemed to famously be able to predict Pitch’s moods and needs when in battle.

North moved over to the small sail-ship, and she whirred and then buzzed in response. Two of the
three small stern thrusters turned slowly, and then stopped.

‘And she just does that on her own?’ Jack said, staring.

‘She is being upset that she is here and not out in the field. Normally I am taking my machines
apart for the workings inside but not her. But Pitch doesn’t want her back. Poor thing.’

North petted the black solar sail and Jack was momentarily distracted by the tattoos on his forearm.
Then, the Mora clattered again, sighed, and fell still. North looked over at Jack and then shrugged.

‘There is not much we can be doing, right now. I am hoping Pitch will change his mind. She is not
the only one who is finicky in her old age.’

‘I bet Pitch loves being called old,’ Jack said.

*I’ll just add that to the list of things I can bait him for, before he orders me killed or something.*

North’s gaze turned briefly mischievous, and then he placed his hands on his hips and turned all of
his considerable attention squarely onto Jack.

‘So, Jack! We can spend time looking all around this Workshop. But if you are being here for
something else, maybe you could tell me, yes?’

Jack looked over to the Mora, then looked around the Workshop again. Wouldn’t it be something
to just spend the entire day here? Maybe he could help, somehow. Feel useful. But North probably
didn’t want to babysit, and Jack was there for a reason.

‘Do you have somewhere a bit more private?’ Jack said.

North nodded, like he’d been expecting it all along. He pointed towards the back of the factory,
and Jack saw an arched door of stained glass. He was surprised he hadn’t noticed it until now,
given it was the only real burst of colour in the place.

Jack followed North past the heat of forges, the whine of saws cutting through metal, showers of
sparks falling onto the black and grey floor.

When North opened the glass doors, Jack was surprised to hear tinny classical music coming
through on a gramophone. The room itself was nothing like the factory itself, or even everything
else Jack had seen of the Workshop so far. For a start, he was in a lounge. It had a bit of a museum
feel to it, but Jack supposed that was because of all the silvery automata around the place.

‘This is where you live?’ Jack said, looking to blueprints on the wall, alongside fanciful
illustrations. He saw Jul trees there on thick paper, decorated with baubles and ornaments and stars.
There were sketches of tiny creatures wearing pointed hats, some of the hats coloured in festive red
ink. Each of them wore a silly grin or smile. By the fireplace, an automata of a mountain deer
wearing a harness and reins. Jack knew it would never need to have its clockwork wound to
manage those little mechanical flicks of its ears, the rise and fall of its left front hoof. North’s
magic made these creatures seem so lifelike.

‘It is being home,’ North said, closing the double doors behind him, shutting out the busy factory
sounds of the Workshop. ‘I don’t want to live anywhere but my Workshop. The Palace is- it is not somewhere I wish to stay.’

‘Right,’ Jack said, turning to look back at him.

‘Is it somewhere you are wishing to stay?’ North said gently, with a look that was a little too sharp. Then, once he’d finished wiping off his boots by the entry, he walked deeper into his home, gesturing for Jack to follow.

‘I don’t really...know,’ Jack said, staring at the kitchen that reminded him of home, even though he’d never had anything like this at any point in his life. But to see the copper and steel pans hanging from their hooks alongside drying herbs and more illustrations of feasts not taking place in some noble’s house, or the Palace, but just...peasant’s homes...

‘I am making you something to drink,’ North said, then he looked Jack over, ‘and eat.’

‘Really?’ Jack said, smiling slowly. ‘The Engineer of Wonders is doing that? For me?’

‘I am not so special as all that,’ North said, looking inside the fridge, then the larder, beginning to pull out food. Jack hopped up on the table without thinking, swinging his legs, and North turned to stare at him.

‘Oh, sorry!’ Jack said, beginning to slide off.

North shook his hand, came over, grasped Jack’s upper arms and lifted him back onto the table, as Jack was mid-slide.

‘It is where you are being comfortable.’

‘Yeah, but, it’s rude, right?’

‘But not here,’ North said, and then he laughed his huge, booming laugh. ‘Jack! I am not very good at caring about what is correct etiquette. I did not become a Warrior to be a servant to nobles, even if that’s what they say they are wanting.’

Jack stared at him in awe. Because unlike Pitch - who had shattered so much of what Jack had idolised about him - North was so much of what Jack had always imagined, in person. Huge and powerful, charismatic but humble, and handsome too, with his dark, manicured beard and the ink upon his arms, which they said went all the way across his chest and back. He even had his sabres, but next to them, the tools of an inventor – compass and protractor, blue and red layout pencils, a roll of blank paper for sketch an idea at a moment’s notice.

‘What are you thinking of the Palace now that you have lived there for...just over a month now, isn’t it?’

Jack blinked and then thought back. Had it really only been that long?

‘It feels like way longer,’ Jack said, frowning.

‘I am sure,’ North said, and then he chuckled over whatever he was making. It looked like a sandwich, if sandwiches had dreams of transcending even the wildest sandwich size. ‘Everything is strange in the Palace.’

‘I don’t really see much of it,’ Jack said.
‘Training, yes?’

‘And tutors,’ Jack said. ‘Etiquette and comportment.’

North made a sound of disgust. ‘They erase who you are, a blank slate for every new stage of your life. Because to them, everything you are until you become one of them, is there to be erased! Nothing at all.’

Jack blinked at North’s back. He swallowed. He didn’t want to say – but he didn’t disagree with that attitude like North did. It was kind of how he felt about his past as well. About himself.

‘You don’t think sometimes it’s good to erase certain things? Replace them with something new?’

Jack said tentatively. ‘You make newer, better machines all the time.’

A long silence, and then North kept one hand on the counter as he turned to look at Jack, his forehead furrowed.

‘Are you thinking that we are just machines, Jack?’

Jack stared back. ‘Well, not- I mean- Maybe- The creche kids kind of are.’

North opened his mouth, sparks jumping into his blue eyes, and Jack leaned back without thinking. He did not want to get into an argument with North. At all.

‘Hmm,’ North said, turning back to the counter. Jack knew he’d wanted to say something else.

‘Did you find out about Jamie?’ Jack said. ‘Is he okay? Is he alive?’

‘He is alive,’ North said calmly. ‘And he is being okay. He is wishing you were with him.’

Jack clenched the edges of the table with his hands. He hadn’t really expected an answer, and he hadn’t really known to expect a good answer until he got it. His next breath was shaky, and the next broke into nothingness, as pressed his lips together and tried to focus on not crying. He looked down, bowed his head, heard the sound of his ice crackling along the table and couldn’t make it stop. Not even when he heard North stop whatever he was doing and turn around.

‘Jack…’ North said.

Jack shook his head. If he opened his mouth and said anything, he knew that it wouldn’t be words that broke free. He was glad then, when North didn’t step towards him and try and console him. He felt like he was vibrating in place, as though a single touch would shatter him.

Focus made it safe to breathe again, and then he forced himself to look up at North’s face even though it was blurry through his tears.

‘Jamie’s okay?’ He couldn’t stop his voice from cracking. But he kept his composure otherwise.

‘You are being very close to him,’ North said, almost as though he wished he’d known it in advance somehow.

‘We’re like brothers,’ Jack said. He could use present tense and be sure that it wasn’t a mistake. ‘He’s the only person to really believe I can make it, as a Golden Warrior. As anything.’

‘He is missing you.’

‘You spoke to him? Can I see him? Where is he?’
‘Jack, I am... I cannot tell you these things. For his safety. You know this. He has deserted the military, and that is a crime against the Tsar. He will be killed if his location is ever discovered. Him, and every other child or adult who has ever deserted the military, or chosen something different for themselves.’

It was Flitmouse who had told Jack that the Guardians did what they could to protect the citizens of Lune, even if it meant the Tsar disagreed with them. Even if it meant they could be executed for what they were doing.

‘How can I be one of you?’ Jack said, tilting his head. ‘I don’t know anything about what you are, what this is. I love the Tsar, but- I don’t want Jamie- I couldn’t report him.’

‘It is hard,’ North said, turning back to the counter and finally coming back with two plates with stacked sandwiches upon them, and two glasses of something that was cold, fizzy, and bright pink. ‘It is hard to hold these things inside of us.’

North sighed and pushed Jack’s plate towards him.

‘I loved the Tsar,’ North said, ‘and everything about the Palace, once. Such a place of wonder it was to me, everything new and grand and how it felt, to be a part of history in a way that would be letting others remember me. I once threw myself down at my Tsar’s feet and vowed that I would give my life to him, the Tsarina, the Palace and all of Lune. I still remember how it is feeling, the way he touched me in response, the look on his face. Like love.’

‘But you don’t love him now?’ Jack said.

‘Jack, you will hear a lot of different things,’ North said, sighing.

‘Like Husthoun.’

North’s hands tightened hard on his sandwich, and half of it fell out onto the plate. He looked down and raised his eyebrows, and then laughed. When he looked up, his lips quirked.

‘And what are you hearing about that?’

So Jack launched clumsily into everything that Flitmouse had told him, and North ate his sandwich the entire time, nodding or gesturing for Jack to go on at certain points. When Jack was done, he realised that he’d literally just spoken something he could be killed for, and thought of Jamie somewhere safe, and didn’t have a word for the tense, uncomfortable feeling in his chest.

‘I think I know which little bird has been ear-bending you,’ North said, and then indicated that Jack should start eating. ‘It illustrates my example. You are going to be hearing a lot of things. I would love to simply tell you my way of seeing the world, like it is what you should believe, but Jack, you are an Overland. The entire world has always told you how to think and what to think, and I know that if I – as the Engineer of Wonders – tells you what to think, you may be giving my words more credence than your own thoughts. That is a mistake.’

‘But you know more than me,’ Jack said, around a mouthful of so many different flavours that they shouldn’t work, and yet kind of did. ‘About everything.’

‘Not about you,’ North said. ‘Not about your life or your experiences. People will even be telling you about you and your experiences like they know more than you. They’re wrong. You should have been hearing them, when I decided I was going to keep my first accent. But then – miracle of miracles – they just accepted it. And now it is a part of who I am. But I had to give myself more credence than them, and that is being- I am remembering how hard that was for me, yes? I am
thinking it may even be harder for you.’

‘So you’re just not going to tell me anything,’ Jack said.

‘People will be telling you a *great* deal,’ North said. ‘You are welcome to come to me *any* time, ask questions, tell me your thoughts. I want to know who *you* are, Jack. It is so good to see you here, in my Workshop. Did they let you go for the day?’

‘Uh,’ Jack said, and then he took a bite of his sandwich so he wouldn’t have to talk. From the look on North’s face, it wasn’t going to work as a strategy.

‘Don’t tell anyone where I went,’ Jack said, then. ‘I kind of ran away. I mean not for good or anything. Just... Maybe for the next few days. Or weeks.’

North nodded like this was perfectly normal, and then said:

‘Tell me what has been happening.’

Jack hedged, and then slowly, in stops and starts, he found himself spilling how things had been. He left out the meetings with the Tsar, but everything else – the meditation room, Pitch using Bunnymund in training, the Parade and the after-party, and everything else – he explained. Even Crossholt, because he knew that North *knew*. Talking about it was still painfully difficult. He was only able to sketch the barest outline of what he’d done, and then talked in more detail about the aftermath; Pitch offering to end his life or place him in an Asylum, or give him another chance.

North listened attentively. Occasionally he asked for clarification on something, but for the most part, he sat there and sometimes sipped at his drink.

Jack’s mouth was dry when he stopped, and he drank most of whatever North had given him at once. He didn’t appreciate the flavour until he was done and it was still fizzy at the roof of his mouth and the back of his throat. But it had been fruity, and Jack knew he hadn’t had at least two of the fruits before. He was discovering he kind of had a thing for different fruit flavours, and he took another sip.

‘I am thinking I need to talk to Pitch,’ North said, sighing.

‘What?’ Jack said. ‘That’s not- I didn’t tell you so you’d go to Pitch! He’s getting the results he wants. Why would he even *care*? He’s just going to think I can’t handle it.’

‘I think he is feeling very much the opposite of that,’ North said, leaning back in his chair. ‘But Jack, everyone has a breaking point.’

‘I’m just taking like a few days to not be at the Palace. I think you’d understand that more than most.’

North ran his fingers over his moustache and beard. ‘I will leave it for now,’ he said finally. ‘But Pitch and I were once friends, like Pitch and Bunny, and it might not seem so to you, but he will listen to me.’

Jack shrugged, then went back to eating his sandwich. It felt weird having talked about it. He couldn’t shake the feeling that maybe he shouldn’t have said anything at all, even if it was kind of vindicating that North wanted to intervene on his behalf. At least it wasn’t just Jack who thought that Pitch took things too far.

North changed the subject after that, and when lunch was over, North showed him through the
Workshop until the sun began to set and Jack had to reluctantly head his way back to the Palace.

*

The next morning, Jack slipped out early once more. This time he tried taking a different route out of the Palace, asking one of the servants to show him. He saw guards all over the place, but no one stopped him.

He spent the day wandering through the outskirts of the city. He didn’t feel like experimenting with the wind, or with the ability to fly. His visit with North had left him circumspect, and his skin crawled at the idea of shirking his duty like this in the first place.

But he didn’t want to train with Bunnymund again, and he didn’t think talking to Pitch about it would achieve anything at all.

He stayed out until it was nearly midnight, and then walked back to the Palace, frost fringing all of his clothing.

*

Friday, Jack woke even earlier, hated how guilty he felt that he kept doing this. Pitch would surely have noticed by now.

He still left.

He took his smallsword and with his staff and the sword, he did drills on his own in one of the forests. No one bothered him. It wasn’t the right time of year for anyone to forage for food, and it was too cold to be out for hours on end. It was perfect.

It occurred to him, some time in the late afternoon, that his powers seemed perfectly suited to a life spent alone out in the winter depths. Snow fell around him, and he was breathing hard from pushing himself, and he half wanted someone there to tell him he was doing a good job.

He remembered Pitch telling him that he was ‘doing so well’ during the meditation, and Jack’s face screwed up in frustration, and he went back to doing drills and training.

*

It was Saturday evening, after another day of skipping out on the Palace – and most of his meals – that someone came to him.

It wasn’t a guard, and it wasn’t Pitch.

Jack was startled awake and saw a figure standing over his bed. He blinked in confusion, and realised that in the dim light of his room, it was the Tsar. Jack gasped, wondered if he was dreaming, and the Tsar smiled at him. His teeth gleamed.

Then the Tsar reached out and turned on the lamp.

Jack looked around the room, and no one else was there. It was just the two of them.

‘Your Imperial—’

‘Gavril,’ the Tsar said, though he didn’t look irritated.

Jack nodded. He started to push himself up, but the Tsar waved him down, and then amazingly, sat
casually on the side of Jack’s bed. Jack could even smell a hint of something citrus and fresh in the air. Some kind of cologne the Tsar wore, maybe. Jack had never noticed it before.

It was then Jack realised the Tsar must have been in the equivalent of whatever a Tsar wore as pyjamas. Some soft, dark fabric, that looked like anyone else would be happy to wear it outside. But it was the least formal thing he’d ever seen the Tsar wear. Except for the two silver brooches on the collar.

‘I owe you an apology,’ the Tsar said, before drawing his legs up fully onto the bed, and reaching out and bracing himself, a hand flat on the blankets. With that move, he was almost pinning Jack’s legs.

‘Why?’ Jack said.

‘The after-party,’ the Tsar said, sighing. ‘I should have heeded you, and I did not. I don’t blame you for anything that happened after that. I wanted you to know, I have been thinking on it so often. I can’t leave it any longer. I am sorry, Jack. I had no idea you were so weak.’

Jack hesitated, then nodded. Was he weak? Pitch didn’t seem to think- But who knew what Pitch really thought.

The Tsar looked beautiful in the soft lamp lighting. His hair wasn’t perfect, for once. Some of the waves of his hair were out of place. Everything about him seemed gentler, except for that sharpness in his eyes. It was never hard to forget he was the Tsar, when Jack met his eyes.

‘You don’t disagree with me,’ the Tsar said.

‘I’m getting control of it,’ Jack replied.

Except I keep running away.

Did the Tsar know about that?

‘I want to make you stronger,’ the Tsar said, something wistful in his voice. ‘It can be done. It may require more work than I expected, but I have faith that you can do it, Jack. No one else believes in you like I do. I want you to have everything. But you must see me as cruel.’

‘What?’ Jack said, surprised. ‘No. I don’t. Really.’

‘Oh that’s sweet,’ the Tsar said. ‘What a sweet soul you are. See? It’s so easy to believe in you, when you’re like this. There are aspects of you that need to go, but I’m sure you know that. After all, who wishes to hold onto weakness?’

‘What do you want me to do?’ Jack said.

‘Let me think on that,’ the Tsar said. ‘In the meantime, Jack, how has Pitch been treating you?’

Jack rubbed at his eyes and his legs shifted. In response, the Tsar moved on the bed, and then placed his hand over the blankets, over his right knee. Jack blinked down at the touch.

‘Are you afraid to answer that question?’ the Tsar said.

‘I just- It’s hard. With training. To get everything under control. He’s been...fine.’

‘If you try again, maybe I’ll even believe you,’ the Tsar said, smiling.
'We don’t really get along,’ Jack said. ‘He’s not what I thought he’d be.’

‘Are any of us?’ The Tsar squeezed Jack’s calf gently, and then petted him through the blankets. ‘I abandoned you when you needed me most. You were exceptional at the Parade. I wanted to tell you! But oh, these parties, so much mingling.’ The Tsar laughed, and looked off towards the windows, up at the stars. ‘But the powers that the mountain gave you. Exceptional. How you must have been favoured.’

Jack didn’t say anything at all. After everything that had happened, he just wanted to grab onto every single one of the Tsar’s words and not let go. He didn’t want to break the spell somehow by speaking and causing inadvertent offense. He didn’t want to ruin it.

The Tsar was quiet for a time. In profile, Jack thought of posters and coins, of bank notes and statues in village greens. That he was sitting here in Jack’s room, on Jack’s bed...

‘Pitch reported that you are capable of making the Light,’ the Tsar said, while looking up at the stars. ‘Several days ago. It’s surprising, isn’t it? Who the mountain chooses. We lost so many good trainees, this time.’

Jack swallowed. He nodded.

‘I was lucky. I had help.’

The Tsar stroked a single finger from the base of Jack’s shin to the top, before poking idly at his knee through the blankets. It made Jack want to squirm, but he held still.

‘Why don’t you get along with Pitch?’ the Tsar said, looking over at Jack.

‘Oh,’ Jack shrugged. ‘You’ve probably heard about my record, right? Not so good at following orders.’

‘That’s not an answer,’ the Tsar said.

_Sounded pretty good to me._

‘I guess he just pushes hard,’ Jack said. ‘I mean he has to, right? He’s said that you basically...didn’t give him much of a choice. I mean with me losing it in the after-party, and embarrassing everyone, and I–’

‘I didn’t tell him that,’ the Tsar said slowly.

Jack frowned. ‘But he said–’

‘Who are you going to believe, Jack?’ the Tsar said, his voice turning frosty. ‘The Admiral who needs to be put to pasture, or the Tsar of Lune?’

‘No, but, I mean–’

The Tsar didn’t speak. He lifted his hand from Jack’s leg and stared at Jack silently, his face blank, his eyes sharp.

‘You,’ Jack said, after the silence felt like it was crowding all around him. ‘Of course you.’

_Very_ believable,’ the Tsar said, sliding off the bed.

Jack pushed back the blankets, the Tsar already walking away.
'Please wait?' Jack said, hating this. Why was he always doing this? He’d just agreed with the Tsar, but he couldn’t seem to do it right. ‘Please. I’m sorry. I’m just really confused. He didn’t- he told me something else.’

But Jack knew it wasn’t just that. Pitch had spoken to Anton about it, while he thought that Jack was sleeping. Did that mean he was lying to Anton too?

The Tsar paused, folded his arms. ‘He’s poisoned you this much already?’

‘What?’ Jack said, shaking his head. ‘No, I’m sorry. He keeps- I don’t even really like him. I’ve been leaving the Palace every day since I made the Light because I just hate- I... I’m sorry.’

Jack felt weak. He hadn’t meant to say any of that. Maybe the Tsar was right, he was just weak.

‘You have been leaving the Palace instead of coming to me like I asked you?’ the Tsar said, his face twisting like he was hurt. ‘Wasting our time like this? We are fighting a war, Jack, and if you dislike Pitch’s methods, you should have come to talk to me!’

‘But after the after-party...’

‘I’m going to enjoy this,’ the Tsar said, his arms still folded, expression frightening. ‘I cannot wait to hear what charming story you have about why you have been ignoring my instructions, and why you have been shirking your purpose. Are you going to tell me it’s hard for you? Oh, but we’ve already established that you have a weak little spirit, Jack. That’s why I asked you to come to me in the first place. So I could help you.’

Each one of the Tsar’s words were delivered incisively, but also with an emptiness that made them cut deeper. Jack could hardly think. And how could he argue his point? The Tsar had already apologised.

He felt sick.

‘I’m just not good at this,’ Jack said finally.

‘Let’s not work solely in understatement,’ the Tsar said, though his voice had softened. ‘I truly do not comprehend how the mountain let you free, while it took so many others. You.’

Jack felt colder than before, as though he was freezing from the inside out. It was happening slowly, but he felt like he was paralysed.

‘I’m sorry,’ Jack said.

‘What have I said to you about weakness?’ the Tsar snapped. ‘Except that you cannot quite help it, can you? No. I suppose it’s cruel of me to expect you to be anything more than what you actually are.’

It was getting harder to breathe easily, and Jack shook his head, quickly, because he’d done such a good job of impressing the Tsar, and now- it was like being around Crossholt. Except this wasn’t Crossholt, but the Tsar.

And if he says it, then it has to be true.

‘Do you wish- Do you wish the mountain had given my powers to someone else?’ Jack said.

‘Does it matter? It’s too late for that,’ the Tsar said.
Which was as much an answer as anything. Jack stared at some point past the Tsar and felt like he was being compressed into a small, tiny thing.

The Tsar pressed the heel of his hand to his forehead, and then slowly lowered both of his arms to his side. He walked back to the bed, and Jack couldn’t bring himself to look up. He could feel the warmth of the Tsar standing so close, his legs pressed against Jack’s bed. He could still see the indent in his bed out of the corner of his eye, where the Tsar had sat and spoken to him, touched him so gently.

‘I want to help you,’ the Tsar said.

‘But maybe I can’t be helped,’ Jack said, feeling no small amount of bitterness overcome him.

The Tsar leaned down then, caught Jack’s eye.

‘That doesn’t mean it’s not worth trying,’ the Tsar said. ‘Does it? I know we have been at odds, this evening. It wasn’t my wish, truly. Jack, you will never have someone help you like I can. Ever. And yet you seem to wish to reject it. Me. Can you imagine why I might not take that well?’

The Tsar laughed gently. He was being so nice now, and Jack wanted that so badly. The Tsar had made him feel so special, and Jack knew if he just tried harder, the Tsar might remember what Jack could be, and talk to him like that again.

‘You have to let me help you,’ the Tsar said. ‘You have to come to me when Pitch does these things, makes you feel like you need to run. I would never do that to you. I want to help you be stronger. Don’t you want that? And Jack, if there was anyone who could help you do that, it would only be me.’

Jack risked looking at him. The Tsar’s soft gaze matched the earnest tone of his voice.

‘I don’t want to be weak,’ Jack said, finally.

‘No one does,’ the Tsar said. ‘Jack, listen, I am a master at turning weaknesses into strengths. Lune is only a small planet, and it is under-resourced. And yet we have moved into our Golden Age because I knew that we could be supported by what could be found elsewhere. Trade agreements and more. And when we drew the ire of other nations, our military became one of the strongest in existence. Lune is small, it should not be what it is, it should not have achieved what we have achieved. And yet here we are. Don’t you want that for yourself?’

‘Yeah, of course I do.’

‘Good boy,’ the Tsar said, reaching out and grasping his shoulders. ‘Good. And listen, do not worry about this evening. Friends argue sometimes. It’s normal. It’s how we show love. Here, let me give you a gift. A token of my care.’

The Tsar unpinned one of the silver brooches. It was of a single flame enveloping a black circle. The sign of the Light vanquishing the Dark. The Tsar placed it on the bedside table tenderly.

‘There,’ the Tsar said. He offered Jack a rueful smile, then straightened. ‘Good evening, young master Jack.’

‘Good- Good evening,’ Jack said.

The Tsar left and closed the door behind him. Jack turned to look at the brooch. He reached out to touch it, and then at the last moment, couldn’t bring himself to.
His breathing still wasn’t back to normal. He felt exhausted in a way he hadn’t for some time. He remembered echoes of this with Crossholt, but it had never been like this, because there had never been a chance that Crossholt would ever see him as special, like the Tsar once had.

He sagged back onto the bed and pressed both of his hands into his chest.

He’d figure out a way to stop messing things up. He didn’t know how. But he would.

* 

Jack woke with a start, dread freezing him still when he realised it was Pitch standing over him. Pitch in his military regalia, sword strapped to his back instead of his side, and wearing the insignia of his rank. Pitch who he’d been concertedly avoiding for days.

He stood by Jack’s bed, by the faint glimmer of dawn, holding something small and silver in his fingers. Turning it slowly. Jack felt queasy when he realised it was the brooch the Tsar had given him.

Would Pitch know that it belonged to the Tsar?

‘Your room smells like his cologne,’ Pitch said, looking from the brooch to Jack, and then at the brooch again. ‘So he’s paying you night visits, now?’

‘You’re in uniform,’ Jack said, staring at him, not wanting to answer the question. He thought of the Tsar saying that Pitch had lied about needing to push Jack so hard, that he was under the Tsar’s orders. He wanted to ask but...

He didn’t know what to believe.

‘I am,’ Pitch said quietly.

‘Are you leaving?’ Jack said.

‘We’re leaving,’ Pitch said, staring down at him. ‘Pack your uniform. Ready your staff and smallsword. Everything else will be made available to you on the ship.’

‘The trainees are going on a mission?’ Jack said. That was soon.

‘No,’ Pitch said. ‘The trainees are not. You are coming with us. Leaving you alone in this Palace is not a good idea.’

‘Does the Tsar know I’m coming?’ Jack said, staring at the brooch that Pitch was turning in his hands. Pitch never looked away from Jack.

‘Does it matter?’ Pitch said, tossing the brooch into Jack’s lap. ‘You follow my orders. Perhaps you’ll remember what your purpose is, when you see what Darkness is really out there, away from his tête-à-têtes.’

‘But I’m not ready,’ Jack said.

‘It didn’t stop you on the platform,’ Pitch said, already walking away. ‘Either way, it’s not your choice. You have twenty minutes, or I’ll bind you and drag you there in your nightclothes. Which I’m certain will make a wonderful first impression on people who are supposed to be your comrades.’

Pitch stared at Jack without blinking for several more seconds, before turning with a swirl of his
coat, and walking briskly from the room.
This chapter kicked my ass up and down the street, and I'm SO glad to finally be posting it. Things are moving along now, I mean they always kind of were, but they're moving along in pretty specific ways that'll give whatever I have resembling a plot (if you find it, let me know, I've misplaced it) a move on. I think. :D

Hope you're all going well!

Jack stared out into space, at the stars around him, as he leaned over the railing of the huge warship they were travelling on. It was his first day away from Lune, and he felt as though he stuck out. Everyone else was in black with gold accents. And there he was in white and blue.

But everyone had been good to him. Better than good. An older guy called Yaromir – Yarrow for short, apparently – had shown Jack to his private bunk, which was tiny, but nothing he’d not been accustomed to before he lived in the Palace. And then a heavily scarred woman named Vera had given Jack a quick tour of the most important places on the ship – the mess hall, the engine room, the training deck and the vaulted internal training theatre, along with the quickest exits and entries to make sure that if there was a call to arms, he knew where to go.

Now, his cape and clothing fluttered around him, and he realised it was partly the winds the ship generated, but also the winds he influenced, too. Even out here, they listened.

His fingers briefly touched the collar of his cape. A place he might have put a brooch, if he hadn’t at the last minute thought the better of it, and hidden it beneath all of his clothing back at the Palace.

Footsteps, and he looked up to see Anton walking towards him. He cut a fine figure in uniform, and his hair was a vibrant red that faded to gold. He smiled warmly when he saw Jack, and then stood next to him and faced out towards the stars, leaning against the railing.

‘What’s it like? Is it your first time on a ship?’ Anton said.

Jack looked at all the dark spaces between the stars. The Living Darkness could be hiding there, and he’d have no idea. But he could almost feel it, somehow, whispering to him.

He made himself turn and smile at Anton.

‘It’s good. It’s not my first time.’

‘Oh, right, I’d forgotten. The test for ship sickness. But that ship doesn’t leave Lune’s atmosphere, does it?’

‘Nah,’ Jack said. ‘This is new.’

‘It’s always new,’ Anton said. ‘Well, for some of us. I love it out here.’

‘Where’s Eva?’
‘Oh,’ Anton said. ‘No, the Royal Admiral and Eva never go out on missions together. In case one of them – you know – doesn’t make it. They made a pact. So that Seraphina would always have one parent alive. It’s- It is what it is. Oh, Jack, I wish you could have seen them fight together, side by side. It was like nothing else. And hot, let’s not forget it was hot.’

Jack laughed in spite of himself, in spite of the tight feeling in his chest. A moment later, Anton laughed as well, and then he sighed.

‘Jack,’ Anton said, lowering his voice, ‘you’re new to all of this, so I’m going to lay down a ground rule. On the ship, he’s never Pitch, all right? Ever. There are a lot of things Admiral Pitchiner doesn’t reinforce back at the Palace, but here, he has a flogging post, he has an isolation room, and he has a dark-room. He’ll use them if he feels it’s necessary. It’s always fair, but- I wanted to give you a heads up. I don’t want to see you going to any of those places, but it’s utterly unethical for him to show favour to you or me or anyone else.’

It was something Jack had wondered, since coming onto the ship. Everyone else – even Anton – called him Admiral Pitchiner, or Sir.

‘What about if it’s just the two of us?’ Jack said.

‘It’s best to be safe,’ Anton said. ‘Not because he would punish you if it were just the two of you, but because if someone walks in or something happens- We have a good thing, out here, as Warriors. But that good thing is predicated on the Admiral being our leader, and not our friend.’

‘Oh, well, no fear of that,’ Jack said, and then sighed.

He felt Anton looking at the side of his head, and ignored it.

‘Jack,’ Anton said carefully, ‘is everything all right?’

‘Would it matter?’ Jack said. ‘I’m here now. Whatever, Anton, look, I know you mean well, but-’

Jack stilled when he felt the hand rest on his forearm. He looked down at it, and then met Anton’s golden eyes. They were almost more gold than Pitch’s. And luminous, too. Like he’d been born to fight the Darkness and nothing else.

‘Jack,’ Anton said, faintly reproving.

‘Hey,’ Jack said, ‘do you remember what P- what the Royal Admiral said about the Tsar? After the party and the Parade? The Royal Admiral said that the Tsar needed him to get me under hand faster. Or something like that?’

Anton’s eyes widened. ‘Yes,’ he said, like he wasn’t sure what Jack was getting at. ‘Is that all you remember?’

‘Did the Tsar actually say that to him?’

‘I didn’t see the conversation happen, but-’

‘So maybe it didn’t happen?’

Anton’s thick eyebrows furrowed, and then he pursed his lips. His fingers tightened minutely on Jack’s forearm.

‘I’m confused,’ Anton said. ‘Do you think the Admiral was lying? He’s- Jack, he doesn’t do that.'
Why would you think he was lying?’

Jack looked back out over the railing. At the stars, at the conspicuous darkness between the stars.

‘He lies,’ Jack said.

He wasn’t quite sure who he was talking about, in that moment. His chest hurt.

‘All right,’ Anton said slowly. ‘Jack, I have one question. Why do you think the Admiral was lying to you about this? Or me? Where did that idea come from?’

‘Maybe you’re lying too,’ Jack said.

Anton was still for a long time, and then he withdrew the touch on Jack’s arm and leaned against the railing again. He looked troubled. Jack wanted to apologise, but at the same time, he didn’t know who he could trust anymore.

‘Maybe,’ Anton said. ‘But we’d be in a sorry state if that’s how we treated each other. The Golden Warriors. And you’re one of us. Even if you don’t feel it yet, you are. You lie to someone, you fracture trust. You fracture trust with the people who have your back, and you’re going to be killed. I need to trust the people around me with my life, and so do you. So why would I want to fracture that?’

‘Yeah, but-’

‘Jack,’ Anton said. ‘Why are you thinking this way?’

Then Anton stiffened and his hands clenched the railing. He looked down at Jack, and his lips thinned.

‘The Tsar?’ he said. ‘The Tsar. He’s been trying to get between the two of you since the Parade. If not well before.’

‘No-’ Jack said, but couldn’t think of what else to say, and Anton looked certain. ‘I mean… I mean it doesn’t mean that he’s not wrong though, even if that’s what he’s doing.’

‘Oh, Jack,’ Anton said, looking stricken. ‘By the Light, I knew things were bad, but I didn’t know-’

‘Things aren’t bad,’ Jack said, frowning. He tensed when three Warriors walked past them on the deck. But they were talking amongst themselves, and one flashed a quick smile to them both before sinking back into animated conversation about the benefits of different sword types.

‘He deliberately isolated you at the after-party.’

‘No, but, I should’ve been able to handle it. He said-’

‘Jack,’ Anton said firmly, ‘he deliberately isolated you at the after-party.

‘He thought I could handle it,’ Jack said.

Anton looked furious, opened his mouth, and then closed it so abruptly that his teeth clicked together. Then he seemed to force himself to look back out over the railing. For a long time, he said nothing at all. Jack wanted to prompt him, but the conversation was threatening.

All of it was.
He could feel himself nearing the edge of some great precipice. One that would lead to executions
and Asylums and whippings and more. One that meant his best friend and almost-brother was no
longer in his life. One that took, and took, and gave no comfort back.

Jack startled when he felt fingers at the side of his face. He turned quickly, but Anton was just
smiling at him, cupping the side of his face, looking sadder than he had any right to look. In all of
the military posters, he was simply painted gazing up at the stars, a smirk on his face. If the Royal
Admiral was mythologised as the determined one, Anton was the most cavalier. Nothing like what
Jack saw now.

‘You’re too good for all of this,’ Anton said. ‘I’m sorry for that. But let’s change the subject. These
things are not what good missions are based on. Though I doubt the Royal Admiral will call it a
‘good mission’ anyway.’

‘Why?’

‘You’ll see,’ Anton said, dropping his hand and resting it on the hilt of his sword. ‘You’ll see soon
enough.’

With that, he walked off, and Jack watched him go, thinking that the myriad constellations out
there weren’t as confusing as the people around him.

*  *

It turned out that Pitch took his meals with everyone else in the mess hall. He had the same rations,
and he wasn’t even offered extras. He didn’t joke with anyone, but he made conversation with
anyone who approached him. Jack could tell those conversations were about serious matters –
military gear, strategy, star maps – even from where Jack sat.

Jack wasn’t excluded, surprised to find himself at the table with Yaromir and Vera, Anton the
Brave and others. Jack was happy to watch them talking amongst each other, and he ate quietly.
The rations were generous, better than he’d gotten in the Barracks, and he could almost feel his
digestive system sighing in relief to be away from the rich food of the Palace. He missed the fruit
though. There was no fruit on the ship.

Anton didn’t direct worried looks at him or anything like that. He simply treated Jack like a new
member of their crew. He joked about hazing rituals, while the others said the initiation in the
mountain was hazing enough. Anton opined about the quality of food while clearly not minding the
rations. Jack found it easy to see then why he was so beloved by the other Golden Warriors. He
kept the conversation flowing easily, and was a master at redirecting it when necessary. Their table
was the one with the most laughter.

Later, when the plates were being cleared away by a nominated head of each trestle table, Jack
looked over to Pitch and was surprised to find Pitch staring at him. His face was difficult to read.
Not quite blank, and not disapproving.

Which didn’t really make any sense.

But then Pitch got up and exited, and Jack followed Anton and the others down to the training
theatre.

He wasn’t allowed to join in with their specific manoeuvres yet, but he was directed to watch, to
remember what he could.

He sat on the sidelines as they made their Light in unison. Watched them form lines or ranks,
move as one, or break apart at some invisible command to burst out and attack as though facing the Darkness from all sides. It was sobering. Because wherever they landed, they might be doing that soon. Out in space, the Darkness could even come and attack the ship directly.

Later, Anton and Yaromir walked up to where he was sitting in the stands, and beckoned him down.

‘What?’ Jack said.

‘We must see this ice of yours!’ Yaromir said, grinning, his crooked smile full of crooked teeth. But his eyes were bright and kind. ‘Or are you only the Boy of Snow?’

‘Come on,’ Anton said, grinning at him, then winking. ‘Come show us. We want to see.’

Jack looked at the others, who were watching. Many of the Golden Warriors had left to get ready to sleep, or for watches, but there were about forty remaining.

‘I’m not- I’m still learning how to control it,’ Jack said. But he stood, he held his staff tighter. His heart beat faster.

‘Excellent!’ Anton said. ‘We’re in a training theatre. I can’t think of any better place to train, than a training theatre. Can you, Yarrow?’

‘I cannot,’ Yaromir said, turning to sweep his arm expansively towards the training ground. Several other Golden Warriors backed away to make room.

‘And I can’t make the Light yet,’ Jack said.

He didn’t want to say that he could, but it was unreliable, and he’d probably have to try and kill people first.

*Because that’s not...how you make good first impressions.*

‘So you’ll learn,’ Anton said. ‘Come on, Jack. If you want to be one of us, you can’t sit on the sidelines forever.’

‘I *suppose,*’ Jack said, walking down the stairs towards the training ground, finding their good-natured attitudes contagious. He wanted to know what it was like to train with them. It would take him months to learn their manoeuvres – longer, in fact, until he had a better grasp of his Light.

Then they made a circle around him, and Jack looked and then laughed a little.

‘It’s not going to be enough space,’ Jack said. ‘If you don’t want the snow, and want the ice stuff? It sort of- Maybe just stand behind me? And leave the front?’

‘Oh, look at him, giving orders,’ Anton said.

‘Or you can just totally stand around me like this and take your chances,’ Jack added.

‘All right everyone,’ Yaromir said, ‘you heard him. Back up. Where does the ice come from? Do you need a source of water?’

‘Nope,’ Jack said. ‘I dunno how it works. It’s just there.’

‘I wish the mountain gave me the power of sunlight or something,’ said a voice from the back. ‘Then it wouldn’t be so damn *cold* on Lune all the time.’
‘Not this again,’ someone else said.

‘Quieten down,’ Anton said reprovingly. ‘Maybe Jack needs total silence. Did you ever think of that?’

‘I don’t,’ Jack said.

‘Then why aren’t you making the ice?’ Anton said, in mock surprise. ‘Is there some magical word we need to use?’

‘No, I…’

‘He’s shy,’ said another stranger’s voice, and Jack looked over his shoulder.

It was a little intimidating, all of those Golden Warriors in uniform standing behind him, the smell of sweat in the air from all the hard training they’d done, the glare of Light still seared into the back of Jack’s eyes. All of them looking at him. These weren’t strangers in the City of Lune. These were people he’d looked up to all his life.

Jack left his smallsword at his side and clasped his staff in two hands. He could already feel the ice at his fingertips. When he was nervous, it was more likely to be ice anyway.

Then he tried to think of what they’d like to see. He’d been trying things in the forests on his own. But he had no idea-


The wind came to him first, moving his cape, ruffling his hair. Jack stepped forward, thinking of the things he’d been trying.

Then he stepped into the wind and swept his staff out, biting his top lip even as he felt that wintry cold take him over. First, the huge ice barrier he’d been working on. Stretching from one side of the stands to the other, topped with huge jags of ice and causing some wilder side of himself come to the surface.

The ice crackled into being, stretched in shards up to the sky, and Jack stared at it in some satisfaction and turned.

‘So like that?’ Jack said to Anton.

Anton stared at the barrier. Jack looked past him to the others. They were all staring.

Jack waved his staff and the ice crumpled to the ground.

‘Ah,’ Jack added, ‘I can’t make it disappear once it’s appeared. So it’s just gonna…make a huge mess.’

‘Is that effective against the Darkness?’ Anton said. ‘Will it stop it?’

‘I have no idea,’ Jack said.

‘I wonder…’ Anton said, touching two fingers to his chin. ‘How hard was that to make?’

‘Do I look out of breath to you?’

Anton’s lips quirked on what could have been a quickly stifled grin. Then he placed both of his
hands on his hips and leaned back, looking to all of the other Golden Warriors.

‘Look how confident he is, I bet that was all he could do. An ice barrier. Impressive, but obviously that’s all for tonight.’

‘A short but effective show,’ Yaromir said, mocking at disappointment.

Jack knew he was being baited. He was pretty sure they all knew that he knew. And yet he liked it. This was like being with Jamie, somehow. They’d rib each other, but it was never ill-spirited. And Jack wasn’t tired, and he’d been trying other things too.

‘Yeah, yeah,’ Jack said, hoping he wasn’t crossing any boundaries by being too casual. He walked across the training theatre and grasped one of the dummies they used to mimic the Darkness. Instead of being shaped like a person, it was shaped like a hulking creature, and Jack shuddered even as he touched it. But he dragged it into position, and then walked back to where he’d been before.

He’d used unfortunate trees for target practice in the forest – though he tried to pick dying or dead ones – this would probably be easier.

_**Yeah, just pretend it’s Bunnymund.**_

That made things _much_ easier.

Jack let his ice loose, focusing it on the target. First the shards of ice coming directly from his staff, and then when he couldn’t see the target anymore, he reached into that well of power inside of himself and found that crackling ice lightning – whatever it was, it blasted the building ice away and then knocked the figure back. The air filled with the sounds of booms and the frenetic snaps and breaking of ice that would build on itself and the fall apart in brittle, glass-sharp pieces.

Jack touched his staff to the ground, swung it sharply upwards, approaching the target, and as with Bunnymund, ice shot up from the ground. It knocked the target over, and Jack used the wind to push it back up without thinking, and then blasted it again.

He stopped when he knocked it back into the opposite wall, realising how far he’d pushed it.

He lowered his staff, turned back and opened his mouth to say something cocky, and then saw Pitch standing above them all, at the top of the stairs that led down into the training theatre.

Anton turned and followed Jack’s gaze, and Jack expected them all to be intimidated, but instead Anton just waved.

‘Admiral! Are you coming down?’

‘Not tonight,’ Pitch called, his voice echoing amongst the vaulted ceiling. ‘Frost, if you make that much ice in the training theatre, you’re cleaning it away, too.’

Jack nodded. Then added: ‘Yes, Admiral Pitchiner.’

He couldn’t see Pitch’s expression properly, as Pitch was half in the shadows, and quite far back. It didn’t matter. Pitch turned away, and then left.

Jack looked at all the ice he’d made in some dismay, and then walked over to it, wondering what the best way to start cleaning it up was. It left huge messes of water wherever he made it.
Footsteps coming up beside and behind him. Jack looked up to see the Golden Warriors standing around him. One picked up a shard thoughtfully, and then said to another:

‘Careful, it’s very sharp.’

‘We should get some of the laundry carts,’ another said. ‘Just toss it overboard.’

‘Surprisingly good thinking from you, Xenia,’ Yaromir said, with a laugh.

‘I have my moments,’ she replied, grinning.

‘But—’ Jack said, confused, ‘I thought I had to do this—’

‘What, alone?’ Anton said, raising his eyebrows. ‘We asked you to show us the ice. We’ll all help. It’s only fair.’

That was how Jack figured out he could use the winds to help lift or shift the ice into the laundry carts that some of the others fetched. And Jack looked around him in wonder as they all moved the carts up to the deck, and then with a giant cheer, pushed the ice off the ship and watched it float behind them, growing more and more distant, until it looked like all the stars blinking around them.

*

Anton walked Jack back to his small bunk, and then leaned against the narrow door that would give Jack privacy.

‘So that’s what you’ve been hiding behind those pretty snowfalls,’ he said, looking impressed.

‘I mean I don’t know if it will work against the Darkness,’ Jack said. ‘And while I can’t make the Light…’

‘I don’t think anyone really cares,’ Anton said. ‘That’s the kind of thing that we work on together. We can’t use the same training routines for the rest of our lives, and if one of us ends up with a unique skill, the others will want to learn how to use it. I make the strongest Light, so there I end up, on the frontlines. Or just behind, for the last burst when needed.’

‘I thought the Admiral made the strongest Light?’

‘It’s…different,’ Anton said, tilting his head and looking off, clearly thinking about it. ‘He saves his, in case we need emergency teleportation, or someone needs healing. We have healers, but no one else can get people up and functional again like he can. So he’ll use it, but not like me. I tend to use myself up, and then I need to recharge.’

‘That’s why you’re Anton the Brave,’ Jack said.

‘No, that’s not why,’ Anton said, laughing. ‘I’m called Anton the Brave because I stay out in the frontlines, even when I have no Light left. The Admiral doesn’t like it, and it’s ended with me in the dark-room more than once, but some of the others started calling me that and it stuck. The Admiral says I’ll get myself killed one day.’

‘You can’t fight the Darkness if you’ve got no Light left,’ Jack said, frowning.

‘Not directly,’ Anton said. ‘But not all fights are won directly, Jack. Sometimes the fight is won when you stick around to make sure an injured friend gets safely off the field. I can’t really help it. We all have those things about us that make us who we are, even if someone disapproves. Even the
Admiral, he can’t let me get away with everything I do, but he also accepts who I am.’

Jack rubbed at the back of his neck, shrugging. Pitch might accept Anton, but he’d never accept Jack. No one in the Palace wanted to accept him for who he was. They all wanted slightly different versions of him. Flitmouse wanted him to think seditious things and join his side. Pitch wanted him to become a Warrior and be less…whatever Jack was now. The Tsar-

Jack closed his eyes and almost laughed.

‘Why do you look so sad?’ Anton said, and Jack’s eyes flew open. Anton’s eyebrows were pulled together. Jack realised they were dyed dark red, to match his hair.

‘Just tired,’ Jack said. ‘It’s how I look when I’m tired.’

Anton reached out with his hand, as though to touch Jack’s face, and then at the last moment his arm dropped and he shifted against the doorframe.

‘If you ever need someone to talk to,’ Anton said, ‘you should probably pick Eva. But as she’s not here, I’ll do in a pinch. I’ll also tell you you’re cute. But Eva will do that too.’

Jack laughed in spite of himself. After a beat, Anton held out his hand, and Jack stared at it. Then, warily, he extended his own hand.

Anton grasped his warmly and shook it, then placed his other hand on top of it.

‘Anton the Brave,’ Anton said, ‘pleased to meet you, Jack Frost. We’ll make a Golden Warrior of you yet. Good night, Jack.’

‘Ah, good evening,’ Jack said.

‘So polite,’ Anton said, already turning and walking away. ‘Such a polite young lad. And so pretty, too!’

Then he turned a corner and was gone, and Jack closed the door to his cramped cubicle and rested his staff on one of the hooks provided. Beneath his feet he could feel the rumble of the ship’s engines, and in his heart he could still feel the wind swirling, ice glittering on the back of it.

He told himself he couldn’t hear the Darkness whispering from beyond the ship. It was just his imagination. He was new to all of this. It was just nerves.

*

After a week and a half of travelling – and Jack spending a lot of time keeping out of people’s way, while learning the ropes; sometimes literally in the case of the solar sails – they sighted Endan, and announced landfall in a day.

Jack watched the pink-red planet loom closer. His ice weaved jagged patterns along the rails and without having anywhere to properly exercise his ice, or whatever his darkness was, he could sometimes feel flashes of malice creeping back. He didn’t know if it was because he was out here, where the saturation of Darkness was so much higher, or if it was because he wasn’t exorcising it somehow via training.

Pitch never brought it up. In fact, Pitch hardly interacted with Jack at all. It didn’t seem personal, he was incredibly busy, and whenever Jack caught glimpses of him, he was doing all the things Jack had imagined him doing as a child – marching somewhere in uniform with his chin up and his
certain eyes focused ahead, or chatting authoritatively to a group of Golden Warriors, or talking with the ship’s pilot over the wheel, tapping his fingers on a spoke before he’d drop his hand and argue animatedly about some point regarding their course.

Weirdly, Jack thought Pitch seemed more himself out here on the ship, than he’d seemed back in the Palace. But maybe he was just imagining it.

* 

They stood in a deserted city. The skyscrapers made of a dull, black metal. Some of the frontages of abandoned shops had been plastered in the same pink-red sand that gave Endan its colour.

He’d expected a barrage of Shadows and Darkness. He’d expected the Golden Warriors to immediately be on the attack or defense.

Instead, he stood and watched as about twenty filed into a building with heavy, reinforced carts, and then emerged about an hour later with piles of bullion. Gold and silver, and a greenish metal Jack wasn’t familiar with. Other Golden Warriors stood on watch with their weapons out, but it was obvious they weren’t expecting any attacks.

Pitch had told Jack to stay by him. To Jack’s surprise, this meant standing some distance away, overseeing what was happening.

‘I don’t understand, Admiral,’ Jack said, confused. ‘Where is everyone?’

‘We were at war with them,’ Pitch said. ‘Then the Darkness came. It exterminated everyone on the planet.’

Cart after cart of bullion – heavy, shining bricks of wealth. An entire city’s worth.

‘And we’re just allowed to take- I mean that’s a lot of…’

‘Why do you think Lune is so rich?’ Pitch said.

Jack looked up at him, and Pitch had a wry smile on his face, staring at his Golden Warriors.

‘No one else but the Golden Warriors can go back to these planets, after all,’ Pitch added. Then: ‘What, expecting something a bit flashier?’

‘I- Aren’t we here to fight the Darkness?’

‘Sometimes,’ Pitch said. ‘Some missions. Some of them are what you might call a restock. Besides, the Tsar will inform you quite happily that there is no one left here on Endan to enjoy it; except of course for the handful of Endanian refugees who surrendered to avoid our wrath. Then he’d tell you that we’re repatriating the wealth to them.’

‘Are we?’

‘They’ll never see this,’ Pitch said calmly. ‘Or perhaps they will see it from afar, as the nobles grow ever richer, and the divide between the upper eschelons and the peasants grows ever more abyssal.’

Jack watched the Golden Warriors. They’d all seemed far happier on the ship. Now they seemed lacklustre – grim and determined, but with little joking or companionship. Jack recalled Anton saying this wasn’t what Pitch would call a ‘good mission.’
In all of the stories he’d been told about the Golden Warriors, there had never been a version that went:

*The great Golden Warriors went to abandoned planets to plunder their wealth.*

‘I don’t like this,’ Jack said abruptly. ‘Everyone- If there’s Endanian refugees left, shouldn’t they have this? Shouldn’t they be here? Couldn’t we somehow give them back- You know, it’s a *whole city.*’

‘With the Darkness?’ Pitch said. ‘You’d what, bring them all back here, so they can be possessed by it?’

‘Yeah, but-’ Jack hesitated. ‘Shouldn’t we be...defeating the Darkness?’

‘On an entire planet? No one likes to say so aloud, but we struggle to contain it on Lune.’

‘Well, then, shouldn’t we give the gold to them?’

‘The Tsar is quite certain they’d have no idea what to do with it, and he would tell you that it would imbalance the Lune economy.’

Jack opened his mouth and then looked around at the deserted streets. This was only one small section. The city sprawled. It clearly had held more citizens once than the entire city of Lune.

A faint whispering at the corner of his mind distracted him from his thoughts. Then it was closer, as though someone had leaned and breathed into his ear.

He turned sharply to look to see if anyone was near them. But he couldn’t see anything. Not even the Darkness. Still, he stared off down another street and felt his skin crawl. The whispering hadn’t exactly stopped, and it crept upon him, making him feel itchy in his clothing.

A minute later Pitch turned and faced the same direction.

‘You can hear it?’ Pitch said.

‘What is it?’

‘It’s the Darkness,’ Pitch said quietly. ‘I think you may be better at sensing it than I am.’

Pitch’s hand drifted down to his sword, and several Golden Warriors paused and looked at him. But Pitch waved them back, and kept looking in that direction, eyes narrowing.

‘You’re in danger,’ Pitch said abruptly.

The whispering was getting louder. Every now and then, something that sounded almost like a voice. In response, Jack heard something whispering inside himself. Some malicious *thing* that yearned to be back with what was familiar. Jack clutched his staff harder, the winds on the planet picked up around them.

‘It’s coming closer,’ Jack said. ‘It is, right?’

‘It’s quite far away,’ Pitch said. ‘But it’s approaching. It can possibly sense your locus of power.’

Jack nodded, frowning. He didn’t know that. He planted his feet and tried not to listen to the whispering. He couldn’t hear any words anyway, but even so, the wind around him banked and fluttered uncertainly, as confused as he was.
He gasped as he realised something.

‘Wait, does that mean the Darkness attacked the Palace because of me?’

Pitch looked down at him, and Jack thought of all the times to be reminded of Pitch cornering him in that stupid corridor, now was not the time.

‘No,’ Pitch said. ‘That had nothing to do with you. If it had, don’t you think we would have removed you from the Palace as soon as possible? Why would we have ever let you stay there?’

‘Oh,’ Jack said. That made sense. ‘Cool.’

Whispering again, but from another direction. Jack spun, staring in the opposite direction. He couldn’t see anything except this ghost metropolis, those carts filled with bricks of precious metals.

‘I shouldn’t be here,’ Jack whispered. ‘It’s too soon.’

‘It is,’ Pitch said. ‘But I’m not sending you back to the ship. At some point, we need to know if your ice can be used against the Darkness at all. As it can hold the Light, I have a few ideas already. You’ll be protected, Jack. Whatever happens, you must not cross into the frontlines.’

‘Yeah,’ Jack said. ‘I mean, yes, Admiral.’

Fingers at his jaw and chin, and Jack winced when Pitch just turned his head to look up like it was easy. Turned his head away from that whispering that he could hear, even though he couldn’t see the Darkness anywhere.

‘I mean it,’ Pitch said, staring at him.

Jack couldn’t even nod properly, but he tried. Jack could feel Pitch’s nails against his skin. The smooth curve of them, like they were manicured, or had been recently filed.

‘Can you hear the Darkness coming from any other direction?’ Pitch said.

Jack closed his eyes and tried to feel out the whispering, even though it made his skin prickle to do it. He could feel all the tiny hairs standing up all over his body. After about a minute, he shook his head.

‘If that changes, and you get a chance, tell me. Now, let us join the rest of the Warriors. I am not a fan of ambushes.’

‘Is anyone?’ Jack said.

Pitch’s eyebrows lifted as he marched off, like he conceded the point, but he didn’t reply.

*

First, it had been orders and different Warriors moving together in the units that fit them best. Jack stayed in the centre with those nominated to keep pushing the carts. They stood like they were in training manoeuvres – granted advanced ones that Jack wasn’t really familiar with – but all the same, he couldn’t see any Darkness. They just prepared themselves calmly in the dead city, by the wealth they were taking from it, weapons out.

Then, the Darkness became louder and louder – though only in his mind. Jack shook his head to try and clear it, but he couldn’t. It was just there. His brain kept trying to piece it together, but the only real thing he knew was that whenever the ominous whisper of it rose, some lurking thing inside of
him roused and shifted. It made him accidentally freeze his hand to his staff. It had ice crackling out in tiny spears from underneath his feet.

The Warriors focused on moving the wealth back to ship, with units facing outwards, and Jack following alongside one of the carts. Everyone had their orders.

Jack’s breathing was doing strange things.

This wasn’t like the platform where the Darkness was suddenly there. It wasn’t even like with Pippa, when it had been there, and he’d tried to save her-

Waiting for it like this was awful.

‘Can you hear it?’ Jack whispered to Yaromir, who was pushing one of the heavy carts.

Yaromir squinted at him, tufted eyebrows creasing together, and then he seemed to realise what Jack was talking about and shook his head.

‘No. Most of us are not able to hear it. It is better that way. It is not pleasant in battle. To hear. It means my Light is not as strong, but it...it is still better this way.’

Jack swallowed, feeling zero reassurance at that. How was it possible to feel so cold when he was already cold?

His cape flapped in a wind that mostly centred around him. He couldn’t seem to turn it off. Pitch was checking in on units, moving around, he seemed frustrated to be on the ground. Jack thought of Mora, his hydrofoil, back in North’s Workshop.

Then, Pitch came to him and pointed to one of the directions that the Darkness was approaching from. That none of them could see.

‘Jack, can you make it snow? Here?’

‘Now?’

‘Yes, enough to cover everyone.’

Jack nodded, did it without really thinking. He made sure the snowfall wasn’t too heavy. Everyone needed to see where they were going.

Pitch withdrew his sword and in a few short steps, sent Light directly up into it.

The awe that followed, seeing it glow the way it did, seeing it hold the Light – Jack wanted to savour it. He did. But the Darkness chose that moment to reveal itself, pooling up from the sand and roads in both directions. Growing from distant seams in the ground.

Pitch commanded others to keep sending Light up into the snow, and then was off, as were several of the other units, moving towards the Darkness even as the carts weren’t abandoned.

It looked like oil at first. Then it shifted and rose into the air like smoke. Then it seemed fluid, cresting like a wave metres across. From it, separate nightmare men and fearlings split off, some running, some crawling, some clearly broken and twisted, with arms growing from heads, or moving like fleshy, giant black caterpillars upon the ground.

All his training couldn’t prepare him for the crest of fear that came. At first he thought it was normal to want to run, but when the other Golden Warriors weren’t running, he remembered
distantly that this was what the Darkness did. It evoked fear.

The whispering had vanished. In its place, a coiling, oozing feeling inside of him. He kept the snow going, but it was falling faster than before, more compacted, the ice chunks inside larger. He couldn’t control it as he wanted to.

Even without using words, the Darkness called to him.

He looked to Pitch in alarm, because it was one thing to be told he wasn’t ready and think that Pitch didn’t really know what he was talking about – to living his lack of understanding. He wasn’t ready.

*Shit.*

Without really thinking about it, Jack stamped his staff down into the pink-orange road and sent up a flare of ice. Then another. Even as Pitch turned, Jack sent up another, and could see the Darkness on both sides and the ship in the distance. He remembered abruptly sitting on the ground back at the Barracks with Pitch. Pitch had given him a choice. To keep trying and live or to go to an Asylum and probably die.

Had he made the wrong choice?

‘Jack,’ Yaromir said, under his breath. ‘Jack, it is like this for everyone, in the beginning.’

Except it wasn’t.

Jack wasn’t afraid for himself. Or he was, but that wasn’t the fear that pressed down hardest. He was afraid for what he’d do. In his mind’s eye he saw the attacks he’d unleashed on Bunnymund, that he’d unleashed on Pitch, on Crossholt. On Warriors he didn’t know the first time he’d come out of the mountain.

By the Light, some of them were likely standing near him right now.

Jack flinched at the Darkness that surged towards him, and then realised it was just Pitch. Fingers at his jaw again, even harder than before, and Jack was blinking up into golden eyes-

A mind-wiping surge of terror that made a sweat break out all over him. He staggered, and Pitch kept him upright.

The gasp that followed scoured his throat and he coughed hard, but the building fear was broken and he was able to concentrate again. He could hear the Darkness as distant whispering, and not as some beast waking inside of himself. He wanted to sag in Pitch’s grip, but he planted his feet, locked his knees. Now wasn’t the time.

‘Keep the snow going,’ Pitch said. ‘Stay here.’

‘Yes, Admiral,’ Jack said, nodding. He felt shuddery and weak, but grateful for once that Pitch could do whatever he’d just done, could use one form of fear to override another.

* The Golden Warriors were not as well-matched to their opponent as Jack had hoped. They kept the Darkness back on both sides, but they struggled. The battle was strangely silent – except for orders shouted, the Light didn’t make any noise. When the Darkness was obliterated, it was in soft hisses and scraping noises, often too faint to even hear. There was no ringing of swords upon swords, as in
Yaromir was clearly frustrated to not be fighting. He pushed the cart and muttered under his breath, looking at both sides of the battle, forehead creased.

The Darkness tried to crowd closer, to encircle them. The Warriors tried to stop it from happening. But the ability to make Light didn’t last forever, and the Darkness didn’t seem to be lessening, no matter how much of it was obliterated.

An agitation in Jack’s gut. Fear curdled. He felt useless. He couldn’t even make the snow anymore, but he knew he could make the ice. He had a lot of ice left at his disposal. And wind to move it where he wanted it to go. Didn’t they want to find out if his ice could help? He could make so much of it.

‘Is this bad?’ Jack said. ‘Worse than usual?’

‘Yes,’ Yaromir said, frankly. ‘We’ve been to Endan before. We’re often not attacked. This is different. They must be drawn here.’

‘Drawn here,’ Jack said, frowning.

‘I don’t like it,’ Yaromir said, looking around. ‘This was supposed to be a straightforward mission. The Darkness is getting stronger all the time. It shouldn’t be. We keep fighting it. And always, it comes back, and there is more, and it is cannier. An ambush. Earlier, it showed almost no signs of intelligence. Now…we are ambushed.’

‘Should I be meditating or—Saying the hymns or something?’

Yaromir looked at Jack and lifted a hand as if to say: ‘It doesn’t really matter either way.’

‘I want to do something,’ Jack said under his breath.

‘Not dying is doing something,’ Yaromir said simply, while pushing the cart.

* *

A flash of movement to Jack’s right and he spun. Sickening, he saw a Golden Warrior enfolded into a wave of Darkness, and the other Golden Warriors retaliated, but it was too late – the Darkness parted to reveal that the Warrior was already gone; pulled down into the ground, or consumed. The Darkness itself became stronger, surged forward, put the Warriors on the retreat. At least two were no longer able to make the Light.

It pushed closer to the carts, forming a fast moving point upon the ground, slithering as though reaching the carts was its priority.

Every time the Light hit it, it simply reformed and started again, gaining metres every second.

Jack stepped towards it without thinking. A strange pull in his chest. He had the weirdest feeling that the Darkness was coming for him, and the thought didn’t scare him as much as it should. He felt numb. As though it was a dream. Not even a nightmare. Just a strange dream.

A sharp tug at the back of his cape and Jack fell, landing in a plume of orange-red dust that rose thickly around him. He looked up to see Yaromir standing over him, alarmed.

‘Are you hearing it?’ he said.
‘No,’ Jack said, feeling odd.

Yaromir’s eyebrows pulled together, and then he looked around quickly, like he wanted to flag someone for help.

Everyone was too busy fighting the battle.

That point of Darkness was so much closer now. Jack pushed himself up and though idly that it would be easy to see if the ice could hurt it.

He stepped forwards faster, and Yaromir called after him and then swore fiercely.

Jack pointed his staff forwards and shot a barrier of ice at the Darkness and-

-And it stopped for a few seconds, then swept over it, absorbing the ice.

Jack sent spears of ice, and it jerked and flinched back, but never for very long. Then he grit his teeth to pull from something that wasn’t complete numbness, and that crackling blue lightning moved along his staff and hit the point that was approaching him.

The Darkness shrieked then. The sound was made of multiple voices, scraped along Jack’s nerve endings. It scratched at the inside of his mind. He could almost hear the sound echo inside of him. On the back of it, he thought of Pippa and walked closer to the Darkness.

Wasn’t he supposed to be afraid?

Jack and the Darkness drew closer to each other. It was clear that the Darkness wanted him. Maybe it was as curious as Jack was.

He could hear his own breathing echoing in his ears. It sounded strangely loud, uneven, ragged.

A sharp weight knocked into him, sent him sprawling, the crook of his staff hitting the side of his face as he landed badly.

Malice roared to life inside of him and he turned, already calling his ice, when he realised it was Pitch. Jack went still, even as hatred roiled, even as he could feel ice crackling along his wrists and forearms, could see diamond dust pluming from his mouth.

Pitch shouted something at him, but Jack couldn’t make it out over the sound of a roar in his own head. Everything seemed to be moving in flashes. It was weird, but Jack thought that Pitch looked frightened.

In that moment, he liked it. He wanted Pitch to be frightened. He wanted them all to be frightened. It felt better than feeling fear – surrendering to that malice, knowing that there was power in hurting someone else.

He raised his staff again, pointing it at Pitch’s heart, because it would be easy. It would be easy.

Jack would kill him, and he wouldn’t be afraid.

Pitch’s golden eyes widening, his grip tightening on his sword, his arm rising.

Pippa lifted her arm to the swarm of Darkness, screaming, and Jack tried to reach her, but his feet slipped on the frozen ice. It cracked beneath him. He’d never seen her so scared. Never. He’d do anything, he just had to get there, and-
It seemed to happen in slow motion. Jack turned his staff to the Darkness and then stared in shock when he realised how close it was. *Too close.* Fearlings walking towards him, opaque, empty figures with hollow eyes and hollow mouths. Seconds trickled by, and Jack thought of Pippa on the ice, and how he’d been afraid at first that the lake would take her, and then…

The blast of ice that came from his staff was huge. It flew forwards in a tornado of movement, and on the back of it, a broad wave of Light that clung to the ice and drove the wall of Darkness back, turned fearlings into black dust that vanished.

Other waves of Light followed – other Warriors following suit - but it was unnecessary.

The Darkness had gone.

Jack shuddered on the ground, his arms shaking. His heart pounded. There was shouting around him, but he couldn’t really understand it. He looked around, and through people’s legs, through the carts, he couldn’t see any Darkness left.

His ears were ringing. There was no reason for them to. So much of the battle had been silent.

A burst of laughter, and Jack belatedly realised it came from him.

Slowly, sounds came back to him. A conversation happening above his head.

‘...Disciplinary action.’

‘He just *saved* us!’

‘He was under direct orders to not enter the frontlines. He has almost no control over his ice, and you are lucky that he did not change sides and *kill us,* Anton!’

‘Admiral Pitchiner, just-’

‘Haul him up.’

Jack blinked as hands moved under his arms and he was lifted. He got his feet under himself, and he stared blankly, thinking that he should be paying attention, but still not quite sure what had happened.

In the background, a creeping horror that stuck to him like threads of spider silk. Pitch wasn’t wrong. He would’ve killed them. He would’ve started with Pitch and kept on going. It hadn’t even felt intrusive. It had just felt *natural.*

‘Take him to an isolation room. He’ll stay there overnight. Take his staff and sword from him.’

Jack stared as someone withdrew his sword, hand moving quickly underneath his cape and taking it. They pulled on his staff, but it was frozen to his hand. He shook it free. A pang when he wasn’t holding it anymore, but he was spending too much of his energy trying not to think about what he’d done to really do anything about it.

He’d helped win their battle, and it was a *fluke.*

He had no control, and he’d spent his last week at the Palace running from Pitch. The Tsar was right, Jack was shirking his duty, and he could’ve murdered people because of it.

‘Admiral Pitchiner, no,’ Anton said. ‘You can’t put him in an isolation room for a *first offense.* You *know* flogging is the first line of-’
‘And assign Anton to the flogging post,’ Pitch bit off. ‘Ten lashes. Is that clear?’

A murmuring of assent, and Jack nodded too. His eyes met Pitch’s, who was staring down at him, face impassive.

‘Get him to the healer first,’ Pitch said.

Jack was walked back to the ship. He went in a daze. An isolation room. He didn’t think that was so bad, and it could’ve been worse. A ship’s flogging. They’d see his scars. He didn’t want that.

He had the feeling that all of it could’ve been much worse. His fingers curled and relaxed, curled and relaxed.

He was the reason it could’ve been much worse.

The gleam of precious metals flashed into his eyes and he thought of the golden Light he made. Then he thought of the look on Pitch’s face before he’d made it. Fear and anger. He’d never seen Pitch look like that before, and the expression stuck in his mind. It had never occurred to him that Pitch could be vulnerable.
What You Tell Yourself

Chapter Notes

A lot of things being shaken loose for Jack, and Jack being resistant to pretty much all of it. But hey, sometimes it's really hard to learn truths about the world around you.

(Also woot for slightly earlier update :D ).

The healer cleared Jack as having nothing more than a mild case of shock that was fading, and a bruise on his cheek from falling onto his staff when Pitch had knocked him down. Jack was escorted to the isolation room. The door was closed behind him. The light was left on, and there was a switch inside the room, so he could control it himself.

The isolation room didn’t bother Jack.

He’d been in them before.

It wasn’t really like being locked up in Fyodor’s room, even though he’d worried at first that it would be exactly like that. But they weren’t the same at all. He didn’t know what was happening then. They’d forgotten him. Here on the ship, they knew where he was, and he was only here for a limited amount of time. Jack worried at his bottom lip with his teeth, but otherwise he was pretty pleased with how he was keeping it together.

He realised it helped, the orders, knowing what was happening. An isolation room. Twelve hours – probably. No one would stare at him as they would during a public punishment, he wouldn’t have to walk past people he was trying to get to know with his back all bloodied and torn up. After Bunnymund using magic to lash his back during training, Jack couldn’t even trust that he’d be able to take a flogging without turning and trying to kill all of them.

Like you just tried to do out there. Sort of.

He spent some time thinking over what he’d done. Thinking over Pitch’s actions. He was surprised to find that he felt everything Pitch did afterwards was fair, and even more surprised to find that he wasn’t at a flogging post, or recovering from a ship flogging.

Because he had a feeling he knew why Pitch had chosen to do it that way, even if Anton had challenged it.

Jack lay back on the plank of wood that serviced as some kind of bed or ledge, and stared up at the ceiling.

Anxiety trickled through him in small pulses and sharp bursts. It was in seeing the Darkness again, like that. It was in the vivid memory of Pippa splashing against his mind, jarring him out of that trance enough that he could change what he was going to do. It was in knowing that he might not be able to control himself in the future, and it was the only thing Pitch seemed to care about. Jack’s control.

It was in knowing that he’d walked towards the Darkness twice. First Yaromir had pulled him back, and then Pitch had knocked into him. Twice. He hadn’t even been aware of really fighting
with himself. There was no voice in his head saying: Don’t do it, not this. Stop it! This is wrong! He’d just…done it.

He’d have to talk to Pitch about it at some point. Maybe he couldn’t be a Golden Warrior, just at the point where he could make the Light. Because walking towards the Darkness when it wasn’t even talking to him was probably a bad thing.

It bothered him that they’d not let him keep his staff, but he could understand that too.

He’d disobeyed. And what if the Darkness had taken him? He’d lose all sight of himself. If he wasn’t absorbed completely, he’d be their puppet, and they could take all of his wintry powers and disperse them amongst themselves, in their strange hive mind. It was a terrible weapon to give to any enemy.

Jack rested his arm behind his head to give him something to rest on, and pursed his lips. Okay, so, maybe the isolation room bothered him a little. Just because he’d been in them before didn’t mean they were easy.

But a night only? If Pitch actually followed through on that order, Jack would come out feeling a little frayed, but otherwise he’d be fine.

Still, it was hard to shake the sound of Anton’s voice when he’d heard that Jack was to be disciplined.

Jack had wanted to reassure him, but there had been no time, and Jack was so shocked and relieved to know it was an isolation room with a constant source of light, rather than a dark-room, that he hadn’t thought to say anything to make it better.

None of it was Anton’s fault, anyway.

The tools of his training floated back to him in fragments. It wasn’t enough to sink him down into a deep meditative state, but it was enough to keep him calm, to stop him from frittering away his energy worrying he’d be left there forever.

He remembered Crossholt joking about it, a few times. Peering through the tiny slot-hole in the door and laughing.

Maybe we’ll just leave you in there forever!

In that moment, Jack couldn’t bring himself to be very sorry that he’d killed Crossholt. He wondered if that said something about him as a person, and hated that he could hear Pitch’s voice distantly reminding him that it was normal, it was normal to feel good about it. To feel good and bad.

It didn’t seem fair, that Pitch could be so reassuring when he wanted to be, and then the rest of the time…

‘But this?’ Jack said. ‘This is fair. Weird.’

*

Jack was sitting upright when the door opened in the morning. He was a little surprised to see it was Pitch, and then even more surprised when Pitch let himself into the room and closed the door behind him. Then, he leaned against the closed door and stared down at Jack.
‘Are you extending the time?’ Jack said. ‘I mean the time I’m staying in here?’

‘No,’ Pitch said. Then paused. ‘Is that something that’s happened before?’

Jack looked away, almost laughed. There were times when Pitch seemed to know everything, and then times like this.

‘The Darkness, did it- Is the ship okay?’

‘Yes,’ Pitch said. ‘You’ve been placed in isolation before. I know that. It’s in your record.’

‘Yeah,’ Jack said.

‘Crossholt only ever marked down that you were never in there for more than twelve hours at a time.’

Jack did laugh then. He couldn’t help himself. But the sound wasn’t cheerful, and he swallowed it down, and then shrugged.

‘It’s actually not so bad,’ Jack said, risking leaning back against the wall and feeling like he needed a shower. He still had dust and sand on him from the planet. ‘In the Creches, they-’

‘They don’t have isolation rooms in the Creches,’ Pitch said, incredulous.

Jack looked up at him slowly, could feel his face twisting into confusion. For a moment, Pitch’s expression echoed his, and then his eyes narrowed at Jack like they had at the Darkness.

‘So they have isolation rooms in the Creches,’ Pitch said, and Jack didn’t know what to think. How did Pitch not know?

‘Yeah,’ Jack said. ‘I mean, they’re not called isolation rooms. They’re called quiet rooms. But they’re the same. You know, locked from the outside, tiny room, tiny bed. Option to turn the light off from the outside, with no one able to control it inside.’

‘That’s a dark-room,’ Pitch snapped, but his anger didn’t seem entirely directed at Jack.

‘Well, not really,’ Jack said. ‘They never left the light off long, if they decided to do it. Most of the kids never saw the inside of it. They just joked about ‘quiet time’ and stuff, you know, like ‘Don’t do that or you’ll get quiet time,’ but never knew what it meant.’

‘What were you doing? To be put in there?’ Pitch said.

‘Being naughty,’ Jack said, and then he grinned. ‘I mean, if you have a younger sister and you want her to have fun sometimes- We weren’t supposed to ever leave the confines of the Creche. I mean it was a big property, there was room the play outside – it’s not like they didn’t provide for us - but we both liked the forest beyond. So you know- And I would’ve sold my soul before letting her see the inside of one of those rooms, so I always took her punishment.’

Pitch was silent for a long time. Jack sighed. It wasn’t so hard, another person being in here with him. Pitch wasn’t being super intimidating. Not deliberately anyway. He always had that faintly threatening energy about him.

‘How old were you?’ Pitch said. ‘The first time?’
'Oh, like, eight? They didn’t turn the light off that time. They almost always didn’t, anyway. I mean there was only- There were a couple of caretakers who I just rubbed the wrong way. You know. Me being who I am, it’s kind of natural? The rest – it was usually just overnight.’

Pitch’s chest rose and fell in a slow, silent breath. Jack couldn’t tell if he was trying to hold back anger, or something else. This was one of the stranger conversations they’d ever had. That was really saying something. Every conversation they’d ever had, had been strange.

‘Which is worse?’ Pitch said finally. ‘Flogging? Or the isolation room?’

‘Is this like- One of those things where you get me to pick the one I like least, and then that’s the one you pick from now on?’ Jack said, smiling a little.

He hated that game.

‘This is not that,’ Pitch said.

‘Well, if you say so. Flogging is worse. Isolation rooms are just- I mean especially now that I know when you said overnight you really just meant overnight? They’re fine. I mean not fun, but fine.’

Pitch nodded slowly.

Then, Jack startled when Pitch stepped forward and pressed two of his fingers to the corner of Jack’s cape. A place where Jack might wear a brooch. Pitch met his eyes, his face so much closer.

‘You’re not wearing it,’ he said.

‘Um,’ Jack said, as Pitch tapped the spot at his collarbone hard, and then withdrew so that he was leaning against the door once more. ‘I guess- No. I left it- I thought it would be…complicated.’

‘He’ll know,’ Pitch said. ‘You’ve rejected his claim. He’ll not be pleased.’

A fluttering of horror in Jack’s gut. The Tsar was already not pleased with Jack. Very much so. Jack thought of their last conversation, felt something inside of him twist hard.

‘What? But I won’t tell anyone, and I can- I mean- When we get back...’

Pitch looked briefly to the ceiling, like he was gathering strength or patience.

‘Jack, he will ask one of the others. It will be innocuous, but it will be there. He’ll say, ‘Ah, Jack must have looked splendid wearing the brooch I gave him. It’s silver, it would have suited him. Tell me, did it look very fine?’ And then another will give him a blank look – Xenia or Darya or Danil – will say ‘What brooch?’ without thinking about it, and then Gavril will know that you rejected his mark.’

‘No,’ Jack breathed. He just couldn’t handle another visit like the last one. He didn’t think- He couldn’t apologise, because the Tsar didn’t like that. Maybe he’d just have to start wearing it, but it wasn’t that simple, except- The Tsar didn’t see it that way.

It was that simple, and perhaps Jack wasn’t as loyal to the Kingdom as he thought he was.

At once, he realised that his breathing was uneven and echoing in the small space. He swallowed down the uncertain, knotted feeling in his chest as much as he could, but he didn’t meet Pitch’s eyes.

‘I should have brought it,’ Jack said eventually. ‘I just didn’t- I didn’t think it through.’
‘Did you want to bring it?’

‘I should have brought it,’ Jack said again. ‘He’s the Tsar. And Lune is- I mean he’s the Tsar, and you’ve met me- I’m like- I mean I know what I am.’

_The Tsar keeps telling you he can make you special, he can see your potential, and you keep ruining it. This isn’t like disobeying your Creche team leaders, or even Crossholt or even Pitch._

‘Did you want to bring the brooch?’ Pitch said, his voice harder than before.

‘Stop trying to trap me!’ Jack shouted. A moment later his breath strangled in his throat and he shook his head, and then at once, he felt himself go weak. ‘So I’m staying in here longer now, right?’

‘No,’ Pitch said, and then he shifted and Jack bit his top lip when Pitch sat next to him on the bench. ‘No, there’s forty five minutes before the breakfast call. You’ll make it to the mess hall.’

Jack’s whole left side prickled with awareness. He could feel Pitch’s body heat, something he was so much more sensitive to now. Wondered if Pitch had ever been flogged, or spent time in an isolation room, or even a dark-room.

‘What... What will he do?’ Jack said, his voice smaller. ‘When he finds out I didn’t bring the brooch?’

‘I don’t know,’ Pitch said. ‘What has he done before, when you’ve done something he hasn’t liked?’

Jack lifted a hand to press it to his face and then dropped it. Another _meeting_, and Jack only knew how to make it right by apologising or trying to make amends, but the Tsar would call that weak, and just tell Jack that if he really wanted to do well, he would have tried harder in the first place.

‘It scares you, disappointing him. Doesn’t it?’ Pitch said, his voice quieter than before.

Jack thought to the meditation room, the induction technique Pitch had used, and almost didn’t want to answer. But he wasn’t being inducted now, and he wasn’t in a trance, and the isolation room didn’t feel as isolated when there was someone sitting next to him on the same bench.

Jack shrugged.

‘You’d think it wouldn’t,’ Jack said, ‘since I can’t seem to stop doing it around him. I mean _in general_, but also definitely around him. All the time.’

‘And he’s still nice to you?’ Pitch said.

‘Yeah,’ Jack said. ‘He thinks I could be special. Which is more than most.’

‘Could be?’ Pitch said, his voice sharper than before. ‘Which means not now. So what does he say about who you are now?’

‘I know what you’re doing,’ Jack said, fighting the urge to squirm. ‘Did Anton speak with you? He said he’s sure the Tsar is trying to get between you and me. I should’ve just told him that you’re doing a great job of that yourself.’

Pitch laughed. Not a small, quiet thing, but something loud enough that Jack wondered how the room even contained it.
‘I know that,’ Pitch said. ‘Yes, Anton did speak with me. He’s worried about you, Jack. Anton is… many things, but if you have him as a friend, he’ll worry about you. It gets tiresome. You may swear at him and tell him to find something else to occupy his time and he won’t listen.’

Jack thought that actually sounded kind of nice.

‘The Tsar is trying to drive a wedge between you and I,’ Pitch said. ‘I expected something like it. But I don’t think it’s all he’s trying to do. He never works with a single ulterior motive. You should always remember that. You may think he only wants one thing from you, but if you’re not giving him that one thing, chances are you’re giving him something else he wants.’

‘This feels like treason,’ Jack said. ‘You can be executed for treason.’

‘Yes,’ Pitch said. ‘You can be executed for a great many things on Lune. Are you going to report me?’

‘Are you going to report me?’ Jack said.

Pitch crossed one leg over the other. His boots were scuffed. There was a tear along the leather. Not enough to penetrate through to the foot, but it exposed the true colour of the leather beneath, left a ragged, vivid mark. It was nothing like the Tsar’s perfect boots.

‘I wouldn’t report you,’ Jack said helplessly. ‘You have a kid. You’re the Admiral. I just- If I reported people for everything I was supposed to, I wouldn’t…’

I wouldn’t have anyone left. Or just about anyone.

‘I used to think that I was like not terrible,’ Jack said quickly, in a rush. ‘You know, like I was naughty, and I deserved punishments, and that maybe I was made too naughty. But I used to think that deep down it was like – I was a citizen of Lune, and if I fought for Lune and the Tsar, then I was- I could be good. Y’know? And now I’m just- Like I know what the Tsar thinks about me, and he speaks for Lune, and the citizens, and it’s like- I just want him to be happy with me.’

‘But you didn’t bring the brooch,’ Pitch said.

‘I didn’t think he’d know!’ Jack said. ‘I didn’t- You must think I’m so stupid.’

‘Naïve, yes,’ Pitch said. ‘He has ways of finding out what he wants to know.’

‘So do you,’ Jack said, and then he laughed. ‘The meditation, and the Disciplinarian. You’re just like him.’

A hiss of breath, and Jack risked looking at Pitch sidelong. He thought Pitch would be looking at him, angry, but instead Pitch was staring ahead, something frozen on his face, in the slight widening of his eyes.

‘I need to do the things that I do, whether you like them or not,’ Pitch said, finally.

‘So does he,’ Jack said.

Pitch turned and stared at him, and Jack shrugged.

‘You’re both trying to make me into whatever you need me to be. I get it. You need me to access the Light and get control of my darkness. I get it. But he needs me to not be what I am, and to be better, and more…realise my potential somehow. You’re both the same. It’s not bad. It just- It’s not
easy.’

It almost looked as though the colour had drained from Pitch’s grey skin. He continued to stare at Jack, until Jack had to look away. The main difference was that Jack couldn’t ever talk to the Tsar like this. Ever.

‘You’re too strong for all my other methods of training,’ Pitch said.

Jack nodded, and then the sentence seemed to filter in properly and he frowned.

‘Wait, what?’

‘You’re too strong,’ Pitch said. ‘You are so practiced at skills in denial and self-suppression – and your stamina is such that…that I cannot think of any other way to access your darkness. And I cannot access your Light, without doing that first.’

Pitch smirked then, and tapped his fingers on his knee.

‘And then you turned to a technique I didn’t plan for – which was sheer avoidance.’

‘Yeah,’ Jack said. ‘I didn’t really think I’d turn to it either, until I started doing it.’

‘It feels good to leave the Palace, doesn’t it?’

‘No,’ Jack said, feeling some hurt thing sprawl through his chest.

‘No?’ Pitch said, sounding surprised.

‘No,’ Jack said. ‘I know I should be training. I know it’s what I’m meant to be doing. I know. It doesn’t feel good to run away from my duty. I mean- There are moments- When I visited…a friend, and when I practiced with my ice out in the forest, it wasn’t all bad, but otherwise I’ve just been feeling sick. I told the Tsar I’d been running away from you, and he got so mad at me. And I thought- He keeps asking me how I feel about the situation, about you, and I thought he wanted to hear that I didn’t like- I don’t know what he wants. I know he doesn’t want me to tell you this. So you know, yay Jack.’

‘‘Yay’ indeed,’ Pitch said.

‘You shouldn’t be easy to talk to,’ Jack said.

‘I’m not,’ Pitch said, his voice sure. ‘But you’re very alone. You may find yourself wishing you hadn’t talked to me like this, later.’

‘I’m not alone,’ Jack said. ‘I’ve never had so many people trying to get to know me.’

*Flitmouse, the Spymaster, North, the Tsar, Anton, and then even Seraphina and Eva and Pitch.*

‘You cannot keep avoiding training,’ Pitch said.

‘I don’t know how not to. I just- I can’t help it. I wake up, I hate myself, and then I leave. And then I come back and do it all again the next day.’

‘Then you’ll stay in my rooms when we return. I have a guest suite you can use. So you’ll still have some measure of privacy.’

‘Yeah, I’m pretty sure I can just escape that-’
'No,' Pitch said, ‘you cannot. You’re welcome to try. It will be vastly amusing. I’ll enjoy it immensely.’

‘I’m not staying in your rooms,’ Jack said, staring at him, realising that Pitch was serious. ‘And what about the Tsar? He’ll be- By the Light, he’ll be-’

‘Furious at me,’ Pitch said. ‘He’ll think I’ve started playing his game. He’ll likely be thinking it as we speak, given that I seized you from his grasp and took you on a mission I had no intentions of taking you on, and I didn’t even give him any notice. He knows what I’ve done. Especially since you haven’t worn the brooch. Oh, Jack. He’ll be furious with us both.’

‘You don’t seem worried,’ Jack said.

Meanwhile, Jack’s whole gut was twisting itself up into knotted, spiky masses that just hurt.

‘No?’ Pitch replied, and then he smirked. ‘Jack, there’s a reason you cannot escape my guest rooms, or my wing. It’s built like a fortress. And that has nothing to do with the Darkness. It never did. Now. It is time for you to get changed and shower, and then breakfast and a busy day ahead. More for me than for you, I’m afraid.’

Pitch stood, and Jack wanted to stand, but he had a feeling it’d be really cramped. So he waited.

Then, without really knowing what he was doing, he said:

‘P- Ah, Admiral Pitch, the Tsar told me that he didn’t tell you to…step up my training or anything. He said he’d never do something like that.’

‘That does sound like something he’d say,’ Pitch said, voice faintly airy, as though he didn’t even care.

Then, without even confirming or denying any of it, he just stepped out of the isolation room and left the door open for Jack. The click of his worn boots fading as he walked away.

Two minutes later, Jack finding his staff and sword leaning outside the door, he realised that Pitch hadn’t properly brought up the attack on Endan at all.

Maybe Pitch was saving it for later, too.

*

The shower would have been blissful, if Jack wasn’t worried about breakfast in the mess hall. And then when Jack was there, he belatedly realised that he didn’t need to be worried. Almost no one mentioned it. Only Yaromir brought it up, but subtly, by placing his bread roll on Jack’s plate and saying:

‘Tough nights need good feeding.’

That was it. No one fussed or made a big deal, no one talked about how Jack deserved it or maybe should have been flogged instead. No one said that he didn’t deserve it either. It was just integrated into the day. Discipline happened, one took it and moved on with their lives. That was remarkably familiar, reminding him of the Barracks, without Crossholt looming over him. It was almost nice.

However, Jack could tell almost immediately that Anton wasn’t there, and his heart beat faster to think of Anton taking a punishment for him. Putting himself on the line like that. Was he okay? Ten lashes at a flogging post – they would have used a cat o’nine, and his back would almost
certainly be torn as a result.

Jack resolved to visit him, and then focused on finishing his breakfast.

*

He learned that Anton wasn’t even with a healer, but in his own cubicle-room. Vera, the one with all the scars, showed Jack the way and seemed pleased that Jack was checking up on him. She didn’t speak much, but she was sweet.

Jack knocked quietly on the door. He didn’t want to disturb, if Anton was sleeping.

‘Come in!’ Anton called.

Jack opened the door, not knowing how his presence would be received.

Anton’s whole face brightened. He lay on his stomach and a thick, open book rested on his pillow. There was a light sheet over his shirtless back, a little bloodied, and Jack hissed to see it.

‘Jack!’ Anton said cheerfully, shifting onto his side and then wincing. ‘Come in! Company is wonderful.’

‘Don’t get up,’ Jack said, stepping into Anton’s space and holding up a hand. He closed the door behind him. ‘Just–’

‘Oh, not a problem,’ Anton said, and then laughed ruefully. ‘Jack, I’ve taken much worse in Pitch’s private rooms. A flogging of ten lashes is nothing, really. I mean it’s never nice to have them where everyone can see them, but it was nothing more than a token order to get me to stop railing at the Admiral in front of the others. We all knew it. I’m just waiting for the healer to come by now.’

‘You’re getting to see a healer? Already?’ Jack said.

Anton opened his mouth, smile frozen on his face, and then something seemed to come over him and he tilted his head at Jack.

‘Yes,’ Anton said, finally. ‘You know, how it always is. They get the healers by pretty fast.’

‘Oh,’ Jack said. He felt like an idiot. Of course they’d all be used to healers. ‘That’s cool.’

‘It is,’ Anton said.

‘Wait – you’ve taken worse with Pitch? For fun? Why would anyone do that?’

‘Oh good,’ Anton said, grinning, ‘something I actually like talking about. Here, come sit down. There’s enough room on the cot if I move.’

Anton wiggled sideways, and then he placed a bookmark in his book and pushed it underneath the pillow. He moved carefully onto his side, leaning forward a little, and then patted the spot he’d made on the grey sheets.

Jack hesitated, and then walked over and sat. He lay his staff on the ground. Anton’s cubicle was small, and not personalised. Jack didn’t know why, but he expected it to be showy, somehow. Instead, just a grooming kit that looked fancier than the standard order ones.

‘How are you?’ Anton said. ‘After the isolation room? I’ve been worried.’
'Oh, no, it’s fine. It’s just isolation,’ Jack said, looking around the cubicle. ‘It was only twelve hours, which is nothing.’

‘Really?’ Anton said, and Jack heard something in his voice that made him turn and look at him. ‘So you’re old hat at isolation? Like me and floggings. Except you’re old hat at floggings too, aren’t you?’

Jack wanted to shrug, but instead he held still. For all that Anton was friendly, he had a way of seeing through things. After their conversation about the Tsar, Jack didn’t want to give anything away, which was stupid. But it was obvious that Pitch thought putting a child in an isolation room was wrong. Jack wasn’t sure he wanted to see Anton’s reaction to that.

‘Pitch has seriously done worse to you in private?’ Jack said, changing the subject.

Anton was quiet for a while, as though deciding whether he’d let the subject change through. Then he brightened, nodded.

‘Yes, of course,’ Anton said. ‘I mean I’ve said as much before, sort of. But I like- I like that. I ask for it. In private, not having to think, and the pain of it – it’s not easy, but he never gives more than you can take, even if you don’t know it at the time. And there’s always a way out. A word, or a signal you can make. But the pain helps me to stop thinking. And I need that. To stop thinking sometimes.’

‘But it hurts,’ Jack said. He thought of Anton mentioning being spanked, thought of that moment in the corridor with Pitch and swallowed. Spanking seemed way different. Way less threatening than stepping up to something and just being whipped, for fun.

‘It’s a different kind of hurt,’ Anton said with a sigh. ‘And it’s not for everyone. I could show you some time if you wanted. Just something- like a light spanking. You could decide for yourself.’

‘What makes you think I’d want that?’ Jack said.

‘A feeling,’ Anton replied. ‘That’s all. Just a feeling. If you tell me no, that’s okay. My feelings about people are sometimes wrong.’

Jack nodded, looked towards the door. He blinked when he felt a warm hand slide around his side and rest there. He forced himself not to look down at it.

‘My feeling is that you seem like someone who gets lost in your head sometimes,’ Anton said softly. ‘And that you’re in an overwhelming world, and that a lot of the pain and fear that is around you, in you – it’s completely out of your control. Like chaos. And my feeling is that if you had that in a very controlled and safe environment – along with care and intimacy - you could use it to your advantage. Because I think you’ve learned how to do that in the past anyway. Learned how to use pain and fear to your advantage. Which is terribly unfair. Since I don’t think you’ve had many people take you through it and make it safe for you.’

Anton’s hand started stroking Jack’s side. He was so warm. Not as warm as Pitch, but still- And the strangeness of it. Jack had loved Anton all his life. He was the hero that smiled up at the stars. He’d been around in posters and even collector’s cards when Jack had been a child. Eva called him a baby, but he was already older than many peasants could ever imagine.

Now to be sitting here, and Anton touching him like this...Jack’s breathing hitched.

‘I’ve never met anyone who talks about things like you do,’ Jack said finally.
‘Well, yes, you probably won’t,’ Anton said. ‘I’m disarmingly candid. It’s a part of my charm.’

Jack twisted so he could look at Anton properly, who smiled up at him. Anton’s hand stroked across Jack’s lower back. Patterns and spirals. It was nice. Gentle. Different.

Jack had sucked off a couple of people in the Barracks before. He’d never learned their names, and he really only did it to see what it was like and see what he preferred. It was hurried and Spartan, and while it was fun, it was also empty. Being touched like this wasn’t empty at all, and Jack found it disconcerting.

‘Besides,’ Anton continued, ‘whatever happens in private, the Admiral can heal it. And he does. Sometimes more than you want him to.’

‘You make him sound— I dunno. You make him sound different. Nicer.’

‘The problem sometimes, with having a large heart in this world, is that it becomes wounded easily. Over and over again. I’m so lucky. I can deal with that by taking my wounded heart to Eva or Pitch, or someone else depending. And then they will safely lance it and let whatever infection is there come out. My heart is scarred, but it gets a chance to heal. Pitch’s... It’s different. And now it must be hard to hear me call him large-hearted, yet that is exactly what he is. I wouldn’t trust him with my heart otherwise.’

‘I guess he’s got his own little inner circle that he can—’

‘He cares about you,’ Anton said firmly. ‘He told me later, when I railed at him in private, that he had a specific reason for choosing isolation for you, and that it wasn’t because he wanted to make it worse or— I don’t really understand it. But he was firm that he thought it would be the easiest form of discipline for you to manage. Is that true?’

‘Yeah,’ Jack said.

Anton’s fingers tightened on Jack’s back, like a fragment of an embrace.

‘Pitch said you would have killed him,’ Anton said. ‘That he’s still not sure why you stopped.’

Jack kept his breathing quiet, but he looked down, away. He’d been trying not to think about it. That moment of clarity, and how it hadn’t been terrifying at all. How destructive he could have been, how curious he was about the Darkness. He would have walked straight into it, given the chance.

‘I would have,’ Jack said, feeling guilty, like he should be punished or worse for admitting as much. ‘I would have. I thought of my sister and I...stopped myself, but I’m not sure I belong out here.’

‘Of course you do,’ Anton said. ‘With some more training, some more self-control. I have no doubt of that.’

‘You say that now, but you haven’t— You haven’t seen what I can really be like.’

Jack couldn’t imagine feeling any malice towards Anton, wanting to attack him. He couldn’t imagine ever having a reason to want to. But he knew that wasn’t how it worked. What if one day they were in the field together, and Jack just turned against him because he was curious? Or worse, because he could feel the glee of it in the moment?

‘Anton, you don’t need to defend me,’ Jack said. ‘Isolation is— I mean you told me yourself, things
are different here, he can’t show favouritism. I disobeyed a direct order.’

‘Yes, and I knew I was headed for a flogging,’ Anton said. ‘What you don’t know is that it was my choice. You didn’t make me. I knew what Pitch would have to do when I said my piece, and I’m glad I said it. And see, it’s all worked out. Here you are. You seem well. And here I am, and I’m well.’

It sounded so easy. Simple. Jack wondered if that was how Anton saw the world. Defend the things he thought needed defending, and then try and find some peace the rest of the time. With Pitch apparently. By being flogged.

The spanking was one thing, that seemed- Jack was nervous thinking about it, but not because it filled him with terror. Anton offering to show him what it could be like also didn’t fill him with horror. Something to think about when the world wasn’t moving so quickly he was just struggling to keep up.

Instead, he kept thinking of what it felt like to bite down on the leather they gave soldiers who were going to be whipped. How awful the whole of it was.

‘I don’t get why you like it,’ Jack said.

‘I know,’ Anton said, completely unfazed by Jack skipping around on subject matter. ‘Some people don’t like kissing, at all, and I used to struggle with that. Who doesn’t like kissing? But then I learned that everyone in the world is not me, and so some of them aren’t going to like kissing.’

‘Kissing doesn’t hurt.’

‘Sometimes it does,’ Anton said, laughing. ‘Depends on the kiss.’

Light scratches at his lower back now, and Jack’s skin tingled, felt warmer. It was good. Made something sleepy steal through him.

‘I’m not convincing you to like it,’ Anton said, his voice serious again. ‘I’m telling you that I like it. That’s not taking anything away from you not liking it.’

‘The spanking thing though- I mean- I just...that doesn’t seem so bad.’

‘Oh?’ Anton said slowly. Jack could almost see the raised brow. ‘It would warm you up nicely, would you like that?’

‘By the Light,’ Jack said, laughing, covering his face with his hand. ‘I can’t believe we’re talking about this.’

‘This is the most fun I’ve ever had after a disciplinary flogging,’ Anton said. ‘Oh, no, wait, there was that one time that Pitch visited and-’

‘Nope,’ Jack said. ‘Not ready to hear about that adventure.’

‘No?’ Anton said, and Jack looked down at him to see the faux pout on his face.

‘People tell me I’m incorrigible,’ Jack said.

‘Yes, please,’ Anton said, eyes warming. ‘Here’s hoping so. I am too. We’ve already established that you enjoy mischief. And that you’re somewhat shy. Now what was that you were saying about spanking?’
‘I think that came to a natural end, that conversation,’ Jack said.

‘It did? And so I have been shut down. What about kissing? Is that conversation still open?’

‘I don’t know,’ Jack said slowly, responding to that playful gleam in Anton’s eyes. It was nice, being on the receiving end of all that attention. But it was also that Anton was sweet. His touch was tender, and he never seemed offended by Jack changing the subject. Perhaps because he ran onto so many different ones himself.

‘If I close my eyes, will you kiss me?’ Anton said. ‘I’ll pretend it was a ghost.’

Anton closed his eyes, and Jack shifted, expecting Anton to open them at any moment. When he didn’t, Jack’s breath grew quicker in anticipation, and he leaned forwards.

His lips touched Anton’s. His mouth only a little open. He could feel how cold his mouth was against Anton’s skin. After a few seconds he couldn’t help but say:

‘Am I too cold?’

‘No,’ Anton said, his lips brushing against Jack’s mouth. ‘No, not at all. I’m going to kiss you back now.’

Anton’s hand shifted from Jack’s back to his arm, running along it until he was pulling Jack down by the shoulder. His mouth returned, open and warm, his tongue wet as it gently touched Jack’s lips, as though testing. And then he was kissing Jack with a kind of lazy heat, slow but wanting, and Jack’s own eyes closed.

It went on for a little while, long enough that Jack lost track of time, that his hand ended up at the side of Anton’s neck. He could feel stubble there, and his fingers curled against it.

Then Anton was leaning back, smiling.

‘Thank you,’ he said. ‘All of us should be blessed with a pretty young lad coming to visit us in the morning. And with a lovely kiss like that. I swear, the rest of them don’t know what they’re missing.’

Anton’s hand drifted down Jack’s arm and squeezed at his forearm.

‘Now, I wanted—’

Another knock at the door, and Anton looked past Jack in surprise, and then smiled ruefully.

‘That will be the healer. Go on then, Jack. Don’t worry about me. I’m going to be up and about in all of five minutes.’

Jack flashed Anton a quick smile, and then left the room, passing an indifferent healer who didn’t seem bothered to see Jack at all. All the way back to his cubicle, he felt lighter.

*

The next three days passed on the ship with no mishaps. Jack was wary of practicing with his ice and everyone respected it. But he watched them and their manoeuvres, and realised he was starting to pick things up. The hand signals they made to each other, that he’d never really even noticed before. Or that there were clear leaders at times, and Anton slipped into the role of leadership easily, as though it was a practiced role.
Jack caught himself staring at shadows, looking out into space. He couldn’t stop thinking that if the Darkness came, there’d be every chance he’d either run from it, or walk towards it like he was greeting a strange but intriguing forest animal. He kept checking in on himself: *Is this normal? Am I walking towards normal darkness or the other kind? Am I gonna betray someone right now? Are these thoughts the regular kind or is it something else?*

He knew he shouldn’t, but he didn’t know how else to start dealing with what had happened. He wished he had some idea. An order, a direction. Something more than being told he was going to stay in Pitch’s rooms which...wasn’t serious anyway. Surely.

Jack tried very hard to not think about the Tsar at all. He only really succeeded in keeping the thoughts away, but not the slimy feeling in his gut and stomach. They were going back to Lune. The Tsar would know he’d not taken the brooch. He imagined being back in his bed, the Tsar leaning over him and petting him, and then he’d swear and realise that was dangerously close to *thinking about it,* and shove it all away as hard as he could.

Pitch had called it ‘sheer avoidance.’ Whatever - Jack was going to keep doing it. For as long as he could. About everything. It wasn’t like anything revealed to him made his life easier. *None* of it did. Everything had gotten harder, more stressful, since leaving the Barracks. Why *wouldn’t* he avoid it?

At least at the Barracks, the only thing to worry about was Crossholt. If he assumed Crossholt would find a way to be awful to him, it was predictable, easier to weather. Since he always assumed Crossholt would find a way to be awful to him, Jack just committed himself to training as hard as he could and mucking about with Jamie when he had the chance.

It was good, and he missed that certainty in his life.

He didn’t train to become a Golden Warrior in order to feel more lost, and somehow *worse* than he’d felt before.

He tried not to think about that too. There seemed to be an inevitability about finding out what kind of person he was, in a way he could no longer escape.

He’d escape it for as long as he could.

It was almost a relief when he was handed a letter by one of the Warriors whose name he didn’t know – which was almost all of them – and realised it was a summons to Pitch’s cabin. Except that he knew it would be to talk about Endan, most probably, and Jack didn’t want to talk about any of it.

* Jack knocked on the door before him, nervous, holding the piece of paper that had summoned him.

A minute later – Jack thinking about knocking again – the door opened and Jack was surprised to see Pitch there, instead of a servant. Pitch stepped back, and Jack walked into the Admiral’s cabin, looking around curiously, finding it weird to step onto the plush fabric of an intricately woven rug.

The door closed behind them, and Jack looked over his shoulder when it was locked, too.

‘We need privacy,’ Pitch said simply, and then walked past Jack to a counter where he picked up a glass of some clear, honey-coloured liquid. It had no bubbles in it like champagne. Jack wasn’t sure what it was. But the glass bottle it came in looked expensive. ‘I’d offer you something, but I want you clear-headed for this conversation.’
'That’s not freaky at all,’ Jack said. ‘Sir,’ he added.

Pitch sipped at the liquid, looking at Jack over the rim of the glass, then set it down on the counter again.

‘You don’t have to call me by honorifics in here.’

‘I should probably just keep doing it so I don’t accidentally drop it out there and like, end up in isolation again though, right? That’s what Anton said.’

‘Anton,’ Pitch said to himself, and then muttered something under his breath and turned away, picking up the glass and taking it with him to a small around table with two chairs either side. Pitch gestured for Jack to follow with his other hand, and Jack did.

Jack sat, was reminded of Flitmouse’s small table, and thought he’d see him again when they got back. Unless he couldn’t. He still didn’t know if Pitch was serious about the new room arrangement.

‘I don’t have to stay in your rooms, right?’ Jack said. ‘Before, what you said-’

‘No,’ Pitch said, cutting across him. ‘We talk about Endan, now.’

He drew forth a leather bound journal, a fountain pen, and opened the book to a new page. Jack caught glimpses of tiny scrawled writing, words running into other words. It reminded him of the room where Pitch had hypnotised him, and Jack folded his arms and leaned back in his chair.

‘Yaromir tells me that you tried to approach the Darkness,’ Pitch said, ‘but you told him it wasn’t talking to you at the time. He pulled you back and that seemed to jar you out of it for a time. Was the Darkness talking to you? Compelling you forward?’

‘No,’ Jack said slowly. ‘I hadn’t... I didn’t realise it would be different. I thought it’d be- Easier.’

‘What was it like?’

‘I just don’t know if I should be out there,’ Jack said abruptly. ‘Half the time I was either so scared of it I couldn’t even think. And the other half of the time I was like- I wasn’t even really fighting it. It was just there. And then I just wanted to get to know it. Like a friend. It felt casual. Like, you know, casual friends. I mean- Everything I’ve read and heard, I thought- I don’t know what I thought. It was different.’

‘The Darkness is an intelligent foe,’ Pitch said, and then wrote some notes down, the nib scratching against the paper. Pitch didn’t have soft writing, but a harder kind that seemed to fight the page. Jack would have torn his thinner practice sheets as a child if he’d written that hard, and been reprimanded for it.

‘Yaromir said it wasn’t always,’ Jack said.
‘It wasn’t always,’ Pitch agreed, in what Jack decided was the most unhelpful way of speaking to someone ever.

‘Why is it now?’

Pitch put down the fountain pen, though he didn’t look up.

‘It absorbs people. It never gives them back. It doesn’t leave behind skeletons of bodies unless it’s puppeteering someone, possessing them directly. When we first started encountering it, truthfully, I don’t think it had absorbed that many people. It was weak and hungry, sinister in how voracious it was, but also mindless.

‘But now it has visited countless planets, consumed countless populations, and I suspect that the collective influence of that has given it an ability to understand strategy, to learn how we think, to seek power for itself where before it just sought food. The more it takes, the smarter it grows.’

‘So we should wipe it out?’

‘We should,’ Pitch said, and then he looked up. ‘Even if we were tasked with that, I’m not sure we can anymore.’

Even if we were tasked with that...

Jack felt a thick knot in the back of his throat, tried to swallow it down. He looked at Pitch’s drink, almost wished for one of his own.

‘Why aren’t we tasked with that?’

‘Best not ask the Tsar about it,’ Pitch said.

‘Why?’

‘He’d tell you we are,’ Pitch said. ‘But as I’m the Royal Admiral, I think I’d know what we’re tasked with.’

He spat the last sentence out poisonously, and then stared at Jack like he was surprised he’d let himself slip. With that, he pushed up and away from the table, pacing over to the empty hearth, the way Jack had wanted to pace before.

Jack wondered if that was what Pitch’s darkness looked like, when it slipped out. It was hard to tell.

Jack pulled over Pitch’s notebook to look at it, expecting to be reprimanded. But when he saw it, none of it was written in the common alphabet, and he sighed. Would Seraphina really teach him? He really needed to learn it. He didn’t even know what his name looked like in the letters. He pushed it back.

‘Jack, I think you may be too strong for combat,’ Pitch said.

Shoulders tensing then, a cold curdling in his stomach that felt like where the sharpest, strongest ice grew. He rested his hands on his knees and knew that this was what he’d been avoiding thinking about.

‘I know,’ Jack said, his voice sounding strange and soft, even for him.

‘Your Light is an absolute force of nature, and we need it, but you repeatedly sought the Darkness
'I know,' Jack said, staring at a fixed point on the table and telling himself that he had no right to be upset. This was- He hadn’t even felt joy when he’d made the Light. He’d been wondering whether he was really cut out to be a Golden Warrior all along, even moreso since making the Light and realising it didn’t…make him happy. Like he thought it would.

‘Why didn’t you attack me? The rest of us? How did you make that decision?’

‘I saw my sister,’ Jack said. ‘I mean, a memory. You raised your sword, and she raised her arm to the Darkness, and then I managed to change direction and just-’

He cut off when Pitch swore, and then he turned in his chair and saw Pitch staring down into the black hearth. It took Jack a moment to realise that Pitch looked exhausted.

‘What is it?’ Jack said.

‘That was it?’ Pitch said. ‘A *flashback*? Not even- Damn it.’

‘Yeah,’ Jack said wearily. ‘It was just- Like that’s gonna happen every time, right?’

‘I can’t always be there to snap you out of it. You can’t rely on a traumatic memory to *do it for you*. If you don’t learn to do it for yourself, I cannot have you out in the field. But I can’t know how you’re going to react to the Darkness, unless you’re out in the field.’

Pitch turned to him, something flashing in his eyes.

‘Your training back at the Palace will recommence, and you *will* be staying in my quarters until I know what you do and do not have a handle on.’

‘All the time?’ Jack said. ‘I have- There are people- Will I be *trapped* there? What about the tutors? The etiquette tutors?’

‘Yes, you will get some free time to yourself. Yes, you will still see your tutors. Yes, you will be trapped there the rest of the time. You weren’t simply allowed to leave the Barracks whenever you wished, were you? Think of it like that.’

‘Sure,’ Jack said, glaring at him. ‘It’s going to be the funnest.’

Still, he was relieved to know there would be free time. He could still visit people. Could still leave. It wasn’t until he’d actually done it, that he realised how much it helped to just get away from the Palace. It was a weird environment.

Jack felt deflated. Even if he was complaining about it, the fact was he didn’t even trust himself. What if he saw another huge wave of Darkness? Would he attack it? Or just *walk towards it*?

‘You were right to put me at the bottom of the callout list before the initiation, hey,’ Jack said, looking at Pitch’s journal.

‘No,’ Pitch said, laughing humourlessly, ‘I wasn’t.’

‘Yeah, but-’

‘Jack, Crossholt lied about you in your record. If you were *that* person, I was right to put you at the bottom of the list. Someone has to be at the bottom of the list. But you aren’t that person at all. Crossholt- I knew he was bitter about being sidelined early, but it never occurred to me or others without even seeming to question it.’
that he would treat anyone the way he treated you.’

‘Honestly, I know people keep making a big deal out of it, but it’s not really a big deal.’

‘I see,’ Pitch said. He walked back over to the table, stared at his journal, and then closed it with a snap. ‘Let me guess, because you’re just that kind of person? Rubbed someone the wrong way?’

‘Yeah,’ Jack said.

‘Not because he saw potential in you, thought of you becoming successful out in the stars – a place he would never get to again, and became so horrifically bitter about the whole matter that he essentially tortured you for years?’

Jack blinked, then for a long time couldn’t think of anything to say.

‘Not,’ Pitch added, when it was clear Jack wasn’t going to reply, ‘because you kept coming back and training after everything he did, thus proving that you would become successful – showed immense endurance and strength of spirit - thus cementing his bitterness against you, along with his hatred?’

‘No!’ Jack said, glaring at him. ‘No! Look at how I was yesterday, look at how I’ve been in the training arena. I would’ve killed you, and Bunnymund! I mean I’d probably try and kill Bunnymund now just because I kind of want to anyway, thanks for that, by the way. But that’s just crap. You don’t need to like...build me up to let me down, you know. I get it. I probably can’t be a Golden Warrior. Everyone’s been saying it since I got out of the mountain, I’ve already kind of adjusted.’

‘Is it so impossible for you to hear a single good thing about who you are now?’

Jack stared at him, and then got up and paced, because sitting was driving him crazy.

‘I don’t need it,’ Jack said, ‘because I’m not a five year old. I know how I’m messing things up with the Tsar, and I know how I messed things up out there, and I know how I’m messing things up in training. I don’t need someone to sit me down and hold my hand through it. And that you’re doing it? Of all people? Like, come on.’

Jack met Pitch’s eyes, derisive, and then quailed a bit when he saw the anger on Pitch’s face.

‘You are so good at buying all the harmful dross that everyone is feeding you,’ Pitch said, his voice going from elevated to silky in an instant. ‘That way you don’t have to expend any effort at all challenging anything around you. And yet- And yet you can’t quite help it, can you, Jack? You can’t help it. You didn’t bring the brooch. You don’t like calling me by my title. You escaped from the Creche. You ran from the Palace, over and over again.’

‘Because I’m- Because I am the way I am,’ Jack exclaimed, feeling choked up and breathless.

‘What?’ Pitch said calmly. ‘Made wrong?’

‘Don’t pretend like you don’t believe it too,’ Jack said, his voice breaking. ‘Don’t do that. I know you have to do whatever you have to do to make me ready, or whatever, but don’t do that. Or is that the darkness in you, making you be that cruel?’

Jack struck his staff against the fireplace mantle in frustration, and ice showered from it.

‘Is this meeting over?’ Jack said, refusing to look at him.
'No,' Pitch said, after a beat.

'And if I just walk out? What, isolation? Flogging? *What?*

'Nothing,' Pitch said.

Jack began to walk to the door, staff fisted tight, his breathing thin. He’d thought— He’d thought things had gotten better between them. Why did he let himself think that? Why?

'Jack,' Pitch said quietly.

Right when his hand was on the door handle. Jack saw frost swirling away from his fingers over the brass.

'Jack, when you’re ready to believe something like the truth about the world around you, you can come to me. I won’t tell you about your future potential like the Tsar. But I’ll not lie to you about what I see now. And I won’t lie to you about the danger you present. I’m not lying about you being strong, or having persevered through a great deal of torment that no one ever should. If you can’t hear that for what it is now, so be it. But when you’re ready, I won’t turn you away. You’re the one who’s leaving this meeting, I’m not telling you to leave.'

'It’s not like it matters,' Jack said, squeezing his eyes shut. 'I’ll be living with you soon enough, right?'

'I think you’ll find that you’re well-equipped enough at avoidance that it won’t much matter where you’re stationed. Besides, have you not considered the danger you’ll be in, when we return? The Tsar will seek to meet with you.'

He could almost taste the dust of Endan on his tongue again, all gritty and dry. Empty of life.

'Maybe I’ll take those meetings,' Jack said.

He didn’t even know why he said it. He knew it was petty.

'Maybe you will,' Pitch said, sounding tired. 'After all, he tells you what you need to hear, doesn’t he? He tells you a version of what you tell yourself.'

A flash of anger that he quelled, and Jack opened the door and shut it behind him. At the last minute he managed not to slam it, but all the same, he felt the whole conversation like a loud noise ringing in his ears.
Jack sat on a plush sofa in a private sitting room, vaguely agitated, but also tired. They’d disembarked from the ship that morning, and already he was sitting in Pitch’s space, waiting for servants to take the small amount of his belongings from Fyodor’s room to his new room, and then get the room ready for a new guest. Apparently that would only take two hours. It was happening, and Jack didn’t even bother with protests now. He was almost grateful, even as he predicted about a hundred more fights than usual with Pitch. He didn’t trust himself on his own anymore.

It had crept up on him slowly, during the routine of the ship. What started out as questioning himself, became an intense paranoia that at any moment, the Darkness might be there, and he might be doing something foolish. Sometimes he stopped in the middle of something – earning two brutal blows during the manoeuvres they allowed him to participate in, and consequently barring him from the rest – and it took him more than a minute to trust that what he was doing was fine.

The nightmares that came were of waves of Darkness. Sometimes they swallowed Jack whole and he vanished, screaming. But sometimes it covered him, and he was still standing when it was gone. And then he’d level his staff, and kill everyone he’d recently come to care about. Jamie was always there at the end, begging with him, facing him with a sword as though he’d completed his initiation, and pleading with a broken, terrified voice. Jack always woke up just as he’d extinguished the light from Jamie’s eyes.

In the mess hall, he’d caught Pitch watching him, eyebrows knitted together. Beyond that, they didn’t interact. Jack went to his cubicle every night and stared up at the shadows and convinced himself they weren’t moving.

Now, his eyes were lidded as he focused on his breathing. Pitch’s rooms seemed safe from the Darkness, even if Jack didn’t feel safe inside of himself. The sitting room was furnished in dark tones. It seemed like Pitch loved dark colours – navy blues and blacks, or deep reds and greens, depending on the room itself. And where the rest of the Palace was filled with gold, here it was kept to a minimum. Highlights here and there, almost as though Pitch had looked for items with the least gold, but couldn’t avoid it entirely.

A child’s drawing of a vine with bright red flowers rested on the desk beside Jack’s fingers.

The room that was to be his own was actually two rooms and a bathroom. A comfortable – but not overly opulent – bedroom. The bed not actually a four-poster, though it still featured a headboard and baseboard elaborately carved with demonic faces, along with scales and spines. The fireplace carved from black wood, horses with fluid manes and tails, amber set into their eyes. The other room was clearly a training space. Jack thought about other soldiers that had stayed. Would they have been lovers? Something else? Jack had no idea.

Why did Fyodor get his own room? And why was it separate from Pitch’s quarters?
Jack sighed and tilted his head back, too tired to bother with it. Second-guessing himself was exhausting, Pitch had already vanished. There was no one there to make sure that Jack stayed awake and alert.

He slept.

*

In the mid-afternoon, Jack explored his new living space. There were none of Fyodor’s clothes here, no strange games or corn dolls, items that hinted at some cryptic person that Jack didn’t ever hear about.

The Tsar’s brooch had been placed by one of the servants upon Jack’s bedside table, and he felt squeezed tight when he saw it. He wanted to touch it. He wanted to hide it away and never see it again. Now that he was back in the Palace, he couldn’t even think about the Tsar. Yet there was a part of him still desperate for approval, still convinced that things could be repaired. If he could just have the Tsar’s blessing, and have it last longer than for a few seconds…

Eventually, Jack picked up the brooch with the metal shovel from the fireplace. He slid open the drawer, and dropped it inside, and then laughed as he returned the shovel back to its stand. He was being ridiculous.

In the late afternoon, Jack was surprised to see the group of seamstresses that he normally saw with Flitmouse. He smiled to see them, peering past them, hoping Flitmouse would be by soon. He’d have to find some more tea, see him again.

‘Master Frost,’ said the seamstress with the heavy chatelaine, smiling at him in a detached manner, ‘we are here to make sure you are well-outfitted. Give us a moment to look through your wardrobe to see that which needs replacing, and what needs to be made stronger.’

Jack watched them busy themselves around his room, and realised Flitmouse wasn’t coming.

‘Is Flitmouse okay?’ Jack said. ‘I mean, is he busy?’

One of the seamstresses turned and looked at him, surprised. Then she caught the eye of another.

‘Master Frost, Flitmouse is unavailable at this time. But if you are not happy with our service, we would be more than happy-’

‘No, no, I’m happy,’ Jack said. ‘You folks are amazing at what you do.’

The seamstress had already turned away from his acknowledgement.

A few minutes later they were all standing around Jack’s uniforms, commenting to each other about the strength of fabrics, the way it had worn, and the ability to repel stains. Quick, sharp little notes were made in tiny notepads, with pencils whose wood and leads had been worn down to nubs. Then, they bowed politely to Jack and swept out together without even measuring him.

Jack stared after them, and thought he’d check how long he got out of his rooms every day. Maybe he’d just visit Flitmouse. They seemed to act even weirder once he’d asked about the tailor.

*

That evening, Jack walked into the main lounge, where Pitch was giving orders to Golden Warriors he didn’t recognise at all. They hadn’t been on the ship with them. He wondered how many were
sent on different missions, and how many of them weren’t ‘good missions.’

Eventually, the Warriors were dismissed, and Pitch turned to consider Jack.

‘How long can I leave?’ Jack said. ‘I need to visit someone.’

‘Who?’ Pitch said, eyes narrowing.

‘A friend,’ Jack said. ‘A servant. But he lives in the City proper. Not in the Palace. Can I just- I’m worried about him and I just want to- I’m sure everything’s fine. So how long?’

Pitch looked over to a heavy grandfather clock hanging on the wall. This too, carved in wood, with forest leaves and squirrels and owls, a set of antlers at the top. Where did Pitch find all this stuff? It was so unlike the general aesthetic of Lune, that Jack found himself mesmerised by the details.

‘Be back by eleven,’ Pitch said. ‘Don’t get used to being allowed out so late every evening.’

‘Yes, S-’ Jack swallowed down the honorific, mad at himself for still using it. ‘Sure.’

‘Sure,’ Pitch said, one side of his lips lifting in something of a smirk. Jack knew he was being mocked, that Pitch had seen Jack do a complete turnabout on what he’d been about to say.

Jack gritted his teeth and walked away. He knew they were going to get on each other’s nerves, but he didn’t want it to be the first night.

*

The shopkeeper on the ground level stared hard at Jack as he made his way to the rickety staircase that would lead to Flitmouse’s attic apartment. The shopkeeper – a gnarled old man with a cotton candy fluff of white hair – even leaned to keep Jack in his gaze, and Jack found himself looking over his shoulder until their eye contact was broken.

The stairs creaked as Jack made his way up, and he kept one hand on the railing the entire way. A cold wind guttered up through the alleyway, Jack’s cape fluttering lightly.

Jack’s steps slowed as Flitmouse’s door – hanging off its hinges – came into view. It swung back and forth lightly, creaking as it moved.

Painted on the door in red:

**SCUM TRAITOR**

Jack stopped, the staircase groaning a little beneath him. His mouth dry, working his tongue wasn’t enough to bring saliva back into it. He gripped the railing so hard that his palm hurt.

Then he looked behind him, suddenly paranoid that he’d see all the citizens of Lune standing beneath him, pointing up with their fingers. But even the hard gaze of the shopkeeper was absent.

Jack stepped forwards hesitantly, his heart pounding nausea into his throat. He moved a step at a time, each time grasping onto the railing, trying not to imagine what he might see. Then he was close enough that he had no choice but to push at Flitmouse’s door.

His heart hurt. Almost nothing had been left that made this place so distinctly Flitmouse’s. Cabinets had been pushed aside, drawers upturned, and flakes of newspaper were scattered across the floor. There, near Flitmouse’s kettle – also absent – was a smear of thick, brown-red, that would have once been fresh blood. A sharp voice echoed across his mind, as though Flitmouse was
right there, whispering the words in a mocking undertone:

*I am always ready to leave in but a moment.*

Except he hadn’t left. He’d been taken. His messy, cluttered space rendered broken and bare over however many days Jack was away. Jack didn’t even know if it had happened while he’d been on the ship, or before. He hadn’t seen Flitmouse since he’d brought the tea some time ago.

Jack thought of all the traitorous thoughts he’d been having, the conversations, and stared at that smear of blood and dared to wonder if Flitmouse still lived.

If he did, he probably wished he didn’t.

Jack turned and retched, wrapped a hand around his stomach and gasped for air. The gasping built up on itself, until Jack was pressed back against the wall and covering his mouth, trying to calm himself down and feeling as though his heart was going to explode. If he hadn’t experienced this before as a child, he would have thought he was dying. Instead, he squeezed his eyes shut and let it ride him, until it rode itself out.

He slumped, exhausted, staring around as though Flitmouse would just appear in a moment, tutting about how wrecked his apartment was.

All of the bolts of fabric had been taken, revealing an extremely garish couch beneath it. The pattern alone made his eyes hurt.

How had this happened? Flitmouse had been working in the Palace for years. He seemed like someone who knew who he could talk to, even if he was uncharacteristically bold. So was Pitch. So was Seraphina. So was North.

North…

All at once, Jack recalled North saying, ‘*I think I know which little bird has been ear-bending you,*’ and had a horrible sinking feeling in his gut. Was it possible that Jack had done this? By speaking too freely?

He stumbled out of Flitmouse’s apartment, the wind wild around him now. He ran down the steps and only once he reached the shopkeeper’s landing did he remind himself to slow. He kept his head forward, felt the shopkeeper’s stare prickling into his back like twin knives, and walked briskly, as though it didn’t bother him that Flitmouse was gone. As thought it didn’t bother him that he’d been discovered as a traitor to Lune.

He had to speak to North.

*

Jack ran as soon as he was past the outer ring of the peasant’s houses. It felt good to exert himself, to have something to focus on that wasn’t panic or horror or sickness. He could convince himself that the burning in his stomach was from pushing himself too hard, and then he could pretend this was nothing more than one of Crossholt’s absurd punishments, and he’d lasted through all of those. He’d last through this as well.

‘Come on,’ Jack whispered, impatient, as the wind gathered and buffeted at him. He pressed his lips together, always expected that he’d try this gently, easily, but instead: ‘Come on, are you going to help me or what?’
He lifted clumsily into the air. His flung his arms out for balance, the staff helping him, and stared down at the ground moving a distance beneath his feet. The soles of his shoes not touching anything solid. Night had fallen around him as he sometimes dropped down to the road, taking strange, skipping steps before he swung his staff and started to get the hang of how the wind moved, what the air would be like around him. It took a little while to remind himself that he didn’t actually need to run in the air, and once he stopped treating it like solid ground, it became much easier.

A distant part of him wanted to savour it. To swoop amongst the forests, to learn how to duck and weave between the trees and leave streams of snow behind him. But this was nothing more than efficiency. A skill that he needed to make sure he got to North’s in time, and then home before his curfew. He was suddenly more terrified of breaking rules than he could remember being for a long time. Jamie might have been safe, but Flitmouse…

Thoughts stumbled through his mind in quick succession as he followed the road to North’s Workshop, the winds making him move faster than he was used to, hair pushed about in the wind, cape flying out behind him. The cape that Flitmouse had designed – maybe even sewn himself. Everything he wore had Flitmouse’s careful touch throughout it, and Jack made a faint sound of indignation in the back of his throat, and the wind pushed him along so quickly that branches whipped nearby.

At the last moment, he landed badly on the black road when the Workshop was in view, not wanting anyone to see him flying. It was aberrant, and in that moment, he desperately didn’t want to be any more aberrant than he already was. He staggered, found his feet, and then walked briskly down to the huge entrance to the Workshop, even though nearly all the lights were off, and it was obvious they were closed for the day.

Jack knocked on the door, hearing the sound clanging into the building. A minute passed. Another. No one answered.

He craned back, looking around. In the distance, a tower with a light on at the very top. Perhaps that was where North was. North wouldn’t hear his knocks, but the yetis lived here, and surely-Surely someone would let him in to see North.

He rapped harder this time, with his staff, and the sound boomed off the metal. Resounded loudly.

A few seconds later the door swung open, and Jack looked up at a huge, hulking yeti. Was this one Phil? Jack had no idea.

‘Hi,’ Jack said quickly, his voice rougher than usual. ‘I’m here to see North. It’s an emergency.’

The yeti folded his arms, shook his head.

‘It’s an emergency,’ Jack insisted.

The yeti let loose a diatribe that Jack didn’t understand, and then finally gestured wildly to the doors, as though indicating that they were closed, and that there was no such thing as an emergency once the Workshop was closed.

‘Please,’ Jack said, ‘I just-’

He jumped backwards when the yeti moved towards him all at once, making threatening gestures with his hands. Jack held up a hand to indicate that he was quitting, and stared as the yeti slammed the door shut with a loud clang.
Jack looked towards the tower at the back of the Workshop. It was higher than the tops of the trees around him, but he could fly, and if he could… get the hang of it…

Surely that’s where North would be?

Jack backed up into the forest, just in case the yeti were somehow still watching. Then he lifted up onto the winds – this time he hardly even thought about it. By the time he’d realised he was doing it, he was already in the air.

He moved slower now, skirting the Workshop until he could approach the tower directly. It reminded him of Toothiana’s tower, and the Disciplinarian’s tower. He moved upwards, not entirely sure how it would work. But the more he thought about the fact that he was flying – floating? – up to that light in the arched window, the more he would drop a few feet, as though thinking about it too much made the wind cooperate less.

‘Please,’ Jack whispered, looking down at the ground beneath him, feeling dizzy. He was so high up now. Even higher than Flitmouse’s attic apartment. ‘Come on, please.’

To his surprise, the arched window was slightly ajar when Jack found himself hovering – arms splayed – before it. It wasn’t paned with clear glass, but opaque white. Jack couldn’t see inside. He could hear voices. North was arguing with someone, and then a lighter, feminine voice that Jack recognised, and without thinking, he pushed the window open and floated inside.

Jack’s eyes took in everything faster than his mind could process what he was seeing. Shock bowled into him. He dropped to the ground badly, staff clattering down by his feet.

There, by a huge trestle table, stood the High Priest Sanderson, Bunnymund, Toothiana, and North. But it wasn’t seeing all of them in the same place that had cut through him.

It was the posters on the table, glistening with wet paint.

Jack had seen them before… Seen them multiple times, but remembered them searing into his mind, when he still had cut marks on his back from Bunnymund’s whip.

*How long will you believe the lies of your Tsar?*

Black ink on that pale green blackground, like a scar. Designed to stand out against the reds and whites and blacks of the official Lune posters. No one even knew where the traitors got the colours from. Even the purchase of certain colours was regulated.

Beside it, a stack of posters proclaiming:

*Lune is Built on the Backs of the Dead.*

Jack felt his vision greying out at the corners, tried to convince himself that none of this was happening. Except Bunnymund was already shouting at him, and North was walking towards him, and Sanderson looked concerned and Toothiana had a calculating look on her face.

When Bunnymund took a step towards him, pulling his boomerangs from the brace at his back, Jack fumbled his staff and then grabbed it and threw up a tight wall of ice. Not to attack them, but to shield himself. It covered him in a thick ball, and he couldn’t hear them anymore. Could only hear the harsh echo of his breathing. He backed up against the wall and saw them only as shapes now. No longer moving towards him, that he could tell.

Jack thought of the Guardians of Lune, all that he’d heard. He thought of wishing the people who
made these posters into the Asylums, for daring to harm Lune’s solidarity and purpose. Posters that were clearly made in North’s Workshop. He covered his face with his hands and thought of Flitmouse, and thought that something might be shattering inside of him, only he didn’t know what it was, and he didn’t know how to deal with it.

This was the sort of thing he was supposed to take to the Tsar, wasn’t he?

A sharp, hysterical giggle hiccuped out of him, and then he dug his nails into his scalp and tried to calm himself down.

He startled when he saw a dark, shadowy shape by the ice, and then heard the rumble of North’s voice. There was a crack between the ice and the wall, and North knelt there, talking to him.

‘Jack, are you hearing me?’ North was saying, a soothing tone, like one might use on an injured animal. Jack thought he might have been talking for some time. ‘No, Epiphanes, stay there. He’s terrified. Jack? Can you look at me? You are fine, Jack. It is being fine. You’re safe.’

Bunnymund muttered something in the background, and Jack heard the sharp, angry breath that North took, like he wanted to snap back. But then North sighed it out explosively.

‘Jack, all you have to do is look at me, yes? That’s all. Can you do that?’

Jack turned his head and stared, mute, at North’s face. North, the one who had said that Jack could talk to him, who had said that he knew which ‘little bird’ had been telling Jack about Husthoun.

‘Did you report Flitmouse?’ Jack said, his voice breaking. ‘Because I told you? About Husthoun?’

North stared at him with wide eyes, as though of all the things Jack could say, that was the last he’d ever expected to hear. He looked aside, as though seeking someone’s gaze, and then he turned back to Jack.

‘I did not,’ North said solemnly. ‘I would never.’

‘Okay,’ Jack said. ‘He’s gone.’

‘I know,’ North said sadly.

‘Is he safe? Like Jamie?’

‘No,’ North said, looking aside again. It was a moment later that he realised – from the jade green and violet he saw nearby – that North was looking up at Toothiana, the Spymaster. How was the Spymaster here? Around those posters? It was…impossible. Jack pressed his fingers to his face again and focused on breathing. The ice he’d sealed around himself was so cold.

‘Jack,’ North said patiently, ‘I can talk with you in this little world of ice you have made, but I am thinking you should take it down, so we can talk properly. Yes?’

‘Is he-’

‘Jack,’ North said patiently, ‘I can talk with you in this little world of ice you have made, but I am thinking you should take it down, so we can talk properly. Yes?’

‘No,’ Jack said. ‘I don’t want to see.’

‘You have already seen,’ North said. ‘You cannot unsee. Come out, Jack. No one is going to hurt you here, and if anyone tries, they will have to go through the Engineer of Lune.’

Jack swallowed the lump in his throat. The ice broke apart into diamond dust without Jack really directing it. But he didn’t move from where he’d hunched back against the wall. He felt like a fool.
He felt like someone who couldn’t go back to the Palace and pretend he’d never seen this. All his life, and he was never supposed to be someone who already knew they’d try and hide this from the Tsar.

He could hardly handle what he was seeing, but he could handle himself even less.

Jack refused to look at Bunnymund, and stared instead at the Spymaster’s shoes. They were polished, pretty, but functional. He could smell cigarette smoke, and knew she’d been smoking. The room smelled a little like cinnamon and cocoa.

‘Told you that you shouldn’t have kept that bloody window open,’ Bunnymund griped.

‘Epiphanes-’ North said.

‘Oh, really,’ Toothiana said, sounding exasperated, turning to Bunnymund. ‘We’re eight floors up, and barricaded in. You expected someone to come flying in, did you? What, the Tsar’s now investing in flying spies?’

‘Don’t play daft now,’ Bunnymund said. ‘You know the Tsar is grooming him-’

‘To be a spy?’ Toothiana said, smiling slowly. ‘My dear there is nothing the Tsar wants that I don’t often know about, and if he genuinely wanted this boy to be a spy, I doubt he would have simply bowled in through a window, or stayed here once he’d seen what he’d seen. The Tsar doesn’t want him to be a spy. He wants a lure. It seems he’s got one.’

Toothiana pursed her lips, and then quickly crouched by Jack’s side, staring at him in a way that suggested she saw far more than she ever spoke.

‘Were you followed, young Overland?’

‘It’s Jack Frost now,’ Jack said.

‘Jackson Overland,’ Toothiana said. ‘Jack Frost. I helped choose your new name. Did you know that?’

Jack shook his head, pressing back into the wall. A long time ago, she’d stood at the base of the healing tower, smoking from her cigarette holder, and she’d said, ‘Jack. What a nice, solid name. You can depend on a Jack.’

‘I wasn’t followed,’ Jack said. ‘I flew…from the outskirts. I don’t know. I didn’t notice anyone.’

Toothiana smiled at him, and then stood, walking over to the table and looking over the posters. After a few breaths, she sighed and leaned back so that she couldn’t see them. Instead, she watched Jack.

“A lure,” Jack said.

“Tooth,” North said reprovingly, “the boy is terrified.”

‘Then what a great idea, to keep him in the dark for as long as possible!’ Toothiana said with false brightness, even bringing her hands together, clapping sharply. ‘Brilliant! Here you both are, getting yourselves into trouble by making these posters, which – by the way – will see you both killed, and yet you wish to keep him ignorant for as long as possible? I should knock your heads together. Isn’t that right, Sandy?’
Sandy didn’t sign, but nodded affably in agreement.

Jack wondered if he was hallucinating.

He looked around at them, and then pushed himself back up against the wall so that he was standing. He stared at the posters. The ones that sowed dissent. He wondered what Pitch would say. He wondered…

‘Does Pitch know?’ Jack whispered. ‘About this?’

‘Strewth,’ Bunnymund muttered.

‘I am thinking we have to start from the beginning,’ North said, standing slowly, placing his hands on his knees like they pained him.

‘What happened to Flitmouse?’ Jack said.

He remembered he used to be able to keep track of his own mind, but he couldn’t do it now. Getting sentences out was hard. He thought he might be in shock. Wasn’t that what the healer had said, when he was on Endan? He felt a lot like that now. Of course he knew that the Guardians were treasonous, but he’d never thought- This was organised dissent. It wasn’t just thinking bad things about the Tsar, or occasionally saying a disapproving sentence; which was enough to get one jailed around the wrong people. It was a movement.

Toothiana turned away completely, and then walked away from all of them.

‘What happened?’ Jack said. ‘I went to his apartment and everything… Is he dead?’

‘No,’ Toothiana said, quietly. ‘He will be interrogated, and then he will be sent to an Asylum. He’s a very fine spy. He’ll not break under pressure.’

‘The serums…’ Bunnymund said, ears flattening against his neck.

‘He’s been inoculated,’ Toothiana said. She turned back, violet eyes sparking with anger. ‘Maybe I wouldn’t have needed to sacrifice him, if you two didn’t play your hands so boldly! It’s like neither of you have heard of precision. And I had to throw him before the train, because it was that or the two of you. The only reason I’m here tonight-’

‘You reported him?’ Jack said, feeling like there wasn’t enough air in the room.

Toothiana looked at him, her anger frightening. Then all at once her expression crumpled and she gestured at Jack and looked towards Sandy.

‘The Tsar is stepping up his campaign to find the Guardians,’ Bunnymund said heavily. ‘If Jack’s really a lure, then he obviously suspects Pitch.’

‘Pitch hasn’t been one of us in years,’ Toothiana said. She tilted her head at Jack and pursed her lips.

‘Wait,’ Jack said, not liking the way they all talked over him, like he was just a child. ‘What in the name of the Darkness happened to Flitmouse?’

North had been in the middle of saying something, then faltered and stopped with a sigh.

Bunnymund stepped forward once, looking at Jack warily, ears still flat against his back.
‘The Tsar has been stepping up his campaign to find us,’ Bunnymund said. ‘Toothiana has spies on all sides, and is one of his most trusted advisors. He suspects me and North, but not Sandy or Tooth. He’s known someone is distributing more information than they should, and has had a tail on me for a while now. So, Tooth gave up one of her best men in the Palace, who’s been there for…oh I don’t know, donkey’s years I reckon. Broke her heart.’

Toothiana smiled at Bunnymund for a moment, and then turned away again. Jack watched her rise and fall of her shoulders and couldn’t tell if he was angry or sick.

‘He’ll die in an Asylum,’ Jack said.

‘He’s very strong,’ North said patiently, even as Toothiana’s shoulders went still. She didn’t look like she believed it herself. ‘He’ll wait for us.’

‘No!’ Bunnymund shouted, even as Sandy started and folded his arms, as though this was an argument they’d all heard before. ‘I’m sick of it. I’m bloody sick of it! That’s a pipe dream. It’ll never work if Pitch isn’t on board, and Pitch took one look at that plan years ago and has treated us like shit ever since. It’s a miracle that he’s let us live this long, but he knows he can throw us out to the dogs in a second if it’ll save his daughter. Flitmouse won’t wait for us, because we can’t rescue him, because we don’t have the resources or the power or really, anything. Flitmouse will die in the Asylum, and you’ll keep pandering your Wonders to anyone who will listen, and keep sending our soldiers out in your machines to their deaths.’

Jack stared. He half-expected North to look murderous. But North only looked tired, and he stared down at the ground. When he looked up, it was Jack’s gaze he met, his eyes sheened with unshed tears.

‘He is not being entirely wrong,’ North whispered.

‘My people are dead,’ Bunnymund said, staring at North like he wanted the fight. ‘My planet is gone. The magic and heritage- The heritage and my family- You know there’s only so much I can take Nikolai before I have to tell you to pull your damn head in.’

Jack thought of Endan. Thought of the handful of Endanians on Lune and how they weren’t allowed to access their wealth or planet, and remembered the Golden Warriors pushing cart after cart of bullion back onto the ship. A Warrior had died for it.

‘I know,’ North said. It felt like something that had been said before.

‘This,’ Bunnymund said, catching Jack’s gaze before pointing expansively at the posters Jack had been trying to avoid looking at. ‘This is the hope we have now. That we’ll get more people on side. That we might be able to start something from within. And I’m going to keep working on giving that hope to people, even if it puts me in the direct line of that poisonous monster. I didn’t ask you to give up Flitmouse for this, Tooth. I didn’t bloody ask. I can wear this.’

‘It’s bigger than you,’ Toothiana said, still not turning around. ‘I had to make a choice. I chose.’

‘Yeah, and now who gets to think about your favourite little spy in an Asylum somewhere, wasting away, because you made a choice?’

‘I told you to be more careful,’ Toothiana said, turning to face him slowly. And where Bunnymund was shooting his mouth off, her rage looked composed, chilling. ‘You refuse to listen to me. There are sightings of you putting up the posters now. Witness testimonials. Who has the eidetic memory here, of all of you? Me. I know exactly what evidence we have against you, and I know how
willing the Tsar is to use it. And yet you’ll make more, and put them up yourself? At least get someone else to do it.’

‘So they can go to an Asylum?’ Bunnymund said stubbornly.

‘Believe it or not,’ Toothiana said, ‘I don’t think anyone else is as stupid as you. They know not to get caught.’

Jack watched in confusion as they kept fighting, now about Bunnymund’s capacity for stealth. Jack looked at North, and North was already watching him, like he wanted to say something soothing, but couldn’t think of what to say. Nearby, Sanderson was leaning back against a cabinet and looking bored. But when he looked over at Jack, a gentle smile crossed his face, and he waved with his small hands.

‘Inoculated,’ Jack said. His voice – soft and hardly audible – still cut through the argument and brought silence to the room. ‘Does that mean he knew? That this could happen?’

Toothiana turned to Jack and nodded. ‘He’s always known. Since I recruited him. Or since he recruited himself, I think is more accurate.’

‘He told me he would leave.’

‘Oh, my dear, he was always ready to run. But he also knew this was an option. He was realistic, Jack. He believed the truth was worth the consequences. We all do. What is the point of having a memory like mine, if not for making sure that some of us remember how it once was, versus how it is now? And what is the point of North’s Engineering, if it isn’t to create the weapons of the resistance? And what point is Bunnymund’s alchemy and magic, if he cannot use it to push hope through our City and villages? And Sandy, well, he has dreamed of a far larger future than we could ever have imagined, and without him, we would not be what we are.’

‘You can’t know I’m not going to report you,’ Jack said weakly.

‘Yeah,’ Bunnymund said, staring at Toothiana. ‘You don’t know that. Why do you keep-’

‘Hush,’ Toothiana said, and though her tone was indulgent, her eyes were cold. ‘Leaps of faith are not what you’re known for.’

Bunnymund went mutinously silent, and then he muttered something and went back to the posters, lifting up the ones that were dried, clearly checking the quality. There were hundreds. More than Jack had ever seen. More than had ever been in the City of Lune, surely.

He felt dizzy. Looked towards the open window, the forest layered in darkness.

Would a Jack that hadn’t been impacted by the mountain’s Darkness be standing here right now? Was he supposed to be someone who reported them? The Spymaster who the Tsar trusted? The Engineer who made them their ships and weapons to fight the war? Sandy, the Priest who gave so many people a direction in life? Or Bunnymund… Maybe he’d just leave that one.

But even before the mountain, he’d let Jamie go, and he’d never once regretted that decision. Not once. And he’d let Jamie go these people, this movement, and now Jamie was safe because of it. Flitmouse wasn’t.

‘He’s my friend,’ Jack said, tiredness catching up with him. ‘You can’t just leave him there. If he’s yours, like you said, then you have the power to get him back. You’re the Spymaster. You can get
‘him back.’

‘No, Jack,’ North said, his voice terrible in its softness. ‘You know why.’

‘Get. Him. Back.’ Jack pointed his staff at Toothiana, and Bunnymund’s ears flickered quickly, and he reached behind his back for his boomerangs.

A flash of malice inside of him, hatred roiling fast, and Jack could feel it. The darkness there. He nearly jammed his staff onto the floor to send up sparks. Instead, he pointed his other hand towards Bunnymund, who froze.

‘Don’t,’ Jack said, feeling sick. ‘Don’t. You don’t know what I want to do to you.’

‘Shit,’ Bunnymund said, and then he moved his hands away from his boomerangs and kept his hands in the air. ‘Bloody Pitch, I knew—’

‘Just…be quiet,’ Jack said, feeling sick. ‘Just be quiet, you don’t know what I want to do to you.’

It was North who spoke, so close to Jack’s side, his voice the only one that Jack really thought he could trust. And even then…

‘Jack, Toothiana is the one who is being closest to the Tsar, and as far as we know, he has never suspected her. But she cannot save everyone. If there was a way, we would find it. We would save him, as we have been saving so many, for so long.’

Jack shook his head, wishing that he hadn’t left Pitch’s rooms at all. Wishing that he’d just stayed in that stupid room with its fireplace of horses and training room. Aside from Cupcake, who he wasn’t sure he could trust with this stuff, Flitmouse was the only one who had been really honest with him. The one who had said they could try being friends. He was the one who had taught Jack about different types of cloth and ranted about his ex and-

And he wasn’t going to lose it in front of them. He just wasn’t. He stood there and got control of himself, and imagined that it was Crossholt there, leering, waiting for the moment when Jack would break.

When he looked up, his expressions were masked. He lowered his staff, and he stepped away from the ice. The darkness inside of him felt further away too, but he knew it wasn’t gone. He’d have to be so careful around Bunnymund.

‘Okay,’ Jack said, looking at them. ‘I won’t tell anyone about this. But you owe me some explanations. Because I’m tired of knowing nothing. Or bits and pieces. I’m tired of Pitch hinting about bad missions and about what the Tsar is telling him to do, and,’ he stared at Toothiana, ‘I’m tired of you telling me that Jack is a solid name months ago, and me somehow ending up with the name of Jack Frost. If you’re afraid of Pitch throwing you to the Tsar, remember I can do it too.’

‘You’d put Jamie’s life in danger?’ North said calmly.

It was like a physical blow, that sentence. Jack bit the inside of his lip until he tasted blood, so that
he could look composed, so that he could look like he dealt with this stuff all the time. He turned to
stare at North, and whatever was on Jack’s face, made North’s eyes widen.

‘He’ll kill the trail,’ Toothiana said, smiling ruefully when Jack looked at her. ‘The Tsar would kill
the trail that led to the Guardians. Even dear Pitch knows that, though he pretends he doesn’t.’

Sandy stepped away from the cabinet and started signing quickly, staring at North in anger. North
was following the fast loops and gestures of his movements, and nodded slowly, and then in
quicker agreement.

‘This is not the way to be doing things,’ North said. ‘Jack, you are frightened and confused. But we
owe you better. We do not meet like this often at all. We try and avoid meeting – the four of us –
whenever we can. If you wish to be learning more from us, you can meet with us individually. But
we all have different ways of looking at things. And- Jack, only a short time ago, I am knowing
how hard this is for you. Yes? He is the Tsar. And you love him. It is only being normal to want
his love too.’

Jack closed his eyes briefly, then looked back towards the window. He thought of his curfew
belatedly. He had no idea what would happen if he was late to the Palace, to Pitch’s rooms. He
didn’t want to be late.

‘I have to go soon,’ Jack said. ‘I need to be back by eleven.’

‘You’re not gonna make that,’ Bunnymund said, snorting.

‘I will if I fly some of it,’ Jack said. ‘Maybe.’

At least he didn’t feel like murdering Bunnymund anymore.

Yeah, not right now at least. Give it a few seconds, I’m sure it’ll come back.

He felt defeated, and he looked around at all of them, wishing he was still in his ball of ice. That
he’d not had this conversation with them. That he’d left when the yeti had tried to scare him off.

‘Mate,’ Bunnymund said, his voice far gentler than it had any right to be – as gentle as it had been
the night Jack had attacked him for suggesting they chat in the Disciplinarian’s Tower. ‘You
wanna just sit for a minute? It’s…a lot.’

‘I’m just gonna go,’ Jack said.

He was tired of getting answers to questions he didn’t want to have to ask. He stepped back towards
the window, and stilled when North took a step towards him.

‘Jack, perhaps you should be leaving through the back entrance.’

Jack shook his head and was perched in the window before they could stop him. Even Bunnymund
looked alarmed, when he looked back at them all. The Guardians of Lune. How could anyone have
ever mistaken Jack as one of them? No wonder Pitch had gotten so angry when it had been
suggested.

‘I won’t tell anyone,’ Jack said.

With that, he stepped out of the tower and waited for the winds to catch him. He dropped hard for
five storeys, and then – too tired to even feel afraid – the wind caught him and he sped out into the
night. He looked over his shoulder and saw the silhouette of North there, and deliberately turned
away, making his way back to the Palace.

* Jack had to knock to get back into Pitch’s rooms. He almost laughed when he realised that it was Pitch who had been waiting for him, and not some servant.

‘You’re late,’ Pitch snapped. Then: ‘What happened?’

‘I’m tired,’ Jack said, walking past him. He was covered in a fine rind of frost. He hadn’t been able to stop it. The night had been cold, and his ice had crept all over him, until even his hair was coated.

‘You’re not going out tomorrow evening,’ Pitch said. It was clearly meant to be a threat.

‘Cool,’ Jack said. ‘I think I’m gonna stay in for a while.’

Closer and closer to his rooms. There was a corridor, with other guest rooms coming off it. All he had to do was-

A hand at his arm, holding him still.

‘What happened?’ Pitch said, his voice different.

‘I’m really tired,’ Jack said, without looking at him. ‘And unless you want to see what your whole rooms look like iced over, you should get your hand off me.’

Pitch squeezed his fingers tighter, and Jack winced. Did nothing. It was a dull ache throughout his arm.

‘Do you…need to talk?’ Pitch said.

‘To you?’ Jack said, finally meeting his eyes. ‘What, are we going to have a heart to heart? Maybe I’ve had enough of them tonight.’

His tone was bitter, and he distantly thought it wasn’t fair. But their last conversation still cut at him. Everything seemed to cut at him. It was as though his skin had become paper thin, and could tear in an instant.

‘Was it the Tsar?’

Jack laughed and could almost feel his knees weakening. He was just so tired. He didn’t want to think.

‘No,’ Jack said. ‘Are you going to let me go, or what?’

A pause, and Pitch’s hand slid away from his arm. Jack wanted to rub the pain away, but instead he left it there. If he didn’t know better, he’d say Pitch looked concerned. But of course, he was just worried about what the Tsar might do. Like everyone. Apparently.

Jack walked into his bedroom and closed the door, then locked it. He got onto the bed with its soft dark quilt and lay on his back, staring at the ceiling. His thoughts drifted, and he could hear a faint, haunting creak lurking in the background. Every now and then he dared to tell himself none of this was happening, even as he couldn’t get the sound of Flitmouse’s broken door out of his mind.
Family is Rare

Chapter Notes

Phew this chapter. I hope folks like it :D Getting a bit more insight into Jack's general experiences here, and also Eva kicks ass.

Jack lay in his bed, after having showered and dressed, unable to motivate himself to train or do anything at all. He stared up at the ceiling and wondered what the point was. If they were fighting the Darkness, but not tasked to defeat it, then why were they fighting it? Bunnymund’s words kept circling through his head, angry and heated, and even if Toothiana had been cutting with him, it was obvious he meant his words. The posters alone…he would get himself killed.

Flitmouse was alone in an Asylum somewhere, maybe already dead. The rumours were that maybe Asylums didn’t even exist, and going to one – for no one ever returned – simply meant being taken off and executed. Out of sight but not quite out of mind.

All the fire inside of him, the passion, had burned itself out. He hadn’t ever thought it was possible, and yet here he was, tired and feeling stupid. They all treated him like a naïve child. Eva had called him the ingénue. Jack had looked it up later, thinking of those Lune-produced operas with the young sopranos who inevitably met some tragic end because they could never quite fight free of their circumstances.

Eva had called him that.

Anton had said Jack was too good for all of it.

Strands of hopelessness that had been floating around him for so long had finally knotted together in his chest. He closed his eyes, unable to sleep, but tired of thinking. His mind drifted. Nothing mattered.

*

A knock, and Jack didn’t respond. Eventually, the door clicked open – which mean that Jack locking it didn’t matter either.

Of course, Jack thought, because nothing does.

The door opened, someone stood in his doorway. Jack could hear them biting into something every now and then, chewing. Eventually curiosity got the better of him, and he cracked his eyes open to see Pitch in the closest he ever got to civilian clothing, eating a pale green apple.

‘There are no servants here that will bring you breakfast,’ Pitch said eventually. ‘So you can either have it with us at the dining table, or you can find your way to the kitchen and avail yourself to what’s there. Except the alcohol. I’ll know if you have any.’

‘Okay,’ Jack said, closing his eyes.

Another bite into the apple, more chewing. Pitch was apparently just going to stand there. A part of Jack thought he should get up, was ashamed to be seen like this. Another part felt too heavy to
move.

‘We’ll not wait for you,’ Pitch added.

‘Okay,’ Jack said.

He wasn’t going to have breakfast with Pitch, or whoever else was there. Probably Seraphina. After all, he was only here because he’d nearly \textit{killed} people. It wasn’t like he was a part of whatever they had.

‘We’re going to talk about this,’ Pitch said ominously.

‘Whatever,’ Jack said, curling onto his side. Finally, the fatigue seemed strong enough that he could sleep, and Jack was distantly aware of a sigh, and then the door closed and Pitch was gone.

* 

When he woke around lunchtime, he was hungry, and surprised the etiquette tutors weren’t there. He slid out of bed, apparently unable to stay in bed ‘forever’ as he’d initially wanted to. He thought about training, and then decided to go to the kitchen. He had no idea where it was, but Pitch seemed to think he could find it.

Jack made his way down the corridor. He peered into the lounge, but no one was there. A fire crackled in the hearth, but it was dying down. On the opposite side of the room, another long corridor beckoned. Jack headed that way.

Down the corridor were many wooden doors, all closed. He didn’t try any of them. There was a time when perhaps he’d have tried to look in each, curious about Pitch’s life. Now, Jack didn’t want to learn anything else. Curiosity didn’t seem like such a great personality trait. If he was being really honest with himself – which he didn’t want to be, but couldn’t seem to help – it was the reason Pippa had died. If they’d never gone beyond the Overland creche in the first place, she’d never have been taken by the Darkness.

He wouldn’t be here now, with one murder behind him and more looming in the future, in a Palace lorded over by someone that no one around him seemed to trust.

The corridor curved, opening out to a large archway. Jack walked through it and into the kitchen, registering a dull amazement at its size – though it wasn’t enough to have him really stop and pay attention. Mostly he noticed the strings of herbs and drying root vegetables hanging from the ceiling, giving the place a fragrant aroma. Otherwise, he just methodically went through the cupboards, the larder with its large thrawl, and then a walk-in pantry that Jack backed out of, because no way was he going to make something from scratch.

In one of the first cupboards, he’d found military rations already packaged and ready to go. He took two of those and walked quietly back to his new room. It was only when he reached his room that he realised he should have taken a week’s worth. Then he’d hardly have to leave at all.

Still, as he munched slowly on the dry biscuit, tracing the nose of one of the black wooden horses at the fireplace, he had to admit that it was all a bit different than he expected it to be. It was obvious that Pitch didn’t use servants that much at all, which was…weird. Wasn’t that just what nobles \textit{did}? And it had always been abundantly clear that Pitch came from an esteemed lineage.

Eventually, Jack sat down on the cool, flat stones at the base of the fireplace and leaned against the carved horses, staring at his room.
No one bothered him for the rest of the day.

*

The next day, it was much the same. Jack woke, showered, dressed, and then got back into bed. This time he lay above the covers, instead of beneath them. He stared at the ceiling, he missed the feeling of warming blankets with his own body heat. It wasn’t until he’d lost most of his own, that he realised he missed warmth. These days, he turned the heat up in the shower slowly, until his skin went red, until it seemed he could melt all the ice away.

Maybe, if he burned it away, all he’d have left was the Light.

When the etiquette tutors came at their usual time, Jack dragged himself up and put himself through the motions. He failed entirely at dialoguing in a ‘charming manner’ but thankfully the tutor in charge of that didn’t hit his wrists when he messed up. And the tutor’s disappointment and clucking tongue didn’t really touch him.

After his lessons, they left, and Jack walked into his training room. He took his smallsword off its hook and then stood there, its tip brushing the ground.

Ten minutes later, he put the smallsword back and sat on the stones at the fireplace again, his back to the cold hearth. He could build a fire if he wanted – there was tinder and wood available – but it wasn’t like he needed it anymore.

To his left was a large series of bookshelves, though they were mostly bare of books. At the very top, a finely crafted tea set, that reminded Jack of Flitmouse’s house, his kettle, his penchant for tea. Jack closed his eyes and tried not to think of the brooch the Tsar had given him, and how he wasn’t wearing it. What was the line? For being put into an Asylum? Had Jack already crossed it?

Wouldn’t someone tell him, if he had?

*

Jack made his way down the corridor to get some more rations, when he heard voices. He stilled, because he didn’t want to make small talk, and he didn’t want to see anyone.

‘If you’re not in the mood…’ Anton was saying.

‘It’s not that,’ Pitch said, his voice muted more than usual. Then he said something else, and Jack couldn’t catch it at all. Obviously whatever he said made Anton answer in the same tone.

A few seconds later, Jack caught Eva’s voice. The idea of facing any of them, let alone all three… Jack turned around and walked back to his room, and closed the door.

He could eat later.

*

It was late when Jack lurked in the corridor again, listening out for voices. But he didn’t hear anything, so he made his way to the kitchen and this time, took a week’s worth of rations. He doubted anyone would miss them, as none were missing since the two he’d taken before. They probably ate better, but the rations were designed to be nutritionally complete, and Jack was used to them. A small marker of familiarity that he knew he was clinging to, and couldn’t seem to stop himself.
Back in his room, he unwrapped one of the biscuits and ate numbly. He was still having nightmares now, more than one a night. Darkness cresting over him, or moving through him, or stealing him away. It was the only time he ever felt more than the emptiness that roared in the hollows inside of him. But fear wasn’t much better, and he avoided going to sleep.

* 

A knock at his door, and Jack just waited by the fireplace for Pitch to enter.

But then another knock, small and furtive, and Jack frowned. He got up, walked over to the door, and was surprised to see Seraphina standing there. Even more surprised to see a hand-plucked bouquet of dark red flowers in her left hand, and a vase filled with water in the other.

‘These are for you,’ she said. Then she walked into his room without asking, and stared critically at the space. ‘You haven’t put any of your things here yet.’

‘I don’t—’ Jack didn’t want to tell her that he didn’t have anything. Even his old collector’s cards and memorabilia of Pitch would have been thrown out during his initiation. ‘Um. Isn’t it late?’ Jack said. ‘Shouldn’t you be in bed?’

‘I was with Mama, in our garden,’ Seraphina said. ‘I couldn’t sleep. Then she said you might like some flowers.’

‘I could have been sleeping,’ Jack said slowly.

Seraphina just looked at him, as if to say: Don’t be stupid.

Then she walked over to Jack’s bedside table and placed the vase down, and carefully placed the flowers in the water. She touched each of the blossoms, and then shifted them, trying to find the best arrangement. Whatever she was doing clearly didn’t work, because she made a faint sound of frustration, and then turned away.

She faced Jack. Today, she wore dull green pants, and a black shirt with a print of white flowers at the hems. She was barefoot, and dirt still clung to her toes.

‘Do you still want to learn the alphabet? The proper one? Not the common one?’ she said.

‘Uh,’ Jack said. ‘Look, I know— That’s a lot of work for someone like—’

If you call her a kid, she’ll murder you. Outright. She’s got that look in her eyes that Pitch gets sometimes.

‘Do you want to learn or not?’ Seraphina said, frowning. ‘I don’t like teaching people who don’t like to learn. It’s not fun.’

‘You’ve taught before?’ Jack said, staring at her.

‘Of course,’ Seraphina said, before hopping onto Jack’s bed and swinging her legs back and forth over the edge. ‘Mihail frustrates his tutors, because he hardly talks, and he doesn’t look at anyone. A few of them used to think he was dumb. But he’s not. He just thinks differently. So I decided to see if I could teach him things. And then he decided to teach me some things. But I teach him more than he teaches me. So I’m his teacher.’ She paused. ‘And his friend.’

Then, after an even longer pause, her legs stopped swinging and she said in a small voice:
‘Don’t you like the flowers?’

Jack opened his mouth to exclaim that he did like them, and then realised that it might sound a bit too defensive.

‘I do,’ Jack said, making his voice quieter, calmer. ‘I’m sorry. I should’ve said before. I haven’t had anyone bring me flowers for a really long time.’

‘How long?’ Seraphina said.

Jack shrugged, and then said: ‘Maybe twelve years. I don’t know.’

‘No one’s brought you flowers in all the time I’ve been alive?’ Seraphina said, staring at him. Then her cheeks coloured, and she looked away as though embarrassed. Jack couldn’t tell if it was for her, or for him.

‘What kind are they?’ Jack said, walking over to the flowers and looking down at them. These weren’t the ones he’d seen before in her meadow. Their petals ended in sharp points, and there were at least twenty petals per flower. In the middle, the stamens were a pearly silver.

‘A hybrid,’ Seraphina said, excitement entering her voice again. ‘I’ve been interested in propagation, and they let me. Mama says I have a gift. So it doesn’t have a name.’

‘You should give it a name,’ Jack said, smiling at her.

‘I might,’ Seraphina said, staring gamely back at him. ‘But I won’t do it right now. Do you want to learn to read the proper alphabet? I found all my books from when I was a child.’

You’re still a child, Jack didn’t say, because he had a feeling that Seraphina wasn’t above lecturing him about the difference between a child and whatever she was now. A slightly older child? Jack didn’t know how she thought about herself. Suddenly he thought he understood why Pitch tried to make things less serious for her sometimes.

‘I’d like to learn,’ Jack said. Though he wasn’t sure if there was a point anymore, or how it would help him. Maybe he’d just learn about all the other things he didn’t understand.

‘Not tonight though,’ Seraphina said.

‘What’s your favourite animal?’ Jack said. ‘Do you have any?’

‘I have a list,’ Seraphina said. Then she rattled off a huge list, half of which were animals Jack had never heard of. But one he had, so he came and sat beside her on the bed and pointed his staff outwards, and brought it forth out of fine particles of ice.

The small, sure-footed glacier goat looked almost real, given its coat was white and blue. It seemed to take on a life of its own, as Jack watched it, smiling, and Seraphina gasped by his side.

‘Oh, it’s like real,’ she said, sliding off the bed and creeping towards it.

The goat looked at her, tilting its head, and then it bucked and trotted a few paces away, a fey, quick movement. Then it lowered its head, baring its two short, strong horns. As Seraphina looked between Jack and the goat, the goat lay down, and looked up at her expectantly.

‘How are you doing it?’ she said. ‘It’s like what Nikolai does, only…so different. Can I touch?’

Jack was distracted by how easily she mentioned North. Stared at for a moment, until she looked
back at him, and Jack had to force himself to not think about how much she knew. If that was why she seemed so much older than she really was.

‘I don’t think it will hold together,’ Jack said. ‘Plus, it’ll be pretty cold.’

‘It’s just ice,’ Seraphina said, getting down on her hands and knees and crawling towards it. She got so close that she was almost nose to nose with it, her green eyes wide and shining in awe. Jack wished he could feel a shred of what she felt, but it was nice to know she was enjoying herself.

Unable to resist, Seraphina touched the tip of her finger to one of its horns, and it fell into diamond dust, glittering in the air. She smiled, and then sat – crossing her legs and moving her hands through the tiny bits of ice.

‘Mihail says that the ball of magic in the mountain is special,’ Seraphina said, still gazing at the diamond dust. ‘He says that it’s one of the only things that his father can’t control, which is why he doesn’t like anyone seeing it, or touching it. Did you know that?’

‘No,’ Jack said. ‘I can’t- Miss Seraphina, I can’t talk about this today.’

Seraphina paused, and then lowered her arms and stared at him, forehead creasing.

‘Why not?’ she said.

‘I just can’t,’ Jack said, trying to go for winning and smooth, and instead unable to hide the way his voice cracked.

She pushed herself up and Jack watched her, not sure how things were going to progress. But instead she just walked up to him and wrapped her arms around him, pressing her sharp little chin into his shoulder.

‘I thought you’d be mad,’ Jack said.

Her arms squeezed him tighter.

‘No,’ she said, her voice muffled. ‘I can’t either, sometimes. It’s not stupid. I’m not mad.’

When she withdrew, she smiled at him. Then she walked over to the vase of flowers and plucked one – sharp little nails severing it from its stem. She turned it in her fingers, and then walked over to Jack and stared at him, before tucking it behind his ear.

‘There,’ she said. ‘You can name it, if you like. But not now,’ she said, rolling her eyes. ‘Later. I’m going to see what Mama is doing. Probably sleeping. She had a hard mission.’

She walked to the door, and Jack called after her: ‘I hope you have sweet dreams.’

A scoffing noise, but then she turned.

‘I’m glad you’re living with us now,’ she said. ‘Or sort of, anyway. You should put some of your things up in here. It would look nicer.’

Then she left, and Jack was relieved, because he didn’t want to see the look on her face when he told her that he had nothing to put up, nothing to keep except the clothing on his back, which belonged to the Tsar anyway.

*
The next day, Jack showered, dressed, and got back into bed. He turned and looked at the flowers instead of the ceiling. He’d placed the one that had been at his ear on the table. The rest sprawled in their vase. The red was very deep, and they looked velvety to the touch, even though they weren’t. They felt more like thin paper.

An hour later, a knock at his door, and Jack thought it was early for the tutors, and Pitch had already told him about breakfast, so-

Pitch opened the door and leaned in the doorway, eyebrows raised.

‘This morose sulking has got to stop,’ Pitch said.

‘I’m not sulking,’ Jack snapped, and then realised he sounded about as petulant as Pitch probably thought he was being. Judging from the smugness on Pitch’s face, he probably had the right of it.

‘Aren’t you?’ Pitch said, looking around his room in amazement. ‘Then tell me what deep philosophical truths you’re contemplating in that bed all the time. Here…’ Pitch lifted a hand to his ear and made a cup with his fingers, as though trying to hear better, ‘I’m listening.’

Jack glared at him, and after a few seconds, Pitch dropped his hand and looked even more pleased.

‘Okay,’ Jack said, pushing himself upright and kicking the blankets away. ‘What plan did Bunnymund and the rest bring to you, that you shot it down and left them making stupid posters about-’

Pitch’s eyes had widened almost comically, and then all at once he stepped into the room and yanked the door shut behind him. It took a moment for Jack to realise that it wasn’t surprise on Pitch’s face, but outrage.

‘What if the Tsar had been out there?’ Pitch said, staring at him. ‘Or I’d be sent to fetch you, while Sharpwood waited less than ten metres away? What then?’

‘I dunno,’ Jack said, staring at him. Truthfully, it had never occurred to him that it was a possibility, and he shoved away the fear that lurched into his throat. ‘I can probably guess.’

‘Do you care?’ Pitch said.

‘Should I?’ Jack said, laughing. ‘According to you, we’re never going to be defeating the Darkness. So that’s like, the only life goal I had pretty much checked off my list. According to them, we’re screwed anyway. And the one person I was going to like…I dunno, talk to about this stuff is gone. And probably dead. So how much should I care?’

Jack lifted his hand and cupped it around his ear.

‘Go on,’ Jack said, a swell of anger inside of him. ‘I’m listening.’

It probably wasn’t possible for someone to explode with anger or anything, especially someone like Pitch, but Jack was pretty sure if it was going to happen – it was probably going to happen now. The look on Pitch’s face had crossed somewhere over into apoplectic, and then Pitch turned away and broke whatever was happening between them, and Jack realised that his breathing was unsteady and dropped his hand, forced himself to breathe. He couldn’t remember ever getting angry at anyone as often as he did with Pitch.

He squeezed his eyes shut, checked himself to see if it was the darkness. But how would he know? He wasn’t imagining destroying Pitch with ice. That was probably a good thing.
When he opened his eyes, Pitch was looking at him again, expression indifferent.

‘So are we gonna train for stuff that doesn’t really matter?’ Jack said. ‘Is that why you’re here?’

‘No,’ Pitch said, and then he lifted a hand in the air and splayed his fingers. ‘It’s breakfast in ten minutes, in the dining room. You can either choose to walk there like an upstanding citizen, or you can be dragged there by me. If we put it to a vote, may I just say that I’d choose the latter, since I think the humiliation will do you some good.’

‘I’m not coming out for breakfast,’ Jack said. ‘You said I could help myself to—’

‘I changed my mind,’ Pitch said sweetly. ‘I’ll see you in ten minutes, won’t I? Do, please, stay in your rooms, so that I may return and fetch you.’

Jack opened his mouth, then closed it again. Sometimes it was all too easy to remember that the Darkness had cut Pitch deep too. Pitch only smiled at him, and then left the room, closing the door behind him.

A few breaths, and then Jack smashed his fist down into the mattress. He didn’t want to sit down at some kind of formal breakfast. He wasn’t interested in any of it. He lifted his hands to his face and realised that he didn’t want to be dragged to the dining room, and he knew Pitch had every intention of returning and doing just that.

After a couple of minutes he sighed, and went into the bathroom to make sure that his hair didn’t look too stupid.

* 

To his surprise, and chagrin, it wasn’t just Pitch at the dining room table. Anton, Eva and Seraphina were also there. Seraphina was playing with a terrarium, and her bowl of porridge had been pushed aside. Eva was drinking something that Jack was sure was alcoholic, except it was early morning and his etiquette tutors would have lectured him for three hours on how it just wasn’t done to drink any sort of alcohol that early in the morning – unless one was a very unsavoury sort, which they were sure Jack wasn’t. Pitch was talking to Anton, the latter of which was spearing up bits of steak with the tip of a wicked looking knife, leaning back in his chair so that only two of the legs were on the floor.

Once they noticed he was there, they all looked at him. Anton grinned, Seraphina went straight back to her terrarium as if Jack was already a part of the furniture, and Eva lifted her flute of whatever-it-was in a salute.

‘There’s food on the table,’ Pitch said, gesturing to the plates and pots sitting on a long table runner. ‘Cutlery and crockery in the cabinet over there.’

Jack wasn’t even that hungry, but he hooked his staff on the back of a chair. He didn’t know if Seraphina wanted him to sit next to her, so he left a chair between them, since the table seated twelve and there was space. Jack walked down to the other side of the room and found a bowl, a small plate, everything else that he might need.

He sat and ended up with a bowl of porridge, some fruit juice that he didn’t recognise, and some toast that he sparingly covered with jam – which he also didn’t recognise. One thing that the Barracks and the creche could never have prepared him for: the amount of fruit in the world, or what it was called, or looked like, or tasted like.

Anton and Pitch had started talking again, and Jack started to pay attention, because they were
discussing ship mechanics and future missions – but then he realised Eva was staring at him. Her eyes were sharp, and they showed some of that brilliant green that Seraphina had in her own eyes, but with gold around the edges. She looked a little like a bird of prey.

‘Good morning,’ Eva said, leaning forward and placing her glass on the table. ‘Sleep well?’

‘Yeah- Ah, yes, thank you,’ Jack said. Just because everyone else was acting pretty casually didn’t meant that he could. ‘And…you?’

‘Mm, very well,’ Eva said. ‘Your breakfast is very plain.’

‘Leave him alone, Eva,’ Pitch said, before going straight back into discussing strategies of attack and defence for different planets.

‘Listen to that,’ Eva said, waving a crooked finger towards Pitch, ‘as though he can tell me what to do in here. I bet you don’t listen to him either.’

‘No, I- I listen,’ Jack said. He grimaced and looked down at his food, thinking that only about ten minutes before, he’d been mocking Pitch as though…as though to see how he’d react. As thought testing him into…doing something. Jack had no idea what. It wasn’t like he wanted to see Pitch snap.

‘You shouldn’t,’ Eva drawled. ‘It’s a terrible habit.’

‘And you?’ Jack said, wanting to take a bite of the toast but not wanting to eat with his mouth full. He suddenly couldn’t remember how to coordinate eating in polite company, and wished that Seraphina wasn’t sitting there, watching the two of them with open curiosity. ‘Drinking in the morning?’

‘It’s to maintain my lovely constitution,’ Eva said. ‘And it’s really very light. Do you want some?’

‘Leave him alone, Eva,’ Pitch said, pausing to stare at her.

‘Darling,’ Eva said, not even looking at Pitch, ‘I’m getting to know your guest. Don’t be so overbearing.’

‘He can’t help that,’ Anton said. ‘It’s like asking someone to change a fundamental part of their nature. Like you, Eva, and teasing people.’

Eva looked over and her smile was surprisingly affectionate. When she turned back to Jack, her expression was softened, and she winked at Jack, before leaning back in her chair and poking at her own half-eaten piece of toast. She wrinkled her nose at it, then sighed.

‘Why aren’t you having anything on your porridge?’ Seraphina said, as Anton and Pitch delved back into their conversation.

‘I…like it plain,’ Jack said, not sure what he was supposed to have on it. They hadn’t exactly covered porridge in his etiquette lessons.

‘Really?’ Seraphina said in some amazement. ‘Oh, Jack, can you make a glacier goat again today? On the table?’

‘No goats on the table, my sweet,’ Eva said. ‘But perhaps on the floor.’

‘It’s not real,’ Seraphina said, staring at her mother. ‘It’s ice.’
‘No ice goats on the table, Seraphina,’ Eva said.

Seraphina huffed, looking at Jack as though seeking an ally. Jack decided he didn’t want to get caught between an argument with these two ever. ‘She never lets me put animals on the table.’

‘Darling, do you remember the incident with the cockroaches?’

‘They were really pretty,’ Seraphina protested, looking indignant. Eva opened her mouth to argue, and then shrugged and nodded, as if in agreement. ‘I suppose they shouldn’t have gone on the table though. Or in the kitchen. There were an awful lot in here by the end of it. I didn’t know they’d grow like that.’

‘Breed,’ Eva said absently. ‘Plants grow, animals breed. Then they grow.’

‘It’s not even a real goat,’ Seraphina said.

Jack left them to it, and ate some of his toast as the conversation continued from goats into ‘Remember that time with the rabbits.’ Eventually, everyone ended up talking about the time with the rabbits, and Jack found himself laughing along at a few moments, unexpectedly. Anton, in particular, had found the rabbits particularly charming, and ended up as Seraphina’s co-conspirator for some months.

‘And,’ Anton said, nodding along, ‘I remember Pitch yelling in frustration: ‘Where do they keep coming from?’ and there’s me standing in the background pretending that I absolutely do not have rabbit hutches in my room. Giving the litters the most absurd names. I think I named most of them after fellow Warriors.’

‘I think some of those fellow Warriors still have pet rabbits,’ Pitch said blandly.

‘There’s a few Pitch’s,’ Anton admitted.

‘Are there any Seraphina’s?’ Seraphina said in breathless excitement.

‘I’m sure there are,’ Anton said with a grin. ‘And if there’s not, I know a wonderful gift I can get you for your naming day.’

‘No,’ Pitch said.

‘Normally I’d take great pleasure in overruling you,’ Eva said to Pitch, ‘but this time I think I agree. Ask again in a year, when the Great Rabbit Debacle is no longer fresh in our minds.’

Seraphina nodded soberly and went back to eating. Anton looked the most put out, then looked at Jack in a way that made Jack think he was about to be drawn into conversation again. Jack didn’t want to feel singled out, so he made a point of looking down at his food and eating it, and tried not to remember that the last time he’d spent any time with Anton, they’d kissed. They’d kissed and talked about…what Anton liked Pitch to do to him.

By the Light, how do they just all sit there and get along like that?

Jack had always been able to banter easily with Jamie, and in the creche, before Pippa died, he’d talked with her. But Pitch was…intimidating. Eva looked at Jack like she was dissecting his soul. Anton was sweet, but clearly able to keep up with the two of them, which made him terrifying by association. Even Seraphina had a way about her – like she wasn’t going to put up with any nonsense, and wasn’t afraid to tell someone when something was nonsense.
And yet here, at the table, he’d felt a part of something larger than himself for a few moments. Listening to their stories, laughing, and they’d all looked at him at different occasions, including him in the levity.

Jack pressed the heel of his hand into his chest without thinking. It hurt, somehow, to be involved in this. Because of course he wasn’t a part of it. He was only here for one reason.

‘May I please be excused?’ Jack said to no one in particular.

‘Of course,’ Pitch said.

‘Where does…where do the plates and stuff go?’

‘You can take them into the kitchen if you’re done.’

Jack nodded, picked up his half-finished breakfast and then looked at his staff, not sure how to juggle everything. In the end, he managed one uneven stack in one hand, and held the staff in his other.

As he walked down the corridor, he thought his breathing was doing something odd. As though he couldn’t draw a full breath.

Once in the kitchen, he placed everything down. He ate some more, not wanting the food to go to waste, even though he wasn’t hungry. Eventually, he couldn’t force himself to have any more of the cold porridge, found the bin, and placed everything in there. A trough at the far end of the kitchen, and Jack rinsed everything, and then – like he was back in the creche – he washed it all and left it draining. He had no idea how they did things, but at least the dishes were clean.

The walk back to his room felt long, and he went straight to the training room and picked up his smallsword.

Even if he didn’t know what the point of training was anymore, he knew that a few drills back to back would empty his mind of everything else, and so he stepped into the first form and tried not to think about anything at all.

*

His etiquette tutors had been less than impressed when he opened his door to them, sweating and breathing out plumes of ice. He waved them in, some of the apathy of the past two days finding him again. Etiquette. Whatever. He’d do what they wanted, and then they’d go.

Rubbing his bruised left wrist after it was all over, he dragged himself back into the adjoining training room. Hadn’t Pitch put him here in the first place, to train him? So why hadn’t training started up yet? Did he think Jack was soft? Jack grit his teeth together, letting out a blast of ice in frustration. It clung to the opposite wall, only reminding Jack that he’d have to clean it when it melted.

After a while, he stopped and hung the sword back up, showered again, and wandered over to the mostly bare bookshelves. He brought down the tea set, turning it in his fingers, and then nearly dropped it at the knock on the door.

He could not remember a time he’d had so many visitors. He wasn’t a fan.

A second knock, and he realised it wasn’t Pitch. So he put the tea set down and opened the door, then blinked in surprise to see Eva there.
‘May I come in?’ Eva said.

‘Sure,’ Jack said, stepping back so she could walk past him, and closing the door behind her. ‘Is everything okay?’

‘I was going to ask you the very same thing.’

She held in her hand a stack of thin books with bright covers, and placed them carefully in the bookshelf.

‘My daughter informs me that you wish to learn the pictographic Lune alphabet. A noble pursuit, and she is a stern teacher, but you may find there to be gaps in what she teaches. As was the case with Mihail, I can fill those gaps. But here, too, are some early primers. They have the common tongue translations, and you may find lessons with Seraphina easier if you look at some of these books first.’

‘Oh, uh, thank you. Thanks. You- You helped Mihail too?’

Eva turned and smiled at him. It was affectionate, like it had been at breakfast, just before she’d winked at him.

‘But of course,’ Eva said, walking across Jack’s room, inspecting it. She looked down her nose at it, as though she was inspecting a ship’s cubicle. Eventually, having surveyed it, she simply stood, shoulders up and at attention, hands clasped behind her back. ‘I was there at his birth. Toothiana, Agnessa and I. He’s dear to me.’

Jack nodded. Didn’t know what to say. Didn’t even know why she was there. She’d given him the books, so…why was she still there?

‘I’ve read your file. Crossholt’s file,’ Eva said. ‘The whole thing. It’s quite thick. You were written up often. I’m starting to think Crossholt used your mark up papers as something of a journal. Or not quite, but I think you catch my meaning.’

‘Yeah,’ Jack said, sighing.

Eva walked over to a linen chest and sat on it, leaning back against the wall, crossing her legs, watching him.

‘Look, I don’t know what you want,’ Jack said.

‘I find you curious,’ Eva said, smiling.

‘If you just want to gawk at me, maybe put me in a zoo first, so I know it’s coming?’

‘Ah,’ Eva said, eyes glittering, ‘so you do have some bite in you after all. I was beginning to wonder.’

She didn’t look offended at all, but pleased. She didn’t even insist that Jack call her by her titles. Which he should, because if anything ever happened to Pitch, she was next in line to lead the entire fleet.

‘I still don’t know what you want,’ Jack said.

‘I think you’re extraordinarily lonely,’ Eva said, the smile dropping away from her face. ‘I think Pitch hoped that shared meals might help you, and they might, in time. But now, they only hurt
you. I see that, Jackson.’

Jack startled to hear his birth name, and looked away, because that hadn’t been what he’d expected at all. And it ached, to have her words press upon the very spot he’d been trying to forget all day.

‘My daughter likes you already,’ Eva said. ‘In spite of herself, really, since I think she felt she was above peasants.’

‘Oh,’ Jack said. ‘Well she is.’

Eva said nothing, and Jack didn’t look at her. Maybe he’d just ice the door shut so no one could get in, and then…well he had enough rations for a few days. So it could work. For a little while.

‘Anton thinks you are very sweet, and he’s always had a sweet tooth, that one. And Pitch…’ Jack held his breath, wanting to know what someone else thought. Needing to know. ‘Pitch is trying, Jack. But sometimes that’s not enough. And sometimes all of this isn’t enough to stave off what you feel. I am sure you’ve had many people telling you that you can confide in them. But why would you? Why would you trust a single one of us?’

Jack stared at her then, shocked. Eva returned his gaze steadily.

‘I wouldn’t,’ she said. ‘I’d feel like I should, but if one wishes to be discerning, one cannot just give away trust left, right and centre. By the Light, what a nightmare that would be.’

‘I thought you’d tell me that I could talk to you.’

‘Of course you could,’ Eva said. ‘Why should you? What have I done for you? How have I earned your trust?’

‘You’re the Captain of the Fleet.’

‘And how have I earned your trust?’ Eva said. ‘Your personal trust?’

‘You’ve…protected Lune.’

‘Darling, Lune is a planet, not a person. I’m sure the planet trusts me very much, but you as a person? Have I slain some Darkness right before you? Saved your life? And does that entitle me to your secrets? Oh, please. Even if I had, you’d only know I was good in a fight. Which I am, by the way. Very good.’

‘I believe you,’ Jack said. Eva’s mouth curled into a smile, and then a grin that was wicked. Jack thought of Anton talking about Eva’s habits in the bedroom, and even though he’d never really found women attractive, there was an aura about her that was compelling. Jack resisted the urge to scratch nervously at the back of his head.

‘I think you should keep coming to the shared meals,’ Eva said quietly. ‘Pitch will likely insist, but regardless-’

‘I’m only here until I can get control of myself around the Darkness,’ Jack said, a spark of anger inside of him. ‘That’s it. Pitch doesn’t want me here. I don’t want to be here.’

‘Don’t you?’ Eva said, lifting her eyebrows. ‘Is our strange little family so off-putting to you?’

‘That’s just it,’ Jack said, ‘it’s your family, not mine. It’s not-’

‘You don’t have a family,’ Eva said, every word falling like a blow. ‘You were sundered from
them, I doubt you remember any but your sister, who died young. And since then, you’ve had no family at all bar the military, which makes for a poor family indeed.’

‘If you’re here to just—’

‘In fact,’ Eva said, leaning forward, ‘I’m not sure you even know how to have one.’

‘Even if I did,’ Jack said, his voice shaking, ‘it’s not going to be here, because I’m not a part of any of this. It’s nice that you all have your happy thing going on, but—’

‘We talked about it,’ Eva said. ‘There was a meeting as soon as Pitch returned. All of us. Anton, myself, Seraphina and Pitch. We all thought that you staying here – not just in the short-term – was a good idea.’

‘Yeah, no one wants a livewire around the place,’ Jack said. ‘I get it. I don’t—’

Eva stood and walked towards him, and Jack worried he’d gone too far somehow. He stiffened, and then Eva crowded into his space and stared down at him, her face far too serious. He opened his mouth to apologise, and then his voice choked in his throat when she slid her arms around him.

‘Jackson,’ she said, as he was folded into her embrace, ‘family is rare. I give you permission to grasp it, while it’s there to be taken. And I am telling you, it’s there. You should take it.’

‘I don’t belong here,’ Jack whispered.

‘Darling,’ Eva said, shifting back even as Jack leaned unwittingly into her. She smiled ruefully at him and thumbed the underside of his cheek, even though he wasn’t crying. ‘Darling, you’ve never really belonged anywhere. But that doesn’t mean you’re barred from the feeling. And if you’re unable to fight for it, let some of us help you do that.’

Jack swallowed thickly, stared at her. She smoothed her hand over his head, then sighed as she looked him over.

‘You have circles under your eyes,’ she said. ‘Nightmares?’

Jack nodded.

‘It is part of being a Golden Warrior, especially in the beginning,’ she said. ‘And that is what you are, Jack. Pitch wouldn’t have you here, if he didn’t think so. Do you know, we took Anton in, lost soul that he was. A boy like that doesn’t risk himself on the frontlines without a reason.’

Eva stepped away from him, and Jack caught himself with his staff, to stop himself from swaying. His eyes were hot, he was scared that if he blinked, he’d lose control of himself. But Eva either hadn’t noticed, or was very good at pretending.

‘Come to dinner tonight,’ Eva said gently. ‘You don’t have to talk, if you don’t wish. You don’t have to eat, if it makes you uncomfortable.’

‘Okay,’ Jack said.

‘But,’ Eva said sternly, pointing at Jack once she reached the door, ‘no glacier goats on the table. Or any other type of ice animal. It’s a slippery slope from that to ornamental praying mantises in the salad. Trust me on that, darling.’

‘Okay,’ Jack said, returning her smile.
She winked at him again, and closed the door behind her with a silent click, leaving Jack breathing shakily and still feeling the ghost of her warm embrace.
Alchemy

Chapter Notes

In which Pitch is the ultimate at the really awful one-upmanship game that no one
likes a friend to play ever. No one has ever sat down and told Jack and Pitch how they
should communicate with each other which *shows.*

Also adding the tag ‘dystopia with a hopeful ending’ to the story because it’s been a
dystopia the entire time and I really just forgot to tag for that. Also added some other
tags.

So excited to be putting this chapter up omg just dsalkfjsda

Family meals became a part of his life – breakfast and dinner, usually. Jack didn’t always go, and
he didn’t always eat. Once he brought military rations with him, and then was surprised at the way
Anton, Eva and Pitch had looked at him. Seraphina had asked to try some, pronounced the hard
biscuit inedible, and offered Jack some of her meal as though trying to coax a starving animal to
her plate. He didn’t bring military rations again.

No one forced him to participate, and Jack wondered if Eva had talked to the others about it. Out of
all of them, he’d never expected someone like Eva to have his back. It really felt like she did. It
made him paranoid that she was going to die on her next mission, be yanked away somehow, like
Flitmouse, or disappear, like Jamie. He kept looking at Seraphina and wondering how she lived
with it. Her parents could die at any time. Were more likely to die at any time. He knew that was
why so many of the Warriors had a network of relationships – in part to protect the children they
had.

Eventually, Eva and Anton moved back to Eva’s rooms, and Seraphina went with them. Shared
meals after that happened once every two days or so. Jack wasn’t sure if he was happy that they
were happening less, or if he missed it.

* 

Thursday, and Pitch stood before a blackboard that was covered in chalk writing in a large room
that seemed like it might be devoted to military meetings or strategy or something. The writing on
the board was the common tongue, and Jack stared at it, because it concerned him.

‘Wow,’ Jack said finally. ‘So you have lots of ideas.’

‘Some,’ Pitch said, staring at it as though he wasn’t sure he liked any of them.

It was a brainstormed chart of all the different training techniques Pitch had considered. In the
centre, Jack’s name, underlined in white chalk. The rest of the board had been filled with ideas.
There were also symbols. A green triangle. A red cross. Some of the ideas were familiar, though
not appealing: *Keep training with Bunnymund.* Others didn’t make sense. One ‘idea’ wasn’t words
at all, but the universal symbol for a ship, followed by two vertical lines crossed through with a
short horizontal one.
‘So what does green mean?’ Jack said.

‘I think they’d give us the most rapid progress,’ Pitch said, stepping back until he was leaning against the same table Jack was.

‘And the red? The green triangles have a red cross right next to them.’

‘They’re the techniques where you risk possession during training; or that could give you over to the Darkness fastest.’

‘Oh,’ Jack said. ‘Shit.’

All the green triangles were paired with a red cross. Every one.

‘Shit,’ Jack said again.

‘This is why your training hasn’t yet recommenced.’

‘I thought you just…decided I was soft or something,’ Jack said, not looking at him, feeling weird.

A pause, and Jack looked up at Pitch, met his gaze. Pitch stared at him for a moment longer and then shook his head, turning back to the chalkboard.

‘No, that wasn’t what I’d decided,’ Pitch said pensively. ‘At all. Labile and volatile, yes. You’d not be the first. A risk to my other Warriors, of course – you know that too. But never soft. Perhaps if the initiation had not been brought forward as early as it had been, perhaps if you’d had another lieutenant, things would be different now. But I was at the top of my studies, if a bit lazily applied, and the Darkness still found me in the mountain, as it did. I was very arrogant though.’

‘Arrogant,’ Jack said. ‘No, you?’

Jack thought of all the times Pitch had insisted on Jack treating him with respect, and he could tell from the way that Pitch just looked at him, that he’d picked up on Jack’s tone. Amazingly, Pitch said nothing at all, and pointed to the blackboard.

‘The most effective training techniques would be to test you against the actual Darkness, and see how that changes matters.’

‘I noticed there’s no green triangle next to Bunnymund.’

‘I will own a mistake that I’ve made once I’ve made it,’ Pitch said. ‘It’s not efficient. While I’d happily have you hate the both of us if I thought it made you a better Warrior, I don’t think it will.’

‘Plus I kind of iced you,’ Jack said, his voice small.

‘Oh, ‘kind of?’’ Pitch said. ‘Is that what the kids are calling it now?’

Jack rubbed at the back of his neck, felt his cheeks warm. He looked at the blackboard. Had Pitch been trying to figure this out since they got back? Or was it even before, on the ship? When they’d hardly interacted?

‘I don’t think there’s much choice in the matter,’ Pitch said. ‘There’s no ‘slow and steady’ in this war, Jack. I suggest a dual approach to training; exercises and manoeuvres here to work on your self-control when provoked. As I think you understand now why it’s important we get some of that volatility under control. And then exposure to the Darkness on Thallias. There’s nothing left for the Darkness there to feed upon, so it hasn’t multiplied. And what is planet bound cannot leave for
space. It’s not a controlled environment, but…if you are possessed, and it doesn’t puppeteer you, you can’t hurt anyone, and you can’t leave.’

Jack was silent. He wanted to say something flippant, but the words wouldn’t come.

‘Of course,’ Pitch said, ‘if it does puppeteer you, I can use the Light to sever that connection, and then we’ll return to Lune for administration of first aid.’

‘Shadow sickness,’ Jack said weakly.

‘You may find it much easier to fight the Darkness, once you know what it feels like,’ Pitch said. ‘Obviously I wouldn’t recommend it as a strategy for others, but…’

‘I just don’t understand why you need me in this fight,’ Jack said. He swung away from the table and walked over to a steel cabinet with every drawer locked. He wondered if Crossholt’s file on him was in there somewhere. ‘If the war can’t be won, then- I dunno, man, why don’t you just…do what gets done around here? Put me away somewhere that I can’t hurt anyone, and like, neutralise me or something?’

He expected some kind of justification from Pitch, some reason, but he got nothing at all. The silence began to expand in the room, and Jack turned away from the cabinet. Pitch wasn’t even looking at him.

‘It’s not that easy,’ Pitch said finally.

‘Seems that way to me,’ Jack said.

‘We are losing this war,’ Pitch said, still not looking at Jack. He stared fixedly at the blackboard, and Jack wondered if he was seeing any of the words there at all. But it was hard to focus on that. Hearing the Royal Admiral say what others had whispered in the dark – We are losing this war – sent a slippery, oozing thing down the back of his neck, all the way to his toes.

‘So…’ Jack said, mouth dry, ‘it’s like…all hands on deck? Even if the hands might be more prone to possession or are already pre-ruined by the Darkness or something?’

Pitch didn’t respond. He looked down and his shoulders rose and fell, but his breathing was silent. Then he looked up at the board again.

‘Do you know…if people are just- I mean is everyone in an Asylum just killed?’ Jack said. He’d been too afraid to ask. But now that he already felt pretty terrible, he didn’t really think he had much left to lose.

‘No,’ Pitch said. ‘Though many are.’

‘Where is it? The Asylum? Or are there like…a few?’

‘There’s thirty,’ Pitch said. When he turned to Jack, his expression was bleak. ‘There are thirty. When one nears maximum occupation, the population is thinned out, and they begin again.’

‘Thinned out.’

‘It means exactly what you think it does.’

Jack nodded, could hardly even think about it. He’d imagined…maybe two Asylums, no more than five. He didn’t know what they looked like. He always imagined hospitals with metal doors and
metal windows. Fences designed to hurt anyone coming in and anyone trying to leave. He imagined Flitmouse, and leaned back into the metal cabinet, feeling weak.

‘I have someone,’ Jack said, ‘that I want to get back from there.’

‘Is that all?’ Pitch said, tone bitter. ‘I have over a hundred.’

For a moment, he thought it was a joke, but Pitch was looking up towards the ceiling now.

‘Maybe it’s closer to three hundred?’ Pitch said slowly. ‘I stopped counting. You don’t get them back, Jack.’

‘But you’re the Admiral,’ Jack said.

‘And many of those people were Golden Warriors. It matters not at all, I assure you. It’s also not a decision I get to make.’

‘That’s- You… I don’t see why you need to exaggerate to make a point,’ Jack said, anger rising hot through him.

‘Exaggeration?’ Pitch said, staring at him, and then smiling like Jack was a toddler. ‘Let me see, you’ve what…from what I know, you’ve had a sister die while you were young, you’ve lost someone to an Asylum, and you’ve lost another person – a close friend – to the protection of the Guardians. Three people? Is that it? Give it time. You’ll grow accustomed to it.’

Pitch turned to some papers on the desk behind him and began writing down notes like he’d said hardly anything significant at all.

Jack stared. He couldn’t even comprehend it. If Pitch wasn’t exaggerating…

‘Why so many?’ Jack said.

‘I’ve been alive a long time,’ Pitch said. ‘There was a resistance movement soon after we started fighting the Darkness, I lost a lot of Warriors then. And friends. Jack, that initial number is only the people who went to Asylums, it wasn’t the people who were executed outright, or who have died in battle, or those friends who weren’t Warriors who simply died of old age or sickness, or the Warriors that didn’t survive shadow sickness… I’m sure there are others.’

Pitch didn’t look up as he spoke. His tone was more conversational than usual, as though this was a light subject one discussed over coffee. He seemed far more serious about how to train Jack. But not about…not about this.

Jack tried to wrap his head around it. If it was around three hundred people in Asylums, and then—Jack heard his breathing rasp in his throat and covered his mouth with his fingertips, forcing himself to silence. There he was, quietly panicking over what Pitch had said, and Pitch didn’t care. Among the horror, the dull grief on Pitch’s behalf, was a stirring outrage that Pitch could just stand there like it didn’t matter. Like Flitmouse and Jamie didn’t matter. Even Fyodor. It explained why most of the time, Pitch was flippant about losing him too.

Most of the time isn’t all the time.

‘This explains a lot,’ Jack said, stepping forwards, choosing outrage over the other emotions that confused him. ‘Why you’re so heartless. Why you’ve given up. Why you don’t give a shit about Seraphina being sad about Fyodor, because – what – she’ll grow accustomed to it? I bet you telling her that, was the best father-daughter conversation ev-’
The look on Pitch’s face strangled the rest of the words in Jack’s throat. If there was a line to cross, Jack was so far beyond it that it was no longer in sight. Pitch stared at him, even as he was hunched over the table, even as a fountain pen still rested in his fingers. He didn’t even blink.

Jack looked away quickly, in case Pitch was gearing up to make Jack feel a terror so strong that he couldn’t think anymore. At that, Pitch chuckled, but said nothing. Jack clenched his jaw so hard that his teeth hurt.

‘You’ve given up,’ Jack said again. ‘Maybe the Tsar is right, y’know? Maybe you’re not fit to lead us anymore. Do they know they’re rallying around someone who doesn’t give a shit anymore? Like, I get the Tsar isn’t-’

Pitch moved fast when he wanted to. One moment Jack was walking forwards, slowly, away from the cabinet. The next he was slammed back against it, feet dangling, a hand tight around his throat and Pitch staring down at him like some golden-eyed demon. Jack choked, his fingers scrabbled at Pitch’s hand. A loud banging noise as his foot kicked back against the metal as he uselessly struggled.

‘Careful, Jack,’ Pitch said. ‘I’ll let you push me, but it’s only because I get to push back.’

To emphasise his point, he shoved Jack harder into the metal. There wasn’t anywhere left to go, so really, he just shoved his hand into Jack’s neck.

Jack’s eyes watered from lack of air, and then suddenly he could breathe and wasn’t being supported against the cabinet at all. He sagged hard, coughing, hands on his knees and throat working, feeling bruised.

‘Is it…’ Jack managed, his voice so hoarse he almost couldn’t recognise it. ‘Is it that I’m right? Is that it?’

‘You are so far out of your depth that you can’t even imagine what being right looks like,’ Pitch said, sounding calm, even though his actions had been anything but. There were ice bears out on the glaciers that were like that. They looked calm even while they were stalking their prey, even as they ripped it apart.

‘You are so far out of your depth that you can’t even imagine what being right looks like,’ Pitch said, sounding calm, even though his actions had been anything but. There were ice bears out on the glaciers that were like that. They looked calm even while they were stalking their prey, even as they ripped it apart.

‘So you’re reacting like this because I have no idea what I’m talking about?’

‘Tell me, Jack, how many friends have you had die in your arms? Telling you they don’t want to die? Telling you to pass their love to their loved ones? How many times have you pleaded with the Tsar for clemency, to not send someone to an Asylum, knowing that no clemency will be coming – or, if it does – you will owe favours of the like you cannot even conceive. Eventually, you’ll learn that pleading for clemency does no one any favours. Did it do anything for Bunnymund? He lives with an axe hanging over his neck and we all know it. Why do you think he makes his stupid posters, as you call them? He’s been living on borrowed time for hundreds of years. What do you think his ongoing punishment is? For daring to live because I dared to ask for it? He gets to discipline the young trainees. The ones who will be broken under the whip. The ones who will get two hundred lashes and die from it. The job that was forced on him broke him a long time ago, and what you see now is the shell of one of the greatest fighters I’d ever known.’

Pitch paused, a smirk on his face.

‘You think you know what it’s like to experience loss, or heartache? You lie on that bed, day after day, contemplating how terribly hard it is for you. Oh, poor, innocent, Jack. Abused from the day he entered a creche, who hardly knows up from down, who thinks he’s beginning to understand
Jack stared, hardly able to breathe. He stood there, braced on his staff, blasted through by the words that Pitch calmly delivered.

‘One day,’ Pitch said, ‘you’ll realise she was lucky. To have died so young. You’ll look back and think ‘I’m glad she’s gone.’ On that day, I’ll be kind. I won’t say, ‘Told you so.’’

Jack’s mind went white. The air was beneath his feet, wind swirling and forcing the papers off the table, whipping at his hair. His staff out. And Pitch was stepping forwards into it, not even afraid, something hungry on his face.

There was a moment that hung between them. Jack knew he was going to attack Pitch, and he knew he was going to be attacked. But in that moment, he knew he’d win. He had the ice, and Pitch only had the Light. The Light could only hurt the Darkness, but ice could hurt everything.

The moment broke, Jack swung his staff back, and didn’t even get a chance to swing it forward with the force of his ice before Pitch ran and leapt up at him, ripping the staff from his hand and flinging it across the room where it clattered and fell.

Two hands at his shoulders, grabbing him to throw him down, and Jack grasped at Pitch’s forearms and let his ice loose from his palms. It raced up Pitch’s robe, spiking outwards, encasing him. Pitch broke Jack’s hold and swung him into the side of a desk. Jack shouted as pain flared from the crunch that followed, fingers turning to claws as he reached out and tried to push ice through Pitch’s clothing, directly into his skin. Whatever darkness was ruling him now was feral, and he could feel it matched, knew it sparked off whatever lived inside of Pitch.

The fight they had was short and brutal. It ended with Jack slammed down to his back on the tiled floor, and Pitch trying to shake a shard of ice out of his skin, blood spreading from the wound. Jack tried to gasp for air, spasms of pain in his chest, body aching.

‘Maybe…’ Jack said, his voice hard, ‘maybe you keep checking whether I’ll kill your daughter or not because you secretly want me to.’

Pitch swayed as if he’d been hit. Jack felt like he’d landed his mark, but the cruel satisfaction was washed away, knowing what he’d just said, what he’d just taunted Pitch with. Even he knew it wasn’t true. Even he knew…

Which meant what Pitch said about Pippa probably wasn’t true either.

So why- Why did he say it?

Jack pushed himself up onto his elbows and then sagged back down again, spots swimming before his eyes. He’d expected to be punched or kicked, but it turned out that Pitch liked to hit people with furniture. The pain was bad.

‘Sorry,’ Jack added, as the fury swirled away. ‘Sorry. I didn’t mean it. But I don’t know if you want to care about her. You act like you don’t want to care about anything.’

‘Do I,’ Pitch said, falling back onto his haunches and staring down at Jack.

Jack tried pushing himself up onto his elbows again, and gritted out a sound as one of his ribs crunched in his side. Broken, probably. He lay back and realised that his breathing really hurt more than usual. Nothing he hadn’t dealt with before, but inconvenient. He pressed a hand to his side
and closed his eyes.

A flinch when fingers touched the back of his hand, and then Jack tried batting Pitch’s hand away when his hand was moved.

‘Stop it,’ Jack said.

‘No,’ Pitch said.

Fingers beneath his black training shirt, pushing methodically into each rib, and Jack bit down hard on the inside of his lip but couldn’t stop himself from flinching. More than one rib too. He’d hit the side of that table really hard.

‘Here,’ Pitch said, and Jack opened his eyes to see what Pitch meant, and then startled in surprise when a wash of golden Light filled his vision. It was warm as it moved through him, and Jack’s forehead creased when he felt the pain dissipating. Just like that. Jack stared at Pitch in disbelief. But Pitch didn’t meet his eyes, instead concentrating on what he was doing. His hand wasn’t as warm as usual against Jack’s side, but Jack had used his ice as liberally against Pitch as he could.

‘How’s your hand?’ Jack said. ‘The other one?’

‘Sore,’ Pitch said. ‘I’ll heal it in a moment.’

‘Oh.’ Jack felt the moment when he could breathe properly, and he felt himself begin to go limp. His head tilted back, and he made a noise when he felt Pitch’s fingers at his throat. ‘What?’

‘Hush,’ Pitch said.

More Light, and the bruising around Jack’s throat was gone in under a minute. Pitch’s hand lingered, warmer than before, lending some of that heat to Jack’s skin. Jack forced himself to stay still, and tried not to imagine what it would feel like if Pitch stroked his fingers across Jack’s neck. Because they’d just fought like they wanted to kill each other. Jack’s thoughts weren’t normal.

When Pitch moved his hand away, it almost seemed like he’d caressed Jack’s neck with his fingertips.

You’re imagining it.

Jack pushed himself up to sit against the leg of the desk near the blackboard. He wrapped one arm around his bent knees, and watched as Pitch healed his hand.

‘Is it draining?’

‘Yes,’ Pitch said. ‘But not compared to healing serious injuries.’

‘Oh. So…are we just gonna pretend we didn’t try to kill each other?’

‘I’m thinking about it,’ Pitch said, his lips quirking into a smile.

Jack stared at him, and then found himself laughing as the adrenaline left his system. It was absurd. He closed his eyes and the wave of it left him, and it was then he’d realised that Pitch had laughed too. That they were both sitting there, like two comrades after a hard sparring match. Which just…Jack felt exhausted trying to understand it.

‘I don’t know if I was trying to kill you,’ Jack added.
‘You also didn’t black out,’ Pitch added. A shift of clothing, and Jack opened his eyes to see Pitch settling back against the metal cabinet. They faced each other now, and Pitch picked bits of ice off his clothing. Jack knew his staff was somewhere across the room, but he could get it later. ‘That’s a positive.’

‘I don’t get you. You say all this…this mean stuff and I know you believe some of it, but you don’t believe all of it. You say that crap about Pippa, but if I said the same to you about Seraphina, you’d lose your mind.’

‘I’m well aware,’ Pitch said, sounding weary.

‘Don’t talk about my sister like that again,’ Jack said. ‘Don’t ever.’

‘I’m as likely to promise that, as you are to swear that you’ll never speak of my daughter again in such a fashion. Don’t let’s pretend about that, Jack. Or have you not realised that no subject is safe, once the Darkness tears down all those doors that keeps you sticking to all the neat, pretty subjects?’

Jack took a deep, shaking breath and sighed it out explosively. His ribs were fine – a bit tender, but fine. His neck didn’t hurt at all. He touched his fingers to it, amazed at how quickly the Light had worked.

‘I apologise,’ Pitch said. ‘I should not have mocked your grief.’

‘Yeah, well, to you it must seem like nothing at all.’

‘It does,’ Pitch said frankly. ‘But I have no idea why I told you so. It doesn’t benefit you to know what’s coming if you live.’

‘Maybe it’s that ‘inner darkness’ thing you keep telling me about.’

‘Perhaps,’ Pitch said, sounding thoughtful again. ‘I hadn’t considered it. But perhaps.’

Jack stretched one of his legs out, thinking it over. He watched Pitch, who was still picking bits of ice off his clothing. He did so with a kind of methodic grace, his hand moving across his clothing like he was playing an instrument.

‘I don’t want to get used to it,’ Jack said finally. ‘I don’t. It’s not easy to miss them, or want them back. It hurts. But the alternative seems worse.’

‘The alternative being me,’ Pitch said, without even looking up. He didn’t even sound mad.

‘Well, yeah,’ Jack said. ‘Yeah. I actually want to care about people. I mean, more than just like… whatever your inner circle is. Don’t you think about the example you’re setting for your kid?’

‘I cannot wait for you to lecture me about parenting,’ Pitch said, sweeping bits of ice away with his hand.

Jack stayed silent then, because it wasn’t like he knew what he was talking about. To his surprise, Pitch looked up and then shrugged.

‘I think about it,’ Pitch said. ‘I even tried again, you see. I had closed off before, for decades. Seraphina was born, and that was all I allowed myself. Eva and Anton went on about it, and so… But then there was Fyodor. What a mistake that was.’
‘So you tried again, and he died,’ Jack said. ‘Like everyone else. Like…hundreds and hundreds of people before.’

Jack’s chest ached, and it had nothing to do with the fight they’d just had. He stared at Pitch and thought how miserable it sounded. He didn’t want to feel sorry for him, didn’t want to feel anything like that, knowing how cruel Pitch could be, had been. He hated that he could kind of see why Pitch had turned out this way, hated that he wanted to do something to fix it somehow, even though he couldn’t. The most he’d ever probably do was be another death in a long line of deaths. He wasn’t naïve about that.

‘Don’t look at me like that,’ Pitch said, smiling gently. ‘Don’t pity me. I don’t need it, I can assure you. I’ve had a long time to grow accustomed to things.’

‘Yeah, maybe that’s why,’ Jack said. ‘Maybe that’s why it’s so sad.’

Pitch shook his head like Jack didn’t understand it, and then pushed himself up, offering Jack a hand a moment later. Jack accepted it, was pulled to his feet. Then Pitch began walking around and picking up the pieces of paper that had fallen, and Jack looked for his staff. He found it on the floor near a bookshelf.

‘Why aren’t the rest of the older Warriors like you then?’ Jack said.

‘But they are,’ Pitch said, collating papers. ‘Quite a few kill themselves, once they realise. In fact there’s almost no one left alive from my era because of it. We’re not supposed to live as we do. It’s marketed to the commoners as a gift, but it’s not a gift, what the Darkness gives to us. This endlessness. Though it wouldn’t do to tell anyone about the number of Warriors who kill themselves so- as it goes, we just say they died in combat.’

Pitch rubbed at his forehead with the back of his hand, and then looked down at his notes as he sorted them again.

‘Off-planet training,’ Pitch said, changing the subject so abruptly that Jack had to think about what he’d originally come here for. ‘And training to recommence here. I don’t want it to be every day.’

‘I need to do something aside from etiquette all the time,’ Jack said. ‘And I can’t run in my rooms, and there’s nowhere else to run if I’m locked up in here. So- Is there somewhere I could just… run?’

Pitch tapped his fingers on the table. Then he sat down on one of the stools and kept tapping his fingers. Jack looked at the book titles and reminded himself to go through the primers that Eva had given him. He’d started to look through them, but had found it immediately so overwhelming that he’d put them down. The common alphabet was less than thirty letters. The pictographic Lune alphabet was over one hundred and fifty, and each could represent a sound, a word, a vowel, a phrase, a musical tone, or all of that and more, or something else entirely.

Jack had no idea how Seraphina had even learned it.

‘I have a larger space,’ Pitch said finally. ‘For training. But it’s a dark-room.’

Jack frowned. ‘What do you mean?’

‘I do a lot of my personal training in the dark,’ Pitch said, ‘to hone my other senses. To not let it intimidate me. It can be lit with candles, but otherwise there’s no natural light. It’s long enough to run laps in.’
'What about…forests or something?'

'The Tsar has stationed people who are looking for you, to fetch you for some task or another. Sharpwood has been by three times. I suspect by the fifth, I’ll not be able to turn him away any longer.'

Jack’s hand clenched on his staff.

‘Why didn’t you tell me sooner?’

‘I thought you could do with a break from the Tsar,’ Pitch said, looking up at Jack, before going back to his notes and continuing to write. ‘You throw barbs at me about wanting to see him, in the same way I throw them at you about…other matters, I find your sincerity about taking meetings with him rather suspect, given you’ve been in no rush to see him again. But you cannot avoid him forever. If it helps, at all, the meeting will likely seem very cordial on the surface when you have it. Even if it’s anything but.’

‘That doesn’t help,’ Jack said.

‘No, I didn’t think it would,’ Pitch said. ‘He won’t stop, either. He knows I’m keeping you isolated now. I believe he thinks I’ll be indoctrinating you behind closed doors, as that’s what he’s brilliant at, and sometimes it wouldn’t occur to him that not everyone operates the same way he does.’

‘Why are you two so friendly when you see each other? When you… when it’s like this?’

‘Oh, but we are friends,’ Pitch said bitterly. ‘He will consider this a small rebellion, another marker that works nicely in his plan to remove me from my post, and watch me do everything else he commands as he thinks that I may not be the tamest creature he’s ever owned, but at least I come to heel.’

‘And he wants you gone because…?’

‘We are losing the war,’ Pitch said. ‘Hundreds of years, and I have not grasped my enemy and conquered them properly.’

‘But you said that you weren’t tasked with- I don’t get it. How can he want you gone for something he’s not letting you do?’

‘How indeed?’ Pitch said. ‘Don’t try to wander the back paths of his mind, Jack. I’m not sure how much of a nightmare you truly wish to live.’

‘And you? How much of it have you seen? How much of a nightmare are you living?’

‘Ah,’ Pitch said, and then he rested his elbow on the table and rested his chin on his knuckles. ‘Ah, well, I know what his endgame is.’

Silence fell between them, and Jack thought Pitch looked tired. Like he had back on the ship. Now that Jack could see it, he wondered if it had been there the whole time, and he’d just missed it. There was even something mournful about him. But Jack had felt that hand around his neck, seen the fire in Pitch’s eyes when they’d attacked each other.

‘What about Seraphina?’ Jack said finally.

‘What about her?’ Pitch said, in that infuriating way he had sometimes. But then he sighed and looked at Jack with a small smile. ‘Do you know what I wish for her? I hope she never sees the
inside of that mountain. I hope her biggest heartache is knowing that she’ll die before her parents, and perhaps the loss of one love before finding whoever she’s meant to give her heart to. I’ve been alive for so long, I think all of that could happen before she ever sees the Tsar’s endgame. Then I’ll know she’ll have been mostly happy, and once she’s gone… Then nothing will matter.’

Pitch fully expected to outlive his daughter. Like a man waiting for the inescapable edge of some great precipice.

‘What was that plan?’ Jack said, his voice weak. ‘The one…the one that you dismissed? You know, the one the Guardians brought to you.’

‘It was very like the original resistance movement,’ Pitch said. ‘It would never have worked.’

‘Why?’

‘Because I have seen what happens if you use your charisma – such as it is – and power to turn a military against a Tsar, and I don’t wish to live through it again. I’ll not put the lives of my Warriors on the line, just because most of them would follow me.’

‘But you put their lives on the line all the time, with the Darkness?’

At that, Pitch’s hand slammed against table, a white-knuckled fist blanching his grey skin. The thud of it shook the papers, and Jack jumped.

‘Get out,’ Pitch said. ‘I’ve determined your training program, so you are free to leave.’

Jack wanted to keep talking. Almost opened his mouth and said ‘You said I could come to you,’ but he suspected that Pitch was at the end of something, and Jack didn’t want to see what was on the other side.

When he was at the door though, he hesitated. He’d had a whole bunch of stuff he actually wanted to ask. He turned back, and could almost see Pitch gathering himself to either throw Jack out of the room or just talk to him. It was hard to tell.

‘What is it now?’ Pitch said.

‘Nothing, just, kind of wondering how much of your…rooms-house-quarters I can explore? I don’t want to go anywhere I’m not sort of supposed to be.’

‘Oh,’ Pitch said, like that was the last thing he’d expected. ‘Most of the locks here are magically keyed, so they’ll open for whoever is meant to be in the room. Or for whoever belongs there. Or needs to be there. The particulars are strange. It’s Bunnymund’s magic. Back when he used to do a great deal more of it.’

‘So that’s why you can just get into my room without a key, even though everyone else can’t?’

‘Yes,’ Pitch said. ‘Actually I suspect Seraphina could too. Likewise, I suspect her lock would allow you to enter her room. It’s an alchemy based more on personal relationships and their quality, than anything else.’

‘Cool,’ Jack said, thinking it hardly made sense, but at least Pitch had given him an answer. ‘Cool. And I was wondering…’ He caught the look on Pitch’s face, the increasing glower and placed his hand on the doorknob. ‘You know what? Doesn’t matter. Not urgent. Thanks for this. Chats with you are always the best. Ah, bye?’
Jack closed the door behind him before Pitch could respond, and then leaned back against it,
closing his eyes. He couldn’t tell if that had been a disaster, or counted as progress. All he knew
was that he needed to take a few deep breaths, and he needed to go focus on something else for a
while.

‘Okay, primer and weird complicated alphabet it is. No time like the present,’ Jack said to himself,
wandering back to his room.

*

The next day, after his etiquette lessons, Jack headed to the kitchen to find himself some lunch and
realised the place was deserted. Pitch didn’t seem to be anywhere, and Anton and Eva were still
staying together in Eva’s rooms.

He spun slowly in the lounge, looking around, thinking that he had permission to explore now. On
a whim, he hopped up into the air just to prove to himself that he could, and after a moment that
was just a burst of pleasure that he could even *do that*, he moved towards the bookshelves, writing
his name in the dust that no one had gotten to for some time. Up here were dust-covered medals
and trophies. Jack looked at them all. Turned some of them. Most of the trophies were made of
some kind of dark grey metal that had a dull lustre in the light. Jack wondered if it was pewter. He
knew they used it for trophies ages ago, but started using gold once they had enough of it that they
could.

His explorations had him travelling around the room, sometimes on his feet, sometimes in the air,
sneezing a couple of times: first from the disturbed dust that floated free of a light fitting he
accidentally bumped, and the second time from running his hand along the ruches of the heavy
curtains on the other side of the room, that were always closed and apparently covered in enough
dust to fuel a small off-planet dust-storm.

Everything lower down was clean, which made Jack wonder if it was Pitch himself who cleaned
these rooms, or if he hired someone. Surely he didn’t do his own cleaning? He was away a lot. He
had to have someone who helped him.

Eventually he made his way down the long corridor that led to the kitchen. The first two doors
wouldn’t open for him. The third on the right did, but that led to the strategy room that he’d fought
Pitch in the day before.

‘Look at us,’ Jack said to himself, ‘already making such fond memories together. The Royal
Admiral and the crappy…maybe-Warrior.’

He didn’t spend too long in the room, in case he saw something mind-breaking or belief-shattering
or *something*. He was well and truly tired of that, and if someone wanted to tell him some other
new horrifying thing about Lune they were welcome to, but Jack wasn’t going to go and seek it
out.

The next few doors wouldn’t open for him. Jack could tell if they were going to, because the lock
would just unclick when he pressed his hand to it.

*Weird.*

He tried not to think about Bunnymund in here, ages ago, making all these locks and using his
magic. Jack didn’t even know what it looked like when he used it. He tried not to think about what
Bunnymund did that required Pitch to beg for his life – that alone was hard enough to imagine –
and tried not to think about Bunnymund being made to do a job that apparently broke him. Maybe
that was why he always saying that he didn’t have a choice. Maybe it was more than just…
defensiveness.

Jack tried a few more doors. Another unclicked, opened into a cavernous storage space that
smelled musty from disuse. Jack clicked on the overhead light and stared in amazement at what
looked like centuries of minutiae, disused furniture and more, hulking together in barely contained
chaos. The room was long, and Jack found himself moving deeper and deeper into it, until he
couldn’t see the doorway anymore. Some of the furniture and junk was covered in sheets thick with
dust. At the back, a wardrobe made of wood that no longer wore its lacquer well. Jack opened the
creaking door and saw uniforms hanging. They were falling apart, antiquing, and Jack drew one of
the coats out and stared in amazement.

It was a relic, a uniform from a time when they fought people, not Darkness. They were fancier,
somehow. Where the uniform now was more sacred – contained more magic, more symbolism –
these contained more embroidery, even beadwork and pearls at the collars, intricate fabric buttons
and fasteners.

Jack placed everything back and made his way out of the space again, shaking dust out of his hair.
It was…weird, being in that room. Like walking through a museum, except it was all of Pitch’s
life, jumbled up together and discarded. Jack didn’t get the sense that Pitch went back in there
much.

Finally, the door on the left just before the kitchen, and Jack pressed his palm to the door lock and
was surprised when it unclicked for him. He stepped through the wooden door into the room,
closing the door behind him. At first he thought he was in a weird training space, not really getting
a close look, and then he turned around and his mouth dropped open.

It was the wall to the left that – more than anything else – gave it away. Neat loops of rope hung
off hooks. Coils and coils of it. At least a hundred. Some thick, some thin. And beside that,
instruments that Jack would normally associate with *punishment*. Whips and floggers, crops and
paddles and…other things he didn’t have a name for.

He dragged his eyes away, breathing faster, and stared at the furniture in the room. A low-lying
leather bench, and then another nearby it, but that one looked like it had foot and arm rests and
Jack couldn’t even begin to imagine how he’d fit in it, and then tried to stop imagining how he’d fit
in it because that was something that would *never* happen. There were hooks screwed into the
walls and ceiling – and rails, and chains that hung, bright and gleaming.

Jack stayed still, his heart fluttering in his chest, as his eyes moved from object to object. There
was a bed, a cross that looked exactly like a flogging post.

*Because that’s probably exactly what it is.*

‘By the Light,’ Jack whispered, moving deeper into the room. It was a huge space. And yet
weirdly cosy at the same time. There were rugs on the floor, a few wall hangings, these depicting
not military scenes, but woven forests and landscapes Jack was sure he’d never seen before. There
were candles everywhere, unlit, but that had clearly been used. Most of them were white pillar
candles, but there was a cluster of twenty candles – all very well-used – that were different colours.
Jack wondered if they were the party candles. And then wondered if that was even a thing.

*It probably isn’t a thing.*

Jack avoided the flogging post, and walked over to the benches. The leather was soft, had that rich,
waxed scent, was clearly kept in good condition. The bench with arm rests and more had straps all
Jack’s heart beat faster, and he swallowed, touching one of the straps and feeling the underside of it. Surprisingly soft, like suede. He tried to imagine what it would feel like against his wrists, or – that middle one – across his waist. For a moment, he was lost in the vision of it, and didn’t understand why he liked it so much. Anton had talked about being flogged, or spanked, but this room was clearly about more than that, and Jack hadn’t considered...

He forced himself away from the bench, and walked over to look at the bed. A cabinet beside it, and Jack opened it to see rolls of fluffy blankets, extra pillows, and then vials and bottles of stuff that he could guess the use of. His cheeks felt warm, but ice prickled out on the floor around him, creeping slowly.

It was supposed to be impossible to imagine Pitch in here – the Royal Admiral – doing…the things that he did. But Jack could believe it. Could almost see it.

When he was younger, when he’d jacked off fantasising about Pitch – long before he’d ever imagined that he’d be calling the Royal Admiral Pitch – he used to pretend the Admiral had taken a fancy to him. He imagined that Pitch had decided to use all that power and control and… Jack gulped and stared around the room again. His mind had never been as creative as this.

Inevitably, he found his way to the wall that had the ropes and tools hanging from it. Jack touched the ropes, surprised at how soft some of them were. But when he got to the whips, the balance between fear and curiosity he was feeling, tipped entirely to fear and a dull, blank nausea. Before he knew what he was doing, he was unhooking them, dropping them to the floor, wanted them nowhere that he could see them. He left the paddles and the things that looked like riding crops, he even left some of the smaller floggers, but the big ones, the whips, the single-tails – he even lifted into the air to get the last of them. All clattering to the ground, handles hitting the wooden floorboards.

When Jack was done, his heart raced, he knew he’d done something wrong, but he couldn’t bring himself to put any of it back. It was a lot easier to look at the wall once everything else was on the floor.

He touched his fingers to a wooden paddle that had holes in it. Why in the Darkness would it have holes in it?

‘Weird,’ Jack breathed.

Even his voice was shocking in this room. He swallowed and moved along the wall, to more cabinets. He opened these and then stilled, feeling a flush go all the way down his spine at the amount of…accessories Pitch had. He closed the cabinets and looked down at his crotch and shook his head. Not helpful. Not even- Not even a little bit helpful.

‘Cut it out,’ he whispered to himself, and then decided to ignore all the equipment in the room and go to one of the three doors in the room. The first led back to the corridor. The second – on the opposite side of the room – wouldn’t open for him. He rattled the doorknob, pressed his hand to the lock, and nothing happened. The third room was a bathroom with – among all the other amenities – a huge, spacious bath. And more of those white pillar candles. Jack closed the door.

After a long moment, he walked back towards the door that led to the corridor. But he paused before he got there, turning back to the room again. He wanted to press a hand to his cock, to get it to calm down, to just…something.
Jamie would probably say something like: ‘Guess it’s time to open a new spank bank.’

Jack stood there staring for at least another few minutes, and then he heard the doorknob turning right behind him. He squeaked in shock, backing up against the wall as the door opened, hiding behind it and keeping his breathing silent. Eyes wide.

Pitch walked into the room and the door swung shut behind him. Jack stared at his back. Stared at the back of his head. Thought to varying degrees about the mess he was in. Tried to ignore the piles of whips on the floor that very obviously showed someone had been in here.

‘Hello, Jack,’ Pitch said.

Jack’s heart stopped, he pressed back into the wall and watched as Pitch turned to face him. Jack expected a smirk, some smug look, but instead it was a serious intensity, Pitch unblinking, staring at him.

‘Do you know what it means that the room let you in?’ Pitch said, his voice slower, softer than before. He took a single step forward, and Jack wondered when his mouth had gotten so dry. His tongue was stuck.

Pitch’s eyes slipped down Jack’s body casually, paused, and then moved back up again. Then he smirked.

‘I’m going to give you two words, one means you want everything to stop, the other means you want things to slow down. Do you understand?’

Jack nodded automatically, had no idea why he was nodding, had no idea why he was still half-hard or why he was even still in the room. Part of him had already fled screaming, mumbling some apology about the whips. The rest of him was here, pinned in place by nothing more than that gaze.

‘Shadow is stop,’ Pitch said. ‘Lumen is slow down.’

‘Cool,’ Jack said, his voice thin. Nothing more than a puff of air.

Pitch’s smirk grew, and he took another step forward.

‘Excellent. Then we can begin.’
Hi folks! Apologies for the delay. So I’ve updated the tags to include: spanking (*watches some readers drift away*), safewords, safeword use and bad BDSM etiquette (honestly it's not super bad and it happens at the end re: aftercare, but 'bad aftercare etiquette' didn't exist as a tag, you'll see what I mean, lol). I hope all of you who were looking forward to this when Jack first taunted Pitch with it, enjoy the chapter! :D (And everyone else too, I hope everyone enjoys the chapter).

Another step, and Pitch was standing right in front of him. He moved his hand to Jack’s face, and then slid the side of his index finger beneath his chin, lifting. Jack had no choice but to look up at Pitch, not like he’d been doing anything else for the past few minutes.

‘Begin what?’ Jack said. ‘If you think you’re going to touch me with one of those whips, I will ice this whole…whatever kind of room this is, and then…’

Jack didn’t know. It seemed kind of absurd to make threats right now. It wasn’t like his cock had gone soft.

‘Anyway, what do you mean…about this room letting me in?’

‘I wonder when the curiosity started?’ Pitch said, his other hand coming up and grasping Jack’s staff, then pulling it away. Jack let go reluctantly, and swallowed nervously. He knew that Pitch could feel it, his finger underneath Jack’s chin. ‘Was it when Anton began talking about it? Or was it earlier?’

‘Um…’

‘What am I going to do with you, Jack? Spank you?’

Jack laughed nervously, and then the sound dried up at the look on Pitch’s face. He could feel his palms sweating. Who in their right mind would even want to be spanked?

But Jack couldn’t stop thinking about Anton calling it safe, saying it was what he needed, but never more than he could handle. There was a part of him which wanted to be burned through by the heat in Pitch’s gaze. Wanted to forget about everything else. Wanted to satisfy that part of him that had considered Pitch this way since the day he realised he could jerk off while daydreaming about someone else and it had been amazing.

‘I’ve seen deer look as stunned as you do,’ Pitch said.

‘I’m not stunned,’ Jack said.

The hand at his chin shifted, until the pad of Pitch’s thumb began stroking over Jack’s lips. Jack was shocked at how sensitive the skin felt. He pressed his lips together, hating the way Pitch smirked at him then. So he tried to relax, but the little bit of saliva that clung to his lips made the nerves in his skin buzz. He thought about stepping away, but the wall was right there, and it was also the hottest thing that had happened to him. Just…also a bit alarming.
‘Are you a virgin?’ Pitch said.

‘What?’ Jack said, twisting his head to the side. ‘No, I’ve had tons of-’

Jack almost choked on air as Pitch shifted his hand and slid two fingers into Jack’s mouth.

‘A quiet Jack is my favourite Jack,’ Pitch said, and Jack bit down on Pitch’s fingers in warning. Pitch only looked pleased, as though Jack had somehow done what he wanted. Then Pitch leaned closer until his nose brushed Jack’s forehead, until Pitch’s lips ghosted over Jack’s temple. ‘Jack,’ Pitch said, ‘you’re not the only one who can bite.’

Pitch’s head dropped and Jack cried out in shock when Pitch’s teeth dug into the base of his neck. Pitch’s fingers moved deeper into Jack’s mouth, and his other hand came and grabbed a handful of Jack’s ass. Jack found himself clutching at Pitch’s clothing without thinking, half-reeling from the pain blooming from his neck, even as Pitch’s mouth found his. And then Pitch was kissing him, a gentleness that contrasted hard with the fingers digging into his ass, the teeth marks he could feel in his skin.

Jack made a weak sound, turned his mouth to the side to gasp for air when the hand at his ass became fingers moving between his legs towards his balls. Jack felt like he couldn’t contain the sensations that were building, like he had to squirm or move, and his voice broke when he felt Pitch’s lips on his, firmer this time, pressing his mouth open. A hand at his throat carefully pressed him back to the wall and held him in place, the tips of two fingers wet with saliva, and Jack half-clawed at Pitch’s arm, feeling like it was hard to breathe.

Just as soon as it had started, Pitch withdrew his hands and stepped back, and Jack sagged against the wall, forehead creasing, feeling colder than before. He looked up, hoping that he wasn’t about to be sent away. But Pitch didn’t look like he was going to send him away. Jack pressed a hand to his mouth, and then touched the side of his neck, where the bite ached. Pitch’s eyes tracked Jack’s hand, and he looked insufferably pleased with himself.

‘Undress,’ Pitch said, and Jack’s hands found the hem of his shirt, and then as the material shifted against the scars on his back, he hesitated. He could see the way Pitch’s expression changed then, how he didn’t like Jack not doing what he said. All of a sudden a wave of something like shame – that he wasn’t doing what Pitch wanted.

‘I don’t- I…’ Jack shook his head in frustration with himself. ‘My scars. On my back. You haven’t seen them, have you?’

Jack knew some of the holy priests had seen his scars after the initiation, when he’d been unconscious, but he didn’t know if Pitch had.

‘No,’ Pitch said, his expression changing from forbidding, to thoughtful.

‘I don’t want you to see them,’ Jack said. ‘Or touch them.’

‘I don’t care about the scars,’ Pitch said.

‘I- It’s going to be a total mood-killer,’ Jack said, laughing weakly. ‘For me, anyway. Please? I just- Not…not now? Not today?’

Pitch was silent, and Jack wondered if he’d just completely killed the mood anyway. But he couldn’t even look at the scars in a mirror, hated touching them while bathing. The skin was weird, the nerves damaged – hypersensitive in some areas, numb in others. He could mostly tune it out in the day to day, but now, thinking about Pitch seeing the real consequences of all the times Jack had
been disciplined for doing something wrong, made him feel ill.

‘I don’t know what I was thinking,’ Jack said, turning towards the door.

Pitch moved swiftly, blocking the exit, a considering expression on his face.

‘Really?’ Jack said.

‘Unless you use one of the words given to signal out, you do not get to be the one who decides how this ends.’

‘Yeah, but—’

Jack blinked at the warm palm placed over his mouth.

‘It’s so much nicer when you don’t talk,’ Pitch said.

Jack dug his fingers into Pitch’s hand, pulling down just enough to say:

‘And how am I meant to say these magical words that mean stop or slow down if you keep doing stupid things like this?’

‘I was getting to that.’ Pitch frowned at him, then said: ‘For the benefit of all, I really believe you need a gag.’

Pitch turned and walked across the room. Jack stared at his back – insulted, annoyed, and still a little turned on. Who liked the idea of being gagged? It seemed pretty important to be able to talk during stuff like this.

‘You can take your pants off,’ Pitch said, as he opened a drawer and began looking through it. ‘That’s an order, by the way.’

‘Okay, so,’ Jack said, hands going to the fastening of his pants, ‘if you’re already going to spank me, what happens if I don’t follow your orders?’

‘You won’t get to come,’ Pitch said easily. He turned around with a strip of black cloth and held it up to the light, as though considering how thick it was.

‘I can make that happen later,’ Jack said, laughing.

Pitch sauntered back over, and Jack felt awkward as he stepped out of his pants. And weirdly exposed, even though his training shirt hung low. He looked at the cloth Pitch held, and then looked at Pitch and felt the mischievousness in himself fray away into nothing.

“You can,” Pitch said, lifting the cloth and winding it around Jack’s head. Jack thought about just keeping his mouth closed, thought about walking away now, but it was like he was under a spell. A hesitation, and then he opened his mouth. The fabric slipped in. It didn’t press as tight against the corners of his mouth as he expected, and he held still as Pitch tied it into place, feeling something like panic knocking at the corners of his mind.

When it was in place, Jack’s nostrils flared, and then he jerked when fingers smoothed over his ear, across the top of his neck.

‘Look at me,’ Pitch said. Jack did, shivering. ‘It’s loose, and you’ll be able to shape words if you need to. The gag isn’t a punishment. It’s to allow you some rest from thinking you need to defend yourself with words all the time. Whether it’s by talking back to me, or whatever stream of
consciousness you’re polluting the air around you with."

Jack glared at him, and Pitch smiled.

‘As for being able to make yourself come with whatever innocent, sweet little fantasies that barely-
touched mind of yours can come up with…’ Pitch said, trailing his hand down Jack’s shirt and
then grasping Jack’s cock with such familiarity that Jack didn’t register the shock until he felt his
knees lock into place, his voice muffled as he gasped. ‘Of course you can. Later, you’ll realise
there’s a difference between what your cold little hands can give you, and what I can.’

Jack sucked in a breath through his nose, suddenly glad for the wall behind his back.

Pitch’s other hand slipped up beneath Jack’s shirt, the heat of his touch dizzying. He rucked up the
fabric, then rested his palm on Jack’s sternum.

‘You can still make the shapes of words with a gag like this,’ Pitch said. ‘I will know what shadow
and lumen sound like through the cloth.’

Jack half-wanted to try the words out, but he knew it would sound stupid through the fabric.
Besides, Pitch touching him like this was distracting. It was becoming pretty hard to think about
anything other than Pitch’s hands, still and hot on his skin.

If he wasn’t wearing the gag, he probably would have said something like, ‘Is there a word that
means hurry up?’

*Probably why I’m gagged in the first place.*

So Jack said nothing through the gag, his breathing not quite silent, Pitch watching him with the
hint of that smile around his face. Then his hand squeezed carefully around Jack’s cock, and Jack
gasped. He was probably going to come in like twenty seconds at this rate. Pitch looked like he
knew it, too, so Jack closed his eyes. It didn’t help much. Once he blocked the rest of the world
out, his body felt more sensitive.

Fingers moved over his cock, and then stroked him as though checking the shape and feel of it.
They ruffled the hair at the base of his cock, circled the ridge at the head, then skated over the tip
with a deliberate lightness that was as aggravating as it was arousing. Jack bit down on the gag and
moaned, and then made a sound of relief when Pitch closed his hand around Jack’s length and
started moving, dizzying him with the feel of it. Pitch’s other hand pushing him back into the wall
and keeping him there.

At least, it was dizzyingly good until Pitch stopped abruptly, four strokes later, and went back to
those lighter touches with individual fingers.

Jack’s eyes opened, glaring up.

‘Hey,’ he managed through the gag. It was a syllable more than anything.

‘Yes,’ Pitch agreed, ‘it must be annoying. But it amuses me no end, knowing you think you’ll
control any of this. Out there, you may forget to call me Sir, or the Royal Admiral, but in here you
will have no illusions as to what I am. The whole point of you being here, Jack, is that you don’t
have control. I think you may want that, even if you don’t know how to admit it.’

Jack rolled his eyes, and then got distracted when Pitch started jerking him off properly. His head
thudded back against the wall, his eyes were closed again. Fingers stroked over one of his nipples,
then pinched, and Jack squirmed, unable to get away from the sensation that was both good and a
little painful and made him feel even harder in Pitch’s other hand.

Pitch kept moving the hand on Jack’s cock, the strokes deft and slower than Jack would have used on himself, but no less intense for it. He squeezed on the upstroke, and without lubricant, the calluses on his palms dragged on Jack’s sensitive skin. He couldn’t quite keep his sounds swallowed down, even with his teeth digging into the gag. He hated that it was obvious that Pitch was getting to him so quickly.

*Just don’t come in like five seconds and you’ll be good.*

But he felt like he was fighting a losing battle there.

A pleading sound, and then Jack made another, louder pleading sound when Pitch stopped again. The hand at Jack’s chest moved quickly down, slid over his ass, and then pinched the skin hard. It was a flash of surface pain, and Jack jolted forwards, bumping into Pitch’s body. The hand on his cock – still now – stopped him from moving away.

The hand that had pinched him, petted one cheek almost condescendingly, and then pinched him again. Jack cried out, but he was still hard in Pitch’s grip, and the bruising pain was dispersing through him, making it harder to concentrate. He also had a fair idea of what this was leading up to, and the fear that had vanished before was bubbling back again. What if he hated it? What if-

Jack moaned as Pitch pulled him forward by his cock, which meant that skin rubbed against Pitch’s clothing. That material might look soft, but it didn’t feel soft. With his other hand, Pitch spread his fingers and caressed both of his ass cheeks, first one, then the other, his thumb sometimes stroking like a promise between the seam of his ass. Jack’s hands were starting to hurt where he was clutching Pitch’s shirt. He was pretty sure he’d fused himself to the fabric with ice. Keeping the ice under control wasn’t as hard as he thought it would be, it was like Pitch was melting him, changing his whole temperature, the way a shower could.

Pitch leaned down and said:

‘What do you say, Jack? Still want that control back?’

Jack couldn’t stop the broken sound he made, feeling like he was way too close to coming. He knew Pitch was taunting him, unable to even wrap his mind around some kind of retort; which he couldn’t say anyway.

‘You might change your mind in a minute,’ Pitch said, sounding entirely too smug as he stepped backwards and drew Jack with him, the hand never leaving his cock. Jack’s steps were small and awkward, and his mind began to clear, realising that he no longer had the support of the wall at his back.

Pitch’s hand left his ass and moved over his shirt, palm resting between his shoulder blades. Jack was aware of his scars, but was pretty sure that Pitch couldn’t feel them properly through the shirt itself. It was hard to care about that much anyway, he was literally being led forward by his cock, and it was hot to think about, but kind of scary in practice. He could feel the tugging, could feel how if he didn’t move quickly enough, it hurt, but if his steps were too big, he’d bump straight into Pitch.

Then Pitch was sitting, quickly shifted his robe, and the next thing Jack knew, he was pulled down so that he was lying with his belly over Pitch’s thighs. He could see the leather of one of those weird benches by his face, and his legs didn’t comfortably reach the ground. He tried shifting, but he couldn’t. Not with the hand that was on his lower back, and his cock between Pitch’s thighs.
He made a sound of protest, trying to back out of the position, but unable to get the traction. He could hardly reach the ground with his hands, and ended up flailing until he grabbed Pitch’s shin with one of his hands.

‘You were the one who brought it up,’ Pitch said calmly, keeping Jack in place, but otherwise not responding to his struggling.

*Rhetorically,* Jack thought, opening his mouth to make sure he could breathe properly. He could swallow, at least. But this was so undignifying. Blood was moving to his head. And then Pitch shifted his knees and Jack fell a bit more forward and realised that his ass was right there, for whatever Pitch wanted to do to it.

He stopped struggling when he realised how half-hearted it was. He was afraid, but not afraid enough to use his ice. Not once. A few ice crystals covered both of his hands, but that was reflex, not deliberate. He wasn’t even trying to freeze Pitch. He fell still, focused on catching his breath, stared at the room from a very odd angle. From here, he couldn’t see the whips he’d pulled down at all. But he could see the bed, one of the doors, the other bench, and some wardrobes and cabinets. The floor looked clean.

Pitch’s hand was firm at the small of his back, and Jack thought of this same thing happening to Anton, other people, and his mind raced. Then he squeaked – Pitch’s other hand began rubbing over his ass. It wasn’t even subtle. But then, his cock wasn’t being subtle either, against Pitch’s thigh. Jack tried not to think about any of it, but…it was kind of impossible to tune anything out in the position he was – face down, over Pitch’s knees. He couldn’t decide if he liked it more when Pitch was talking, or when he wasn’t.

‘I have honestly imagined this for some time,’ Pitch said, beginning to tap Jack’s ass lightly with his fingers. The sensation wasn’t painful at all, and Jack squinted, and then closed his eyes when he realised Pitch was probably building up to it. It’s not like Pitch’s hands were small either.

‘Nothing to say?’ Pitch said, and Jack could hear the smile in his voice.

Okay, *I like it less when he talks.*

Precariously, Jack shifted, bringing up one arm – the other still bracing himself on Pitch’s shin – and not even knowing if Pitch was looking, flipped him off.

A second later, Jack cried out as the tapping became one hard smack that even over the bottom of his shirt, sent sharp pain into his flesh. He began to struggle, a bite of anger that Pitch would respond like that – because that wasn’t fair – and then was distracted by a volley of spanks that were each as strong as the last. He gasped for air, hanging onto Pitch’s shin with one hand, the bench with the other, trying to squirm away and not succeeding at all.

Then, Pitch stopped, and rubbed over Jack’s ass again. Jack felt humiliated. Pain radiated, his skin was warm, he was still hard, he didn’t get it, and he hated that he couldn’t just…retaliating against Pitch as he wanted, with no consequences. He realised that’s what he’d been doing all along, just about. Lashing out at Pitch whenever he wanted. And it wasn’t until now that he realised how often Pitch didn’t get him back for it.

‘What about now?’ Pitch said. ‘Anything to say now?’

*I didn’t say anything, asshole.*

The rubbing continued, it felt kind of nice, spreading the warmth around, making the stinging pain
fall back to something duller. Jack’s breathing eased, but didn’t go back to evenness. He was glad that Pitch couldn’t see his face, his head dropping slightly.

‘Good,’ Pitch said. ‘That’s good, Jack.’

Jack felt that like a whole body shiver. Like ice crystals had just crawled across the inside of his skin, except it was warm, and strange. What was good? That he hadn’t flipped Pitch off again? That he was relaxing?

Pitch’s hand left his ass and then Jack grunted when Pitch leaned forwards, and then Jack gasped when he felt that hand on his cock. It was hot against his skin, and squeezed him. Jack moaned weakly, because that was good. Too good.

‘That’s excellent,’ Pitch said, his voice deepening, and Jack wanted to press his lips together, but couldn’t with the gag in the way.

Pitch shifted back into position, began rubbing Jack’s ass again. Jack’s fear was still there, fizzing away, because when did it stop? What if Jack’s inner darkness came up and he did something regrettable? At least it didn’t feel close to the surface.

The taps started, following a rhythm and easy to predict. But the placement changed. Sometimes high up on the back of his ass, sometimes as low as his upper thighs, sometimes much longer on one side than the other. Jack’s legs shifted, still feeling unstable. If it wasn’t for Pitch’s hand at his lower back, he suspected he’d just slide forward onto the floor.

The tapping became harder, and then his shirt was pulled up just enough that Pitch’s hand was always hitting his bare skin. Jack thought about the hurried encounters he’d had in the Barracks, he could’ve gotten or given a blowjob or handjob about ten times over by now. This was…he didn’t even know if this counted as sex.

He wished his cock would figure it out.

First his skin began to heat, and then the sting started to move through him. It wriggled into his legs and made him restless, had him clutching harder at Pitch’s shin, grunting, because it wasn’t easy to bear. Pitch was only spanking him lightly, Jack was pretty sure, but it was building up, and he was sensitising to it.

He felt like something was building inside of him, and he didn’t have a name for it, and didn’t know what it was. He couldn’t get over how embarrassing the position was. He was over Pitch’s knee like a child, and Pitch talked to him like a recalcitrant brat that needed to be pulled into line.

‘This is one of my favourite parts,’ Pitch said.

The next strike was hard, and fell at the top of Jack’s thigh. There, it was a wash of pain that started at his skin and moved down into his flesh, his bones, knotted up through his spine so that his back arched. Jack cried out, the sound cutting off as Pitch spanked over the exact same place, as hard as before.

Then, not really thinking about it, Jack tried to move forwards, or sideways. To slide off Pitch’s lap somehow. Pitch’s hand dug harder into his lower back, and Pitch’s legs shifted so that Jack could reach even less of the ground – not that he could reach it properly anyway. Then, a round of blows that were swift and over the curves of Jack’s ass, but still hard, still painful, and Jack felt his eyes beginning to prickle, and tried to reach behind to stop what was happening.

Effortlessly, as though Pitch had been expecting it, the hand at Jack’s lower back shifted quickly
and grasped Jack’s flailing arm by the wrist and then pressed it into his lower back, so that Jack was more immobilised than before.

‘Really, I have so many favourite parts,’ Pitch said. Jack could hear the smile in his voice.

A few more light taps, almost playful, and Jack breathed a sigh of relief that was also caught up in his throat as Pitch began spanking him properly again.

He cried out in protest. Pitch didn’t stop at all. Jack was finding it hard to think through the heat of it. The sensations weren’t just pain, but fire that burnt through him, that tangled with the lust that had been stoked with his gut and then became a mess that he couldn’t figure out. It felt like there was too much of it, and he thought of Anton saying that Pitch never gave him more than he could handle, but it didn’t seem true, and Jack’s breath was catching in his throat and he was starting to feel something he didn’t really have a name for, but it choked up inside of him until he blurted out – hating himself for it:

‘Lumen.’

Pitch stopped spanking him, went back to rubbing his skin, and Jack felt worse somehow for having used the word. He wanted to curl up on himself, except he couldn’t. His arm was behind his back, his shoulder ached, and he turned his head to the side, even though Pitch couldn’t see his expression anyway.

*By the light, what’s wrong with me?*

‘Good, Jack,’ Pitch said.

The stroking made Jack aware of the pain, but also diffused it, turned it to something softer, easier. Jack didn’t know why he’d been called good for using the word. Wasn’t it weak? Hadn’t Pitch said that Jack had something like endurance? Yet here he was, a complete wimp.

He tried to catch his breath. Forehead creasing as the hand pinning his wrist down began stroking it instead.

‘Do you want to stop?’ Pitch said. ‘Did you mean to say shadow instead?’

Jack shook his head automatically. Then realised how strange that was. Did he want Pitch to keep going? It was harder than he thought, somehow. He thought it would just be scary, and painful. A lot of things in his life had been scary and painful so far, and he knew how to deal with that. But this was so much more than that. He had a lump in his throat, and he didn’t understand why. He was still hard, and he wanted to come, and he didn’t understand that either.

‘Your ass is starting to look quite red,’ Pitch said, sounding pleased. Jack made a weak, bemused sound, and Pitch laughed quietly. ‘It suits you. This being your first time, I think you’ll bruise up very nicely.’

Pitch’s thumb stroked over the curve of one of Jack’s ass cheeks, pressing deep enough that Jack moaned. Jack didn’t know if it felt good or not. His senses twisting beneath Pitch’s fingers. When Pitch did it a second time, Jack felt his cock twitch, and heat curled up at the base of his spine. Good. Painful, but good.

‘I don’t think it’s the pain that bothers you,’ Pitch said, shifting again and reaching around. Jack winced when fingers brushed his cock, then rubbed at the head of him. He whimpered when Pitch pressed Jack’s cock into the material of Pitch’s pants, holding it there against the roughness. ‘I think you’re running from yourself, Jack.’
Jack wasn’t paying all that much attention, pressing his hips forward to get more of that friction on his cock. It ached, but he knew if he got a hand on himself, he’d come pretty fast.

‘Perhaps you want to stop doing that. I wouldn’t know. But I’d like to see you stop doing that. Ah, look at me, talking as though this is all for your benefit, when I really just want to do things like this.’

Fingers dug into the flesh at the top of his ass and dragged down over one cheek, nails digging in, down to the delicate, sensitive skin at the tops of his thighs. Jack’s back arched, he whimpered, and just like that Pitch’s hand was tight on his wrist, holding him still as he did it again.

‘So responsive,’ Pitch murmured, and Jack didn’t even know if he was supposed to hear it.

Pitch delivered several light, stinging slaps to the backs of Jack’s thighs, and Jack hissed, realised that whatever break he’d gotten with that word was probably over. He felt calmer, and he realised the panic he’d felt at saying the word had disappeared pretty quickly when Pitch had praised him for it. So maybe that word thing wasn’t so bad, maybe-

Jack yelped when Pitch spanked him several times in a row on his left cheek, eyes already burning again. The pain was closer to the surface now, and that thorny knot of emotions and lust inside of him was too.

Pitch kept going, alternating sides, sometimes moving down to the backs of Jack’s thighs – which Jack hated – and then back up again. Jack felt his hips moving involuntarily, sometimes to get away, sometimes to grind his cock into fabric, feeling like he was so close, and yet knowing that dry-humping Pitch’s leg just wasn’t going to cut it.

There came a moment where the pain crested and Jack was crying out and trying not to, biting down on the gag which was soaked with saliva. He felt the first tear spill and made a sound of despair when Pitch didn’t stop.

He thought about saying either of the words then. The one to slow down. The one to stop. But he wanted to prove to Pitch that he wasn’t running from himself – whatever that meant. And, damn it, his body was doing a pretty good job of convincing him that it was one of the most intense things that had ever happened to him, like a build up to some kind of release he’d never had before.

When he sniffed, he struggled again out of sheer embarrassment, and Pitch clucked his tongue like a teacher and kept Jack in place, not relenting.

Soon, the sniffing was the least of his troubles. His body had turned into some kind of sensory firework, and he gasped trying to keep up with the feelings that raced through him. His cheeks were wet, his mouth was wet around the gag, his hands ached, his body felt heavy – stinging sensations chased around by heavier ones.

It built until he was sure he couldn’t handle it at all, until words that he could say began echoing around his head. His exhales were barely stifled sobs, his stomach was a knot of wanting.

Jack felt like his world was tipped upside down when Pitch suddenly shifted, sliding Jack off his knees. With a strong arm around his back, Pitch held Jack upright, and wrapped his other hand around Jack’s cock and tugged less than a handful of times before Jack’s knees buckled.

Everything went white for a few seconds as Jack realised he was going to come, already. He knew it would be more intense than anything he’d known in the past. He reached out clumsily, grabbing onto Pitch’s shoulders, head tipping forwards, and then he brokenly cried out when the pleasure of
it twisted hard inside of him and he started spilling into Pitch’s hand.

It seemed to go on and on, the pain in his ass and thighs making everything stronger. He ended up leaning into Pitch, standing between his thighs, his head tucked into Pitch’s shoulder and shakily catching his breath. Every wave of it took him into a place where there was no thought, nothing to worry about, nothing except his body, and Pitch commanding it.

He felt shattered. But in the process of being broken into pieces, he felt like a weight had been taken away from him too. Something he was carrying that he didn’t have a name for. Something he didn’t want back. He didn’t know how he could feel lighter when he hurt, when he was wrung out, but he did.

Jack couldn’t even bring himself to care about the way he was basically clinging to Pitch. Couldn’t quite wrap his head around the fact that Pitch was letting him.

After a few seconds, Pitch carefully drew his hand away from Jack’s cock. A handkerchief appeared – Jack couldn’t tell from where – and Pitch wiped his hand off one-handed, like he’d had practice with that too.

Then, he reached up and touched the corner of Jack’s mouth carefully. He traced the gag to the knot and undid that. Jack pushed the gag out with his tongue, but it stuck to his skin, didn’t drop away. At least he could talk again. If he wanted to.

He didn’t really want to.

Pitch drew the gag away, placing it beside him on the bench. Then he reached around like he was going to embrace Jack with both arms. Instead, his hand dropped down and rubbed over the searingly hot skin of Jack’s ass.

Jack jolted forwards, hissing, and Pitch made a soft sound of amusement.

‘You managed that very well,’ Pitch said. ‘Especially for what was obviously a first time.’

‘Okay,’ Jack said, his voice rough. He didn’t know what else to say. Pitch’s fingers were lightly tracing over inflamed skin, stirring the pain, reviving it, making his skin tingle.

‘How are you feeling?’

‘Yeah,’ Jack said, and then laughed. ‘You know when I imagined this, this is so not how I thought it would go.’

A beat, and Jack could’ve kicked himself for saying that. He felt rawer than usual, he couldn’t keep track of the words before he said them. In the pregnant silence that followed, Jack swore he could hear Pitch’s smugness like a third person in the room.

‘…Because I never imagined it.’ Jack added. ‘Ever.’

‘I see,’ Pitch said, and Jack leaned back just enough to see the smirk and rolled his eyes, dropping his head again.

_Busted._

‘When did you start imagining it?’ Pitch said.

‘Ha, no, that’s enough,’ Jack said. ‘You’ve humiliated me enough today, thanks.’
‘I rather have, haven’t I?’ Pitch said. ‘You’re beautiful, too. Perhaps I’ll have to make you squirm more often.’

Jack hesitated, then leaned back again, to make sure that Pitch was joking. But he didn’t seem to be now. His face was all seriousness. But no one called Jack beautiful, really. He wasn’t bad looking. He was okay looking. Since the initiation though, he felt more alien, and less like before, when he was just someone who would be able to hook up on occasion, and no one to look twice at.

Belatedly, Jack realised that Pitch hadn’t come at all. He dropped his head, and then, without really thinking, he lowered his hand between Pitch’s legs. That was just reciprocal, the thing to do, right? And he sort of wanted to see Pitch undone. He couldn’t even imagine it.

Before his fingers brushed cloth, a hand secured his wrist.

‘No,’ Pitch said. ‘Not today.’

‘But-’

‘Not today,’ Pitch repeated.

‘But you should get something out of it too,’ Jack said, confused.

‘I think I’m going to remember how sweet you’re being, the next time you’re making my life miserable.’ Pitch shifted, let go of Jack’s wrist and touched his lips to Jack’s. The kiss was light, and Jack’s lips felt clumsy, still feeling the shape of the gag in his mouth like an echo. But it was also gentle, soothing. Jack sighed into it without thinking, forgetting about seeing Pitch undone and focusing instead on that touch. He was hungry for it, more than he’d realised.

But as he leaned in, Pitch leaned away and broke the contact between their mouths. Jack felt dazed.

‘Are you able to stand?’ Pitch said.

Jack realised that he was still kind of just a dead weight against Pitch, and got his legs under him properly. He wanted to put cold hands to his ass and somehow rub the pain away, but he wasn’t going to do that now. Not where Pitch could see. He took another step backwards when Pitch stood and walked across the room, almost businesslike, and frowned.

‘I thought we’d have sex or something,’ Jack said.

‘Did you?’ Pitch said, not even looking over his shoulder. ‘Perhaps. But not today.’

‘Is that like your favourite phrase or something? Not today?’

Pitch opened a drawer and withdrew a jar with a silver cap. It seemed to have a kind of salve in it. Pitch returned and handed it to Jack.

‘That will help with the pain,’ Pitch said. ‘Use it before bed, and you’ll feel much better in the morning.’

‘Oh,’ Jack said, looking at the salve.

‘I’m sure you can show yourself out. I didn’t expect an interlude like this today, but it was a pleasing diversion. I suppose I’m going to have to start using a lock though, so that you don’t accidentally walk in on something you shouldn’t. If you want this again, let me know.’

Jack dug the balls of his feet into the floor so he wouldn’t nervously move from foot to foot. He
was shocked at how Pitch was being. It had been so nice leaning into him, and now- But… Maybe that’s how he was with everyone. What did Jack expect? That they’d cuddle? Pitch had even complimented him and everything.

Jack swallowed, and tried to ignore the feeling that he was being cast aside.

Then he watched as Pitch walked away. He used another exit – the door that Jack hadn’t been able to open no matter how hard he tried. And for a few seconds, Jack saw a four poster bed beyond it, a large desk, and realised that was Pitch’s room.

So I can get in here. But I can’t get in there...

The door closed, and Jack was alone again. The salve was cold in Jack’s hand, and he took a moment to think of what he was meant to do. Eventually he walked back over to his pants. Putting them on was a trial, and he grit his teeth as he drew them up over his thighs and ass, before fastening them into place. He grabbed his staff where it leaned against the wall.

Walking back to his room wasn’t easy either, and he locked the door properly, wanting some privacy. He ended up in the bathroom, wincing as he pulled his pants down. He caught his reflection in the mirror. His eyes were still faintly red-rimmed, the edges of his mouth showed mild chafe marks. He set the salve down on the counter, and looked at himself for a long time. He was wide-eyed, he had a bite mark at the base of his neck.

Pressing his lips together, he ran a hand through his hair and then stepped out of his pants and twisted to see what the damage looked like.

He could already catch the bruising that would appear later, as though his skin had shaded darker beneath the red. In a couple of places, he could see the clear outline of fingers, and touched them lightly.

He kind of liked it.

He supposed that Pitch was probably used to doing this a lot and Jack just had to get used to it too. After all, it wasn’t like the rush jobs at the Barracks had ever been anything like intimate. He was pretty sure he’d said, ‘Cool, thanks,’ after his first blowjob. But then he hadn’t expected to have his emotions dragged into it, to feel like that, to be told he was running from himself and then…and then have it end the way it did. But maybe that’s what Pitch did for everyone. Maybe that’s what Anton meant.

Jack’s brow furrowed and he almost thought about talking to Anton about it, but he didn’t want to seem naïve, when everyone said he was that anyway.

Training was out for the rest of the day, so he lay stomach-down on the bed, elbows on the blankets and hands under his chin as he read through the primers that Eva had given him, trying to grasp a complicated alphabet. Sometimes he licked his lips, as though he could taste Pitch’s mouth on his, relive the kisses. He’d liked those. More than he thought he would.

In the end, he slumped, his cheek on the page, floating in hazy memories of what had just happened, lust sleepily stirring alongside confusion until he fell asleep.
Sooo, a few people have been like, 'Pitch needs some whump.' *coughs delicately*
Here ya go. (Also there's Jack angst, because it's JACK and he trails it behind him and
no one gave him proper aftercare in the last chapter and it's an issue.)

Jack remembered to use the salve when he woke up past midnight and winced, forcing himself out
of bed, muscles aching. It wasn’t just his ass, it was all of him. The salve itself was cool, but it
warmed too fast against skin that was inflamed and rapidly bruising. Jack stood in the bathroom,
one hand bracing himself on the sink, the other tentatively smearing on the salve, and he thought of
how Pitch had held him at the end. Held him in place, and then just…kept his arms there.

It felt weird to want that as much as everything else.

Even now, with the echoes of pain moving through him – the salve thankfully easing it – Jack
wanted it again. He didn’t fully understand why, but it was almost as though he’d craved that
intensity all his life without realising. There had been so many sharp moments, but he’d never been
able to share them with other people. Not really. Having that at the hands of Pitch, in an
environment that was partly under Jack’s control, and it ending the way it had – it was like a
puzzle piece had been handed to him, and he could see himself better in its light.

Once he was done with the salve, feeling it working already to soothe the worst of the throb, he
stared at himself in the mirror again. His hair was growing out – not thin and flimsy, but strong and
silvery white. His eyes silvery blue. He still couldn’t get used to himself. Pitch calling him
beautiful, calling him good, seemed to echo around him. It reminded him of being inducted, but
this time, Pitch wasn’t trying to get political answers. He’d just been saying it, and it seemed clear
that Pitch couldn’t be bothered with lying in that room.

Perhaps it was silly that he wanted those things to be true so badly. He wanted to be good, he
wanted to be beautiful, and he wanted Pitch to think those things about him. Jack took a deep
breath, a wave of tiredness finding him, and he went back to bed, curling up on his side, leaning
forwards to take pressure off his hip, his ass. He stretched out with his hand and touched the sheet
covering the mattress, wishing for something intangible, something he didn’t have a name for.

* *

The next day, he had breakfast in his room, defaulting to a rations bar, no matter what look
Seraphina would give him to see it.

Etiquette tutors came, and Jack sat down on chairs and introduced himself to pretend nobles as
though he didn’t have bruising to deal with. The salve was helpful, but it didn’t get rid of
everything. Every time he sat, he was reminded of what had transpired in that room and felt
flushed. He honestly didn’t know how he was going to look Pitch in the eyes again any time soon,
which was ridiculous, wasn’t it?

It wasn’t that he’d cried – he’d done that in front of Pitch before. It wasn’t even that he’d been
spanked, really, because he’d been considering that side of Pitch for some time before it happened.
But somehow, something had shifted. Some tectonic movement that changed everything he had previously thought he’d known about Pitch. The person in that room saying ‘not yet,’ who said sweet things, cruel things, but also left him at the end so quickly that Jack wondered if Pitch regretted the whole thing.

Perhaps that was it.

Did Pitch ever regret sleeping with people? Spanking them? Whatever else he did? Surely he did. He’d called Jack a child in the past, and maybe he thought Jack was too childish to handle it. Maybe Jack should have been able to find his feet sooner. Maybe other people just stood up straight away, and accepted the pain as stoically as Jack could when he was in the Disciplinarian’s tower?

But it didn’t seem like that’s what Pitch had wanted in the moment…

Maybe he’d speak to Anton. He had no idea what Anton’s schedule was, but surely Pitch or someone else would tell him. He was allowed free time outside of Pitch’s rooms, after all, even though he wasn’t really taking it.

‘Are you concentrating?’ one of the tutors snapped, and he hissed when a fork rapped smartly over the sensitive jut of bone at his wrist.

‘No?’ Jack said.

It earned him another rap over the wrist, but it helped him focus on the lessons at hand. He could find Anton later.

* Seraphina came at lunch, bringing balls of sticky wild rice with her and some red, plump fruits that Jack had never seen before. He thought he’d seen most of the fruits that Lune had to offer by now, but these still had stems attached, leaves, so he wondered if Seraphina had fetched them from the garden she shared with her mother.

‘Here,’ she said, pushing the large bowl of rice balls, and the bowl of fruits onto Jack’s bed. Then, she walked out of the room.

For a moment, Jack thought it was just some kind of bizarre lunch delivery. But a few minutes passed and she returned with a large stack of books, some paper, and several pencils. She placed those on the bed too, pushing them towards the bowls. After that, she clambered onto Jack’s bed properly and sat with her back to his pillows. Arranging them until she was comfortable.

Seraphina’s black hair was braided, shone thickly and healthily. Her green eyes held more determination than usual, thick black brows pulling together as she looked at the stack she’d brought with her.

She then looked around his room, squinting at it, as though annoyed he hadn’t put any personal effects in the room yet. She spotted the primers that Eva had given him, and sighed.

‘I can do this,’ she said to no one in particular, and Jack decided that would be a good moment to get on the bed, opposite her. He felt the bruising, tried not to think about what her father was into and reached for one of the fruits to distract himself. He sniffed it first. It had a tart, sweet smell, and the skin was thin but pebbled.

‘I made sure to ask some adults what they thought might be best to teach another adult,’ Seraphina
said, pulling out the different books. ‘Father said that children learn differently to adults, and he said what worked for me might not work for you. And Tutor Rapshin said that peasants can’t learn this alphabet at all, but mother assured me that’s incorrect. She said it’s a lie that we’re told about peasants.’

Seraphina handed Jack some of the papers and a book to rest them on. Then, she took a large piece of yellowed fabric and unfolded it. It took up almost a quarter of Jack’s bed – a chart of the sacred Lune alphabet in tiny print.

‘This is half of what you’re meant to learn,’ Seraphina said.

_Half of the sacred Lune alphabet. By the Light. I think Tutor Rapshin was right, I can’t learn this._

‘But there’s a secret,’ Seraphina said. ‘Like this, it’s too much. For anyone. Even half of it. Each of these letters can represent a sound, a word, a phrase, a flavour, a musical tone, a hymn, something else, or all of that, or none of it. Sometimes they’re just punctuation, or space markers. These two here mean, ‘take a breath.’ So we learn them in groups. Look.’

She took out a much smaller piece of fabric and pulled the other one aside. This one only had fourteen letters upon it, and they each looked similar.

‘These are our musical tones,’ Seraphina said. ‘Some of them are also vowel sounds. But see, we learn them in groups.’

Jack had picked this up from the primers, but as Seraphina unfolded different, smaller pieces of fabric, he saw that some of the letters would be more crucial than others. If he wasn’t a musician, he didn’t need to learn the letters that only represented musical notes. If he wasn’t a chef, he didn’t need to learn the letters that only represented flavours. He thought he’d have to learn all of it, but as Seraphina said:

‘We start much simpler,’ Seraphina said. ‘It’s very hard to be completely fluent in this language, and most people aren’t, even if they think they are. It’s stupid to think you can learn all of it. Adults are dumb, mostly,’ Seraphina said. Then she paused, as though contemplating how true that was. ‘A hymnist is the only one who knows which hymns are connected to all of the letters. Like Sandy, he’ll know. If he embroiders the letter into a vestment, he means the hymn. The High Holy Priests learn that. They know the most, of anyone. Outside of scholars. Or father, because he’s a perfectionist.’

‘What?’

‘It’s so annoying,’ Seraphina muttered to herself. ‘He has to know everything. But he doesn’t like to read! He can read, but he won’t read fantasy books for fun. Or tales. He says there’s enough nonsense in the world already.’

‘But…doesn’t he tell you stories?’

‘All the time,’ Seraphina said, smiling a little. ‘I suppose one of the good things about him is that just because he thinks it’s nonsense for him, he doesn’t think it’s nonsense for me. Different people have different… Anyway, stop distracting me. I’m trying to teach you.’

‘Right,’ Jack said, deciding that until Seraphina learned she could do this, she was probably going to take all of it really seriously.

But then if Jack wanted to learn more about Lune’s history, and not just the plain language version that was given to all the lower classes, he’d actually have to learn. He schooled his face to
concentration and nodded soberly, and Seraphina scowled at him until she decided that he really meant it.

‘I hope you like copying letters,’ she said finally, handing him a pencil. ‘Because that’s mostly what this is going to be.’

‘Cool,’ Jack said, looking at everything in front of him. This wasn’t daunting at all. This was just…a new version of learning the smallsword. And he managed that just fine. ‘Teach me, Mistress Seraphina, I want to learn.’

She hesitated, and then smiled down at the books. After a few moments she looked up and said:

‘And then after can you show me a glacier goat again?’

‘I can,’ Jack said, finally biting into the fruit she’d brought him. It was juicy, but not too sweet, and it didn’t drip down his fingers. ‘Also, what is this?’

‘Oh, I don’t know,’ Seraphina said. ‘Father brought it back from a planet once and I propagated it, but never got its name. It’s good, isn’t it?’

‘It’s not poisonous?’

‘Probably not,’ she said, drawing out a letter slowly, but with the ease that spoke of someone who could do it much faster, and was making it slow for him. ‘But no one’s died yet.’

Jack laughed a little, and Seraphina looked like she wanted to, but he could tell she was taking it all very seriously, so he decided that he would concentrate. He wanted to be a good student for her, as opposed to the etiquette tutors, who he couldn’t care less about.

* 

In the evening, he found Pitch in the lounge and hesitantly walked close enough that Pitch would know Jack wanted his attention. Pitch looked up from a book that looked ancient. Jack was now pretty sure it wasn’t fiction, but some non-fiction tome on…Jack had no idea. Military ships? Swords? What was he reading about that required a book to be so thick? You could learn the basics of root vegetable farming in a single pamphlet.

‘Yes?’ Pitch said, looking up.

Jack stared at him. Wondered if what they’d done the day before even mattered to him. Was it just…unimportant pleasure? The same as having a meal he enjoyed? Did he even enjoy it?

‘Um, so…’ Jack leaned a little on his staff. ‘Where’s Anton? Can I go visit him? You said I could have like…free time.’

‘Mm,’ Pitch said, looking back at his book. ‘I did say that.’

He sounded a little like he wanted to take it back, and Jack held still, because he was willing to fight for his free time if necessary, yet he also didn’t want to ice Pitch’s entire lounge. But he would. He hoped Pitch knew that by now.

‘Anton is…’ Pitch tilted his head and looked like he was thinking it through. ‘Today- Normally he’s with the rest of the Golden Warriors in the Barracks, but I believe he’s staying in the Palace for the next few days, so he’s likely to be training in the amphitheatre. I can get someone to show you, if you wish? A map might be easier.’
‘Will he mind being interrupted?’

‘Anton?’ Pitch said, and then he smiled as though remembering some private joke. ‘No, he doesn’t mind interruptions. Though he does like an audience. Wait here, I’llfetch a key for you.’

Pitch stood smoothly, left the room. Jack moved over to the book and opened it, and saw a lot of writing he didn’t understand— even if he could pick out three or four of the letters now—and the blueprints of different castles. The paper itself was brittle, and Jack wondered how old it was. Maybe even from the days when the Golden Warriors laid siege to other Kingdoms, and not just the Darkness.

So why was he looking through it? Reminiscing?

*I will never understand him.*

Pitch returned about ten minutes later. In his fingers, a hand-written map to the amphitheatre with directions that Jack could actually understand, and a long, heavy brass key.

‘Hold it,’ Pitch said, even as he didn’t let the key go. Half of it was still visible, and Jack reached out and wrapped his fingers around it. His hand touched Pitch’s hand. The key felt weird, like it held a temperature of its own. He could feel it pulsing into his palm.

A minute passed, and Jack blinked when the key turned very warm in his grip, and then went cool again. It felt like nothing more than an ordinary key.

‘It won’t work after midnight,’ Pitch said. ‘It’s enchanted.’

‘Bunnymund’s magic?’ Jack said, taking the key and turning it in his hand.

‘Yes. Also, if you’re leaving my rooms, you should know two things— first, you must change into your public uniform. Second, go *straight* to the amphitheatre and come *straight* back. The Tsar has been away today on business, so I think you should be moderately safe.’

‘Moderately,’ Jack said, sighing. ‘He’s never hurt me.’

‘Don’t give him a chance to,’ Pitch said. Then, he placed a hand on Jack’s shoulder, fingers curving towards his back. The touch was unexpected, and Jack looked up, shocked.

Pitch said nothing, but his fingers curled as though he was stroking through the black training shirt. Jack stilled, because the material of the shirt wasn’t thick, and he had scars up on his shoulders. He was more aware of them now. Aware that Pitch would probably have to see them one day. In his fantasies, he didn’t exactly imagine himself wearing a shirt while getting intimate with someone.

‘How are you, after yesterday?’ Pitch said.

‘Fine,’ Jack said.

Pitch’s hand dropped, barely touching Jack’s spine, before grasping Jack’s ass through his pants. Jack grunted softly as fingers dug into bruises, jerking forwards, hips brushing against Pitch.

‘Sore?’ Pitch said, a half-smile on his face.

‘I mean- A little- You gave me that salve. I was just wondering, did you-? It doesn’t matter.’

‘Did I…what?’ Pitch said, his voice deeper than before. His hand moved up again, rested at Jack’s lower back. It was a strangely possessive touch.
‘No, honestly, I-’

‘Tell me.’

Jack looked down at the key, turning it in his fingers. How many of them did Pitch have? Why was there even a curfew on his rooms? Or did that only apply to Jack?

‘Tell me,’ Pitch said, voice firm, and Jack didn’t feel he could ignore it anymore.

‘I just wanted to know if you enjoyed yourself,’ Jack said, risking a glance up, feeling like a fool.

Pitch’s forehead creased briefly, his hand – that had been slowly moving at Jack’s lower back – stilled. Jack thought maybe he’d stepped in it somehow, he just should’ve kept his mouth shut. Or not answered Pitch’s ‘tell me,’ even though that had seemed impossible. But he should’ve just-

‘I did,’ Pitch said slowly. ‘Very much. I told you how much you pleased me.’

‘Yeah,’ Jack said, nodding. Now feeling like he was attention-seeking somehow, or searching for praise. He wasn’t that kind of person. He didn’t want Pitch to think he was that kind of person. Pitch had called it a pleasing diversion. ‘Yeah, you did. Of course. I said it didn’t matter.’

Pitch studied Jack, and then he looked away, almost like he was collecting his thoughts. When he turned back, Jack braced himself.

‘Did you enjoy it?’ Pitch said.

Jack blinked at him, and then he gestured at himself with his staff. ‘I mean, yeah, I- I mean yeah, you were there, right? You know I did.’

Pitch frowned at him, as though Jack had said something troubling. Jack wondered if they’d ever have a conversation that didn’t tie Jack up into knots. Even having Pitch this close to him, his hand on Jack’s back, it was hard to concentrate. Jack felt jittery, almost. He wanted Pitch’s arms around him again, holding him up. He wanted things that people weren’t supposed to want from the Royal Admiral.

‘Was it too much?’ Pitch said slowly.

‘No,’ Jack said, thinking that if Pitch thought he was weak now, they’d never see the inside of that room again. He wanted to. Just because he didn’t understand it all- He still knew what he wanted.

‘Hmm, all right then. Yes, I did enjoy myself. If you were concerned- You know you can ask me questions about that?’ Pitch said, as though Jack should have known that all along.

‘Yeah,’ Jack said, feeling like an idiot. He could almost imagine Seraphina saying ‘stupid’ in that tone of voice that she saved for people she truly looked down on. Like the first time she’d met him, and realised he was an Overland.

Pitch’s frown hadn’t vanished. Jack felt like apologising, and thought – oddly – of the Tsar telling him that apologies weren’t helpful, were actually useless. It just made him want to apologise more.

‘It’s silly,’ Jack added, looking down at the key.

‘It’s not,’ Pitch said soberly. ‘I assure you it’s not.’

Jack didn’t feel all that assured. Truthfully, standing here now, he was pretty sure that what he
really wanted anyway, was probably the kind of thing that Pitch didn’t give out to anyone. What was it that Seraphina had said? He’d locked his heart away in a tower.

Which was why Jack really needed to speak to Anton.

‘Well, um, thanks for the map. And the key. I’ll go get changed and... be back by midnight.’

‘See that you are,’ Pitch said, stepping away, leaving Jack feel cold and adrift again, as he had the day before.

Jack offered Pitch a game smile, and walked back to his room. He really hoped Anton was at the amphitheatre, like Pitch had said.

*

The amphitheatre was huge, and clearly designed for public viewings of combat. Jack looked at the gold capping on the seats, the gold detailing in frescoes upon the walls up above the seating, at the entry points. Down in the amphitheatre, Anton and a few other Golden Warriors were moving through drills together. It became apparent after a few minutes that Anton was the one leading them. He seemed comfortable in the role, too. Jack wondered what his rank was.

He was advertised as just a very powerful Golden Warrior; one of the best. But now, Jack wondered if he was an Admiral or a Captain. Surely he was too young? Maybe he just took control like this because he hung out with Eva all the time, and saw Pitch sometimes.

Jack sat in the stands. When Anton saw him, they waved at each other, but Anton kept working. It was about nine in the evening when Anton finished up with the others, wiping sweat from his hair – a flashy yellow to red ombre that, combined with his golden eyes, made him look larger than life. He took the steps up to Jack slowly, rubbing sawdust off his forearms where it had stuck to sweat.

‘Good evening, Jack!’ Anton said, sitting next to him. ‘So good to see you. Should I shower first? I must smell regrettable.’

‘Like I’ve never trained before,’ Jack said, laughing.

‘Is everything all right?’

‘Yeah,’ Jack said, ‘of course. I just wanted to talk to you about some things. Should we- Do we do that here? Or do we do that somewhere else?’

Anton looked searchingly around the amphitheatre, and then clapped Jack on the back, before offering a hand to help him up. Jack stood without the help, and followed Anton towards the bathing rooms.

‘You can come in if you like,’ Anton said, winking, ‘but it might muss your pretty uniform. Wait for me. I won’t be long.’

Jack sat on a bench nearby, icing it idly. On an impulse, he called the winds to him and lifted himself about an inch from the bench, just hovering there. After a few moments where he realised it was pretty easy, he laughed to himself. That would help so much with any bruising he had. And he could hover just high enough that no one else would notice.

The winds dropped him gently back down when he willed it, and he spun the staff in his hand, looking around. The amphitheatre had paintings at the very top. Jack had glimpsed some – wrestling, people fighting other people, sword combat, the kind of things that hardly happened
now. It was more likely to be Light shows or something similar. Gladiatorial events were considered almost barbaric now, amphitheatres most commonly repurposed for training.

Anton reappeared twenty minutes later, dressed, running a hand through his hair and then tousling it deliberately. He smiled warmly, and then gestured with his head for Jack to follow him.

Jack made a point of memorising where they were going. The Palace was a labyrinth. Nothing about it seemed to be organised logically.

A non-descript door down another non-descript corridor, but when Anton opened it, Jack was surprised to see a small lounge, weapons hanging on the wall, and two posters that Jack would have been envious to get his hands on before his initiation. One was of Pitch in one of the earliest iterations of the Golden Warrior uniform; that spectacular black feather crest at his neck, the golden pattern all over the black robes, and his eyes outlined in the black liner they used to wear. The other, a line of Warriors, another vintage poster. Alongside Pitch, Jack recognised Bunnymund and North.

‘You live here?’

‘I prefer the Golden Warrior Barracks,’ Anton said, ‘but yes, it’s more private than the amphitheatre. You can speak in whispers on those seats if you like, but sound carries along the curves.’

‘There was no one else there. I mean except who you were training with.’

Anton took a carafe of water from a small fridge, two glasses, and poured them both a drink each. He shrugged off his coat and draped it over the back of a chair, left in his black training shirt. Then he stretched, hugely, and yawned. When he sat in the chair, he leaned back in it as he did in Pitch’s dining room. But in his room, the back of Anton’s chair met the wall neatly, like he did it all the time and had positioned the chair to best enjoy the position.

‘If you noticed spies, they wouldn’t be very good spies now, would they?’ Anton said. ‘You’re looking well. I do like that uniform. The blue and white suits you.’

Jack thought of Flitmouse, locked away in an Asylum somewhere, and just nodded. Anton looked sidelong at Jack, and waited, and Jack had been expecting questions to prompt him. But Anton would have no idea what to ask, and Jack knew very much what he wanted to say.

‘I need you to tell me about Fyodor,’ Jack said. ‘Everything you know.’

‘Oh,’ Anton said. He blinked, and then rocked back down onto all four legs of the chair with a bump, turning to face Jack squarely. He took a sip of the water and then stared at it. ‘Should you not ask Pitch?’

‘You think he’s ever going to tell me?’ Jack said.

‘Look, with all due respect, if you knew him, then it’s your story too.’

‘Touché,’ Anton said, almost looking proud. ‘Ah, Jack, there are things I wish you didn’t have to know. And Fyodor…’

‘He gave me Fyodor’s room,’ Jack said. ‘And if we’re going to- If we’re going to do stuff together, I just think I should know more about… And-’
'Oh? Stuff is happening?' Anton said, looking immediately delighted.

'Anton,' Jack said, annoyed. 'Like, concentrate.'

'By the Darkness itself, you even sound like him,' Anton said, taking another sip of the water. 'All right then. Fyodor…'

Anton traced a circle onto the table. A moment later he shifted his chair and tipped back again, looking up at the crown moulding.

'He was young, new. But he came from a wealthy background. So we all sort of knew him, in a way. He grew up half in the Palace, half in the City of Lune proper. Always getting into mischief. With Fyo, it wasn’t necessarily about having fun, or a good time, he was just very bold. I have been called many things in my life, but you would look at him and see this fire in his eyes, and if he told you he was going to do something – conquer something, steal something, fight someone – he would do it.

'He knew some of us before his initiation. Even before he went into the Barracks. If some of us were here, and his parents were away, we’d help look after him. So some of us knew him very well from a very young age. The Royal Admiral too. But anyway, he grew up, he went to the training Barracks, he passed his initiation. We used to joke that the Darkness saw him and begged him to be gentle.'

Jack laughed a little, to think of it. It sounded like Anton was describing a new hero in the making, a new myth for the posters.

'He was…an incredible soldier. He broke rules all the time, he was more reckless than me, and it drove Pitch crazy. They fought. I mean they fought, Jack. Fyo ended up in isolation at least twenty times, because he did stupid things. He was so amazing when he was in the field, but you also didn’t exactly want to be in his team, because he did things that got people killed. You had to watch your own back when you fought with him, because he wouldn’t watch it for you. Pitch hates that. He has no patience with it. I used to think I was at the extreme of it, but Fyo went out there like he was going to destroy the Darkness just…on his own. By himself. And you wanted to believe it. You watched him, and you knew it would be true. He’d just march right on out there and just get rid of it all.’

Anton picked up his glass, turned it in his fingers. He still looked up, as though he was seeing through the ceiling, through whatever else lay above them, directly to the stars. Jack followed his gaze, and then thought about Fyodor’s room. A bed right by a training mat. He’d seen no other rooms in the Palace like it. Had Fyodor made it that way? Training to defeat something singlehandedly?

‘I don’t know what it was about Fyo,’ Anton said, ‘but Pitch- You know it wouldn’t have surprised me if Fyo just marched up to him one day and said ‘We’re going to sleep together, and you’re going to love me,’ and Pitch fell before that willpower. It was probably something far less romantic. But one day they were just in each other’s pockets all the time. They were seen together a lot. They went out to cafes and restaurants in the City. They went to parks with Seraphina. They danced at Balls. And this is Pitch, you understand, who basically has to be bribed and manipulated into any of the large public events.’

Anton closed his eyes, sighing.

‘There are some people in this world who are only meant to love one person. In a relationship. It’s weird for me to contemplate, but it’s just the truth of the matter. Fyo was one of those people, and I
have always secretly wondered if Pitch is one of those people. He wouldn’t say so, but I wonder… I hadn’t ever seen Pitch that open-hearted. And Eva confided that she’d not seen it herself in all the time she’d known him. It was like he abandoned himself to it.’

‘I can’t imagine it,’ Jack said.

‘Indeed,’ Anton said. ‘At the time, it was as though we had met a completely different person. I once watched him waltzing with Fyo at some event, and the Tsar came over to us and just said: ‘How wonderful, this is as he was when he was younger. So joyful and powerful. You’d think nothing could stop him.’ It was a strange thing for him to say? But it was a wonderful time.’

‘And then…Fyodor died in the field? He couldn’t conquer the Darkness on his own?’

Anton placed the glass down very slowly. He rubbed at the stubble on his face, and then looked at Jack like he was measuring something inside of him.

‘What made you think he died in the field?’ Anton said. ‘He died in the Palace.’

‘What?’ Jack said. Something clenched tight and cold in his gut. He felt breathless. ‘He what?’

Anton looked around the room, almost like he wondered if someone was watching them now. When he looked back, he met Jack’s gaze steadily.

‘Jack, he was killed. In the Palace. About two weeks after the Tsar came and told us how joyful and powerful Pitch looked.’

‘I…’

Jack couldn’t think.

‘Whatever happened,’ Anton continued, ‘it was made to look like a suicide. But Fyo? Suicide? Nothing added up, there was evidence to suggest it wasn’t. Strong evidence. Signs of a struggle. But when the Tsar prepares a press release that says suicide, you don’t deny it.’

Jack thought of how Pitch had always talked about Fyodor, before he stopped talking about him altogether. Calling him ‘a mistake.’ Speaking about him with a kind of resigned bitterness. He thought of Seraphina saying that Pitch must have found Jack worthy, to place him in Fyodor’s room. Jack remembered saying he was nothing like Fyodor, after he’d killed Crossholt, and Pitch quietly agreeing. Of course not. Jack was meek, not the kind of person to just march up to the Darkness and conquer it. Not the kind of person to demand that he be loved, or that the Royal Admiral be in a relationship with him.

With a wave of nausea, he remembered the Tsar facing Pitch and ordering him to train Jack, and Pitch stubbornly replying with: ‘You do remember what happened to the last one, don’t you?’ He thought of how he’d privately told the Tsar that Pitch probably missed Fyodor, and at the time it looked like the Tsar didn’t know who that was, but in retrospect, that expression could have been something far more sinister.

‘What…would someone gain by killing Fyodor?’ Jack whispered.

He had so many other questions, but they all felt too risky to even utter aloud. The ones that had ‘The Tsar’ in them felt like pure poison. He thought he might be choking on the acid in his throat, despite breathing evenly.

‘It crushed Pitch,’ Anton said, sighing. ‘It crushed all of us who knew Fyo. Who’d fought with
him. Who considered him a nephew or little brother or friend or comrade. But it destroyed Pitch. Especially as Pitch knew what had happened. They made him stand before everyone and deliver the press release saying that he’d killed himself. They made him stand up in front of a crowd and say that Fyodor had been a weak fool.’

Anton’s voice cracked, and he took a deep breath. Another. And then he pressed thumb and forefinger to his closed eyes and said nothing.

‘And what would someone gain by crushing Pitch?’ Jack said a long time later, when he’d drunk half his glass of water and accidentally iced the rest.

Anton didn’t respond. He didn’t look like he could respond. Jack wanted to touch him, comfort him somehow. But he knew a lot of people didn’t like that. He reached out and touched Anton’s other hand, where it still rested on his glass of water. He clamped down on his ice and pet Anton’s hand, frowning.

Five minutes passed, and Jack couldn’t help himself.

‘Was Fyodor a part of the resistance?’

Anton looked up and studied Jack, and then he nodded once.

Stomach churning, Jack looked down at his own feet, swallowing hard. It was getting harder and harder to hide from what looked like the truth, and he could feel his body rebelling against it. He’d never needed a mother and father, because he had the Tsar, the Palace, the principles of Lune. All his life, he’d stared at pictures of the Golden Warriors, of the Tsar…he’d even placed offerings at pictures of the Tsar on the sacred days, making wishes for more strength, more fortitude, the ability to see his challenges through.

‘Jack?’ Anton said. And then, ‘I knew I shouldn’t have said anything. Jack, look, you don’t have to-’

‘I’m really tired of people hiding the truth from me,’ Jack said, his voice strained. ‘Like, really tired of it.’

‘Yes, one does get tired of it,’ Anton said, muted.

‘Everything here was supposed to be better.’

‘Than what?’ Anton said.

‘The creche!’ Jack said, staring at him now that Anton was finally looking at him again. ‘Being an Overland! But it’s not better. I’m eating fancier food, and my clothing looks great, but I feel so much worse. It wasn’t supposed to be like this at all. There’s so many secrets in this place. So many. It feels like every time I learn one, there’s another fifty behind them just waiting. Half the time I’m too scared to find answers and the other half of the time I don’t want them. No wonder Pitch has given up on love, or locked his heart in a stone tower or whatever Seraphina calls it. Who wouldn’t? Why do you bother? Why do any of you bother?’

Anton’s eyes widened in shock. When Jack drew his hand away from Anton’s, he was surprised to find it held in a firm grip.

‘Jack, giving up isn’t the answer. Pitch is just- He’s- It’s temporary.’

‘Says who?’ Jack said, laughing, feeling the darkness inside of him coil around what he was
‘Says who? You? Because you’re an idealist? Or Eva? Because she has a daughter with him? *Pitch* doesn’t say that, and I’m not surprised! Maybe he’s right to do it. Maybe he should’ve done it centuries ago, and-’

‘You don’t know what you’re saying. Do you think Seraphina would have been born if-’

Jack stood up, pushing his glass away, pushing the chair back. He’d come dangerously close to telling Anton that maybe it would have been better if she hadn’t been, and that was too close to what he’d said to Pitch. He could feel the darkness in him now, bubbling up, thick and horrid. He couldn’t think straight.

‘Why did you ask me about this?’ Anton said, not standing, but looking like he wanted to block Jack as he walked towards the door.

‘I wanted to understand Pitch a bit better,’ Jack said. ‘And I do. So…thanks, I guess.’

‘Jack, don’t leave. Stay a bit. We can talk about something else.’

‘I have a curfew,’ Jack said, almost glad of it. ‘You’ve been a great help.’

He left quickly, looking at Anton through the door as he closed it. Anton looked apologetic, but he was clearly going to let Jack go. It was a relief, because Jack needed a moment alone. A moment to just get himself together again. He pushed himself down the corridor, and tried to remember which direction to go, backtracking to the amphitheatre.

Something was knotted up tight inside of him, and he half-wanted to go back to his room just to see if he could throw it up.

Once he found the amphitheatre, he followed the map closely to get back to Pitch’s rooms. So closely he didn’t notice he was about to walk into someone until it was too late. A bump, and he dropped the map and apologised, looking up and freezing when he saw who it was.

Professor Sharpwood. His sharp eyes an unreadable liquid black, with no discernible corneas or pupils. Fingernails a matt electric blue. Perfectly coiffed, even his tufty blue hair. He sent a thrill of terror down Jack’s spine. There was only ever one reason he saw Professor Sharpwood.

‘I was just on my way back,’ Jack said, holding the map. ‘So easy to get lost, huh?’

Professor Sharpwood stared down at him, and then brushed the place on his coat that Jack had bumped into as though it was dirty, when there wasn’t a mark on it.

‘The Tsar of Lune has requested an appointment with you. How lucky to stumble across you here.’

Jack had the sudden feeling that luck had nothing to do with it.

‘Now? I have a curfew.’

‘Did the Tsar himself give you this curfew?’ the Professor said archly. Jack shook his head, tongue dry in his mouth. ‘Then it matters not. Come along. Do not dawdle.’

Jack followed Professor Sharpwood in the opposite direction, dizzy, the darkness in him shrinking small in the face of what he felt at the prospect of seeing the Tsar.
New tag: passive torture. Tbh, this has kind of been around in other ways (isolation rooms etc. / sleep deprivation / drug use and so on) but I needed a term and that'll do.

Also the Tsar is a dick. But everyone knew that.

Thanks everyone for reading / kudosing / commenting! I've had some health stuff going on lately that is pretty stressful and being able to write this fic and interact with you folks about it has actually been really great on so many levels.

Jack and Professor Sharpwood descended down three spiral staircases, and Jack leaned over to see how far they were going down, only to realise he couldn’t really see the bottom of where they were headed. This wasn’t the way they’d gone to the Tsar’s rooms in the past, and Jack’s skin was tight with goosebumps, his lungs taut, fighting him as he tried to keep his breathing even.

‘So…what are you a Professor of, anyway?’ Jack said, his voice echoing off the tiled walls. Here, it was only black marble with streaks of gold. Torches set into recesses along the walls, glowing with a dim orange light that didn’t smoke, and wasn’t fire.

‘Lune,’ Professor Sharpwood said, after a long enough pause that Jack was sure he wouldn’t answer at all. Jack looked down at the top of his blue, tufted hair. He was five steps behind, it was the only way he’d ever get to look down on him. He was tall.

‘Are you from Lune?’

‘No,’ Professor Sharpwood said.

‘Were you a Professor before you came here?’

‘Yes,’ Professor Sharpwood said. Somehow, even though he was only saying a single word at a time, Jack could feel the full weight of Sharpwood’s disdain.

‘What were you a Professor of back then?’

‘Lune,’ Professor Sharpwood said. Then he took an audible breath in, and sighed a breath out, and Jack realised he was probably pushing things too far. What would Sharpwood do? Not let him see the Tsar? Jack was screwed either way, he could feel it in the coldness of his whole body. Not the natural cold he’d gotten used to, but the feeling that his temperature was dropping slowly but inexorably with each step he took further into the bowels of the Palace.

Jack gulped, clenched his staff so tight that his hand iced to it. He thought of what Anton had just told him. He thought of Pitch telling him not to give the Tsar a chance to hurt him.

Yeah, great advice, Pitch. How on Lune am I supposed to make that a reality? Just magically be safe somehow?

He looked behind him and saw ice crystals glittering on the steps. He couldn’t keep control of it
now. It spread out from his shoes with every step.

More steps, Jack counted five more staircases down. Here, the black marble was filled with more gold, and occasionally sparkled like it had mica inside of it. It reminded him of galaxies and stars in space, if every star and galaxy was gold. It was hard to appreciate its beauty, and yet Jack found himself staring at the tiles as they passed, tempted to touch his fingers to them.

They were far enough away from Pitch, from anything that looked like the normalcy of the Palace, that Jack felt like he was being led to his doom.

Though the spiralling staircases continued on, Sharpwood led Jack to a pair of double doors on the next landing. These were gilt in gold, though it was marred badly on one side, a pair of what looked like claw marks having gouged straight into the harder metal beneath. Jack frowned to see it. But before he could look closer, the doors swung open, and Sharpwood gestured for Jack to walk past him into the space ahead.

Here, the floor to ceiling on either side were filled with row after row of shelves, filled with an endless number of books. Each had the same brown spine, each unmarked. At the end of the room, a huge fireplace, and four large high-backed chairs. Jack could make out the hand resting on one of the armrests, the back of the chair hiding the rest of the person – the Tsar, Jack presumed – from view.

‘Your Imperial Majesty, Jack Frost is here.’

‘Thank you, Sharpwood,’ the Tsar said. His fingers tapped on the armrest a few times. ‘Wait outside.’

‘Of course.’

Jack watched as Sharpwood closed the double doors. Dread clawed up sudden in the back of his throat, the temptation to shout that he not be left alone in this strange room, underground. Instead, the dull boom of the doors closing.

Jack stood there, heart fluttering. He didn’t know what to do.

‘Well, Jack?’ the Tsar said. ‘Are you going to make me stand? Or will you come over here?’

There were two shallow steps down and Jack’s footsteps were muffled on carpet. His mouth was dry. He’d just had half a glass of water. He stared up at the books. They went up so high. It was like Toothiana’s Tower.

The fireplace was even larger than Jack had thought, from across the long room. Its heat was stifling. He walked past the Tsar’s chair, then turned to look at him.

The Tsar was looking down, his other hand resting on a page of one of those books with the brown leather binding. After a moment, he licked the tip of his index finger and then turned the page precisely.

‘Sit down, Jack,’ the Tsar said, without looking up.

Jack backed into a chair and sat, feeling dwarfed by the high back. The fabric was warm. The wood was warm. The fire crackled.

The tension ratcheted in Jack’s spine as the Tsar just kept on reading. He had to grit his teeth together to stop himself from saying something, breaking the silence. He didn’t want to look at the
fire. So he looked at the other chairs and wondered why there were four. Who sat down here?

A creak of leather as the Tsar closed the book. Jack turned back to see that the Tsar was looking at him. Studying him. Jack looked back, unsure what to say. He remembered being told he was a terrible liar. Hadn’t Bunnymund told him that? Jack had no capacity to act casual. He would have been scared even before he’d spoken to Anton. He would have been scared even before he’d spoken to Pitch on the ship.

The Tsar smiled at him, then rested his elbow on the armrest, and rested his chin in the palm of his hand. He didn’t look away from Jack.

‘Hello, Jack,’ the Tsar said, smile widening for a moment. ‘I’m going to cut to the chase, I think. Judging by that expression on your face, I think Pitch has been in your ear for some time.’

‘No,’ Jack said. ‘I mean- There was a mission, and-’

‘And my brooch, nowhere to be seen. Didn’t want to wear my mark, Jack? Are you not proud of Lune? Of what she’s achieved?’

‘I- No, it’s only- The Golden Warriors prize solidarity and I didn’t…I’m new. I didn’t want them to think I was special or- So I just left it behind. And then I forgot.’

‘You forgot,’ the Tsar said, looking down at the armrest and tracing a pattern on it with his other hand. ‘You do seem forgetful. Perhaps if I ordered you to wear it, you would?’

Going against the Tsar’s word was treason. Disagreeing with a direct order - Jack thought of Flitmouse and found himself nodding. Of course he’d wear it.

‘Yes,’ Jack said.

‘I suppose we can’t exactly help how dense you are,’ the Tsar said, sighing. ‘Stupid Jack, not understanding that when I gave it to you, it was a kind of order. Or have you decided who you’d rather follow? The sober Kozmotis, ready for battle in a moment. Did you like your first mission, Jack? Was it everything you’d hoped for?’

‘It was…different,’ Jack said. He couldn’t lie outright. So maybe he could just twist things a bit. Instead of saying that it had made him question everything, he could change some of the words.

‘Was it now?’ the Tsar said. He didn’t look up.

‘I didn’t know there were assignments to just get…to do what we did.’

‘To loot,’ the Tsar said, smiling again. ‘To steal. To go off-world and fill our coffers from time to time? What did you think we’d do with the wealth once we’d conquered a planet, Jack? What do you actually think happens in a war?’

*Did you kill Fyodor? Did you have him killed?*

‘I thought we fought the Darkness,’ Jack said. ‘I thought, because it keeps getting closer, that would be the priority. Pitch said we’re not supposed to defeat it. Not properly. And I don’t- I don’t think he’s lying.’

Jack bit his own tongue, wished he could press himself back into the chair, but it was too large. He was perched at the edge of it, feet hardly touching the ground. The Tsar’s hair gleamed in the firelight. His lips were smooth. His lashes long. Even now, he was beautiful. He looked framed by
the chair, the light.

‘What if I told you he wasn’t?’ the Tsar said. ‘Don’t tell me you’re so stupid you haven’t figured some of this out on your own.’

What had felt rebellious turned to something else in his stomach. The Tsar looked up, narrowed his eyes.

‘But you said-’

‘What, exactly, did I say?’ the Tsar said.

Jack’s voice dried up, and he shook his head and looked away.

‘My, my, Jack, you’re almost reminding me of him. Has he taken you under his wing? It’s broken you know.’

Jack couldn’t look back, not knowing why he’d been summoned, not knowing the point of this, not knowing what to say. A part of him still, still wanted the Tsar to look upon him with approval, still wanted to win his trust, wanted to make it okay. If he could just say the right things, if he could just appease him enough, it would be okay.

‘If we defeat the Darkness completely, people will recolonise those planets. They will take back their wealth. Lune’s power will not stand.’

Somehow, he’d expected the Tsar to never admit it. The things he’d suspected, the things that Pitch had implied…and the Tsar had said it all blandly. Explained it like Jack was a stupid child, and he was a teacher.

‘But the Darkness… I mean the whole point of my existence is to-’

‘It’s to work for the good of Lune,’ the Tsar said mildly. ‘And that is whatever I decree it to be. Is it not?’

‘It is,’ Jack said.

‘Do you know what you are, Jack?’ the Tsar said, sounding bored.

*Jack Frost? A Golden Warrior? What you made me?*

‘You’re a cowardly dog,’ the Tsar said. ‘Shaking, needing someone to follow. Whatever backbone you have, meaningless when it comes down to it. But not even loyal. What dog is worth keeping in the pack, if it runs to someone else, the moment it thinks better food might be elsewhere? And have I not kept you clothed? And fed? And cared for? All your life?’

Jack’s eyes stung, and the hand not holding his staff clenched into a fist.

‘You have,’ Jack said, voice soft.

‘This new owner of yours, you know that he cannot truly care for you. His last dog died, you see. And you are nothing to him, as a result. He may go through the motions of trying to make you feel special, but he doesn’t really, does he?’

Jack pressed his fist into his stomach. He felt ill.

‘You don’t think I’m special either,’ Jack said finally. He didn’t sound like himself.
‘I think you could be,’ the Tsar said. ‘I want, so badly, for you to be special. The mountain chose you. You possess an incredible power. But I think your mettle just hasn’t been proven enough. Perhaps if you could prove yourself to me, do something for me, I might believe in you.’

‘What do you want me-’

‘I don’t know yet,’ the Tsar said airily. ‘I’ll think of something.’

‘I know that it takes me a while to understand things,’ Jack said. He’d not intended to talk about any of this. But now that he was here, he couldn’t help it. His whole body was overwarm, he felt confused, he felt like he had a fever. ‘I know that.’

‘You’re an Overland,’ the Tsar said.

‘Right?’ Jack said, laughing weakly, leaning his staff against the chair, so he could fold his other hand towards himself.

*Did you kill Fyodor?*

Jack stilled when he heard shifting, and looked up to see the Tsar standing, looking at Jack with his head tilted. He placed the book down on his chair and walked over, and Jack had to lock his muscles to stay in place, to not flinch, to not draw away.

He trembled when the Tsar placed fingers on his shoulder.

‘Jack,’ the Tsar said, his voice soft. ‘What poisonous things has he been telling you? You’re not yourself. You’ve never been like this around me. Have I ever given you a chance to doubt me? Do you know how many I reach out to? How many I give my mark to? Do you think…that meant nothing to me?’

Every word a rope and Jack was torn with them. They chafed across him, twisted up what he was sure was right. Was this what Pitch would call the Tsar being dangerous? Or was this something else? The Tsar had been nice to him, had given him the brooch, had been keeping an eye on him.

*Did he kill Fyodor?*

‘Jack,’ the Tsar whispered, his face closer. It was meant to be comforting, but for a moment Jack thought he might throw up from fear. ‘Why are you making things this hard for yourself? Don’t you want it to be easier? Don’t you ache for that?’

By the Light, he did.

He was embarrassing himself. His eyes wouldn’t stop stinging. He wanted to cover his face, but it was too late to hide from the Tsar. All Jack could do was keep his breathing silent, but it was shallow, fast.

Fingertips stroked gently down his shoulder. Between the Tsar’s closeness, and the fireplace, he was feeling suffocated. But there was comfort in it too, frightening though it was.

‘I’ve given you so much,’ the Tsar said, sounding sad. ‘You’ve rejected everything.’

‘No,’ Jack said, ‘I-’

‘From the beginning,’ the Tsar said. ‘You haven’t even tried to be loyal to me. It must be hard meeting me in the flesh, realising that I am not larger than life, I am just…myself. You hurt my
heart, Jack. Even despite that, I thought that everything I’d done for you would matter.’

‘It does,’ Jack said. ‘It does matter. It does.’

‘Then can you not rise above your cowardice for more than two seconds, and show your loyalty to me?’

‘Yes,’ Jack said. ‘Of course. Whatever you want.’

I bet Fyodor never did this. I bet he never caved. I bet he was rebellious and staunch and stood by his beliefs. Instead of you, crying like a child. Idiot.

‘I think,’ the Tsar said, pushing closer, ‘you should wear that brooch, Jack.’

‘Okay,’ Jack said.

‘I’ll know what it means if you don’t.’

‘Pitch won’t like it.’

‘Then you must do what your owner likes,’ the Tsar said, fingers tightening on Jack’s shoulder. ‘Mustn’t you? Ignore me. What am I? Only the Tsar.’

The dizziness he felt before hadn’t really left. Jack made a faint sound, almost wanted to push the Tsar away. He couldn’t see a way out of any of this. It wasn’t a game he could play, it was a net tightening around him. He couldn’t argue with a net. He couldn’t wear the brooch. It wasn’t even about Pitch.

‘I’ve been loyal,’ Jack whispered.

‘Only while it’s been easy,’ the Tsar said.

Didn’t you just say it could be easier?

A headache pressed from the top of his spine all the way to the front of his forehead.

‘I don’t think I can wear the brooch,’ Jack said.

That grip on his shoulder softened, and the Tsar crouched before Jack, looking up at him. It was so jarring, so wrong, that Jack almost wanted to slide off the chair and lie down on the floor, to make sure that he wasn’t looking down upon the Tsar of Lune. He rubbed his forehead absently, surprised to find it wet. That fireplace was relentless. How did the Tsar wear all that clothing and not mind?

‘Do you know?’ the Tsar said, looking concerned. ‘Do you know how much you disappoint me?’

Jack was pretty sure he knew.

‘You don’t understand,’ the Tsar said, withdrawing a vial filled with what looked like golden oil out of his pocket. He tossed it onto Jack’s lap as he stood. ‘You don’t understand what I could make you do, if I really wanted to.’

Jack remembered a dark room, filled with black marble. He remembered Pitch talking to him in a hypnotic voice, and the vial that he said Jack could choose to take. He’d given Jack the choice. And here, it looked like the same liquid. Jack felt revolted to see it so close to him, and picked it up in thumb and forefinger, holding it off his legs, staring. Truth serum? Something else? Was it the
same? Pitch would say: ‘It will make you more suggestible.’

The Tsar walked over to the fireplace and stood before the large grate, staring into the flames. His hair gleamed. His hands were held behind his back, as though he were standing in the at ease position.

‘Soon, Jack, I’ll trust my better judgement, and I’ll not give you a choice in the matter of following me. Until then, you have some things you’d best think about. As closely and attentively as possible.’

‘Drugs,’ Jack said.

‘There’s really only very few ways to deal with a disloyal cur,’ the Tsar said, voice clear despite the flames. ‘Consider then, how lucky you are, that I look upon you with favour, that I have personally done so much for you.’

‘I’m not working against you,’ Jack said, hearing his voice break. ‘You don’t need to drug me. I’m just- The brooch, the way the Warriors would look at me, and you want Pitch to train me and you know he doesn’t want me to wear it.’

The Tsar turned to Jack abruptly, and there was a slight smile at the corners of his mouth, as though he was pleased with something Jack had said. Jack backtracked over his words quickly, trying to think of what he’d said, how he’d damned himself.

‘The Warriors have always belonged to Pitch,’ the Tsar said.

Jack felt like he was stuck back in another part of the conversation. The words, ‘There’s really only very few ways to deal with a disloyal cur.’ They echoed in his head. One of those ways was drugs, and the Tsar clearly thought it was the kindest option. A numbness swam through him, stealing the edge of his feelings away. He wasn’t calm. It was as though he’d retreated to a small, dark ball inside of himself. A cold, hidden place.

He killed Fyodor.

‘But he’s like a shadow of his former self,’ Jack said, calmer than before. ‘Pitch, I mean. I remember- growing up, seeing him in some of the picture books, or hearing him speak his speeches. He’s changed since then. He wasn’t what I expected. None of this was.’

The Tsar raised his eyebrows, and then walked back to his armchair, picked up the book and sat down, before lowering the book on his lap. Jack looked down at the vial.

‘It’s yours,’ the Tsar said. ‘Contemplate it. Consider it a meditative tool.’

The numbness was spreading. When he was a child in isolation, when they’d turned out the lights, he’d done it then too. He’d become small, like a tiny pebble. Everything turned from a huge, chaotic spill into one very tight knot. But now, too, the fire was too close, and he felt like he was burning. One whole side of his body prickedled from it.

He had a vision of himself just throwing up right here, in front of the Tsar. Because his night really couldn’t get much worse at this point, but he’d find a way and that seemed to be it. He swallowed and felt his throat click with dryness.

‘Jack,’ the Tsar said, crossing one leg over the other, ‘do you know what you’d be, if you chose not to be my friend? Do you know what you would become?’
‘An enemy,’ Jack said.

‘This is not a world where people are offered my friendship and turn it down. I’ve given you so many chances. So many. And I’ll be honest, I’m angry now. You’ve spoiled it. What we could’ve had. Even at this point, you could try so hard but you’ve already shown me what you really are. I’m not sure you could ever undo it. But I would still appreciate an attempt. Am I not even worth you trying?’

‘You’ll never like me.’ The words were like ash in Jack’s throat.

The Tsar laughed gently. ‘Ah, Jack. Give me one reason why I should?’

It was tempting then, to just drink down the vial of liquid. To turn his mind into waves of genuine calm, to let the Tsar tell him what to think and feel, to disappear from whatever this cold, horrid place was. Anton had said giving up wasn’t the answer, but why not? What else was there? Jack tucked the vial into his pocket. A meditative tool. He almost thought he had his answer now. If there was somewhere or someone to runaway to, he’d do it. But there was nowhere, and the Guardians of Lune had saved Jamie, but they weren’t going to save him.

‘You’re dismissed,’ the Tsar said, opening the book and not looking up. ‘I think I’ve given you a lot to think about.’

‘Yeah,’ Jack said. He stood, the room swaying around him. He blinked, trying to make the doubled images come together. He reached for his staff, hand slipping on the handle. He was sweating.

‘Um. Good evening, Your Imperial- Your… Gavril.’

‘I think we should go back to the formal address for now,’ the Tsar said.

It was almost a relief. The sting of it like a background jab, dull compared to everything else that had been said.

‘Your Imperial Majesty,’ Jack said, bowing his head forward.

He walked slowly through the long room, each limb not quite coordinated. It must have been the fireplace more than anything. He felt for the key in his other pocket. What would he do if he couldn’t get back into Pitch’s room? Could he go back to Fyodor’s? The idea tasted bad.

Professor Sharpwood was waiting for him. As Jack mounted the first step, his heart lurched and he looked upwards, realising how many more spiralling staircases there were. Sharpwood walked up ahead, and Jack knew he wouldn’t stop. He tried to summon a wind to at least cool him down, but his powers didn’t respond at all. Not even a lazy, limp breeze came.

The walk back to Pitch’s rooms was a monumental effort. He knew Sharpwood could hear his rough, uneven breathing. Once, Jack had to stop and lean against the wall, staring at his hand and waiting for frost to cover it. Instead, it only glistened with wetness. It felt like the fire was still there, burning him. Professor Sharpwood walked ahead, and about thirty steps on, he paused and looked over his shoulder, blankness on his face.

He didn’t look like he’d ever cared about anything, or anyone.

Jack staggered forwards and thought about how he’d made it up the mountain, drugged out of his mind, and this was just a single meeting by a fireplace, and he was fine.

*
Jack waited until Professor Sharpwood was gone before trying the key. Of course it didn’t work. It wouldn’t even fit into the keyhole. It was like something repelled it outright. Then, after a pause, he knocked on the main door into Pitch’s rooms. He looked down, sagged against his staff, feeling like he’d not cooled down at all since living that room. He hadn’t realised it had been so constantly warm. Had he been exposed to fire like this, since the initiation? He liked fireplaces, he liked warm showers, but…that fireplace had been taller than he was, fed with so much wood, the flames leaping.

The door flew open, and Jack almost moaned in relief. He knew it was well past midnight.

‘Where in the-’ A pause. And then the sharp, piercing volume crashed into a quiet: ‘By the Light.’

Jack walked past Pitch. He slid the vial out of his pocket with shaking fingers and dropped it in the vicinity of the coffee table that he knew was nearby. It clinked onto the table, and then it rolled off onto the rug. His stomach felt delicate. If he touched it, brushed his hand against it, he’d throw up.

‘Jack?’

‘I’m not…’ Jack’s voice didn’t sound right. One syllable sailed drunkenly into another. What had he even been about to say? ‘I don’t think…’

‘Jack.’

‘I think…’ He heard footsteps rushing towards him as his staff fell out of his hands and he collapsed to his knees. ‘I think I gave him a chance to hurt me after all.’

Pitch probably had something to say to that, but Jack didn’t hear it. The world turned first grey, and then a solid, sweeping black.

*

Jack woke on a bed, the lights in his new room dim. There was a cool cloth on his forehead, and he reached out and touched it, feeling lumps of ice inside. His limbs were weak. He wished that he couldn’t remember any of what had happened, but it was all there, waiting for him. The fireplace, the Tsar, the vial of liquid, even Anton’s voice, and the sureness deep down that the Tsar’s idea of what might be good for Lune, might not actually be good for Jack after all.

Warm fingers brushed over Jack’s face, and he flinched and then turned sharply, half-expecting it to be the Tsar. Instead, Pitch leaning over the bed in a frozen position, hand hovering above Jack’s face.

Jack stared up at him, and he thought that Pitch looked worried, but that Pitch’s worry didn’t necessarily mean anything about Jack. That after Fyodor, maybe Pitch didn’t feel anything properly anymore. Jack waivered between sadness and pity on Pitch’s behalf, but it fell flat beneath the tumult of other emotions swirling inside of him.

‘You’re awake,’ Pitch said.

‘Uh huh.’

‘Are you feeling any better?’

‘I think,’ Jack said. ‘Yeah. Not great.’

‘What did he do?’
‘Nothing,’ Jack said, laughing. His voice wasn’t right. He tried to push himself up, but Pitch shook his head and then placed a hand on Jack’s shoulder to keep him in place.

The Tsar had touched his shoulder too.

‘Jack, what did he do?’ Pitch said. It was quiet, but it was an order. That was almost good. Orders were easy to follow in the military. He could just obey, and pretend if he said anything wrong, it wasn’t his fault.

‘There was a huge fireplace?’ Jack said. ‘It was huge. I got too warm straight away, and then, I dunno. I didn’t realise- I must’ve been- For an hour maybe. I should’ve just walked somewhere else in the room. But I didn’t think about it. Didn’t feel like I could.’

‘Where were you?’

‘I dunno. Some place underground. Staircases. The fireplace was at least as tall as you.’

Jack rubbed at his face absently. Then he touched the cloth again. Had Pitch put that there? Had Pitch picked him up and carried him into his bedroom? Jack was on the blankets, his shoes had been removed, he shifted his feet and realised there was a wet, cold towel beneath them too. It felt good.

‘The Tsar is adept at passive methods of torture,’ Pitch said finally.

‘That wasn’t torture,’ Jack said. ‘It was just a fireplace. He didn’t have a problem with it.’

‘He knew you’d have a problem with it,’ Pitch said. The scraping of a chair, and then Jack assumed Pitch was sitting by his bed. ‘And the vial you have. He gave it to you? Did he tell you to take it?’

‘He told me…’ Jack’s forehead furrowed. ‘It was my best option, basically. Out of all the other things he could do. That I need to…make up my mind soon. He wasn’t nice to me today. But- I get it. I haven’t treated him very well.’

‘What do you mean by that?’ Pitch said. His voice was soothing now, and Jack thought of the induction room, and sighed. Should he talk about it? Did it matter?

‘He kept trying to be my friend,’ Jack said. ‘And I kept throwing it back in his face.’

‘That…’ A pause. ‘That doesn’t sound like you.’

‘Yeah, I tried, it just didn’t… Whatever. I don’t know.’

He could hear the Tsar laughing, saying, ‘Give me one reason why I should.’ Jack couldn’t think of a single reason for the Tsar to like him. Not one.

‘I know about Fyodor,’ Jack said. ‘Anton told me.’

‘Anton should keep his mouth shut,’ Pitch said, that modulated tone of voice vanishing into something far more bitter.

‘And as I was sitting there, next to the Tsar… I can see how he might be the kind of person to be able to do that. He told me that he doesn’t really want the Darkness defeated on those planets, because then people might recolonise them. Honestly he doesn’t like me at all. He asked me to think of like one reason for him to like me, and I couldn’t think of one.’

Jack looked up at the ceiling, and then closed his eyes again. He was tired. His body was cooling
down slowly. It was like threads of chill finding their way up his legs, down his neck, but it wasn’t fast enough for him to feel quite right yet. He reached out with his hands to feel for a cool section of blanket, and was surprised to feel the staff on his other side. It had been placed on the bed with him. He hesitated. It was a surprisingly thoughtful gesture. He kept his palm on it. The metal was good beneath his skin.

‘Not your inner strength?’ Pitch said after a long silence. ‘Your endurance?’

‘Oh, right, yeah, I don’t think that exists, really. I mean, I can’t even pick a side. And he knows that. He knows me better than any of you do. He gets it.’

‘Gets what?’

‘I’m really tired,’ Jack said, his breath steadying. He didn’t really care about the meeting. Tomorrow…tomorrow he had to figure some things out.

If he wasn’t doing this for the Tsar, who was he doing it for? Not Pitch, that wasn’t enough. Pitch was almost like a ghost, going through the motions of a life that used to mean a great deal more than him. Jack didn’t want to live like that, but he wasn’t sure what his other options were. It had to mean something, being a Warrior. It had to. And if it didn’t mean anything at all, then there had to be something else.

Even those thoughts were unwanted. They all meant thinking about things, trying to find a way through something even as he felt the invisible collar around his neck, the leash pulled taut and the Tsar holding the other end, waiting for him.

‘Jack, what sort of things does he say to you?’

‘The truth,’ Jack said, smiling a little. ‘He tells me the truth.’

An unsteady breath. For a moment Jack thought it was his own, but then he realised it was Pitch. He turned his head and opened his eyes, surprised at the way Pitch was looking at him. He didn’t know what the expression was, but he couldn’t look away.

‘Please talk to me,’ Pitch said.

‘I told him I wouldn’t wear the brooch,’ Jack said. Pitch’s eyes widened, and Jack couldn’t help smiling a little. ‘I just can’t. Should I make myself? Is that the smart thing to do? He knows how stupid I am.’

Pitch’s eyes narrowed, he opened his mouth, and then looked away and shook his head sharply. Maybe Pitch knew how stupid Jack was too.

‘North said I’d still love him,’ Jack said, feeling faint. ‘I’d still love him anyway, even once he broke my heart, and I thought differently about it all. It’s weird, huh? But he’s the Tsar. I just want him to be happy with me.’

‘Jack, how long has he been telling you that you’re stupid?’ Pitch said, turning back. Jack thought Pitch was focusing on the wrong part of the conversation. But he didn’t understand how Pitch’s mind worked at all.

‘I dunno. Maybe since the beginning. I mean back then, he said I could rise above it. But he knows I can’t now.’

Pitch stood, an abrupt movement, and Jack watched as he stalked towards the fireplace. This one
thankfully unlit. It might take him a few days to like fireplaces again.

‘I should have seen this sooner,’ Pitch said. But his voice was quiet and Jack closed his eyes and felt himself drifting. At least the worst of the nausea was gone. His stomach was no longer churning. Even the headache which had been constant, was sort of fading in and out. There were occasional flashes of pain, but nothing he couldn’t sleep through.

‘I’m sorry,’ Jack said, licking his lips and wishing he had some water. He was too tired to sit up and drink it, so it would have to wait. ‘I’m sorry about Fyodor.’

He thought Pitch would say something to that, but Jack didn’t hear anything as he fell asleep.
Jack made a faint sound when the cloth on his forehead was replaced with a new, colder one. His eyelashes fluttered. His whole body ached. For a moment he just lay there, sensing that it was morning, and wondering if he’d caught a cold or virus or something. He felt like he could have easily been back in the creche, except that as soon as he realised he wasn’t there anymore, the events of the previous evening flooded up through the cracks of his thoughts.

His hands clenched, and his breathing tripped over itself. The Tsar. That conversation. The fireplace.

Jack opened his eyes, pushed himself up, and then made a sound of shock when a strong hand at his shoulder forced him back down to the bed.

Pitch was standing over him, frowning.

‘What?’ Jack said.

‘You’re recovering from heatstroke,’ Pitch said, and then when Jack didn’t move, he sat at a chair that he must have brought into the room. Jack hadn’t seen it before. It was morning and Pitch was still there? Had he been there all night? Why didn’t he just send for a Priest? Or why-?

‘Can’t you just…zoom me with your Light or something?’

Pitch lifted an eyebrow, his lips quirked into something that seemed like a real smile, and not a smirk for once.

‘Zoom you?’

‘Yeah,’ Jack said, and then coughed a few times, then groaned and knuckled his fist into his head. The pounding was there constantly, but when he coughed, it became sharp, stabbing pains from the back of his neck all the way into the backs of his eyes.

Heatstroke. He’d never heard of it. From a fireplace? Jack shuddered, feeling like his thoughts were still waking up. Eventually he just rested his palm on the cold cloth. His temperature wasn’t as warm as the day before. He knew that much. He’d recovered some, at least.

‘The Light is not…an inexhaustible healing device. There are some things it cannot touch. It is better suited to acute injury.’

‘Oh,’ Jack said. He knew that, didn’t he? That was why shadow sickness had to be treated over time, and the Light didn’t just kill it off. His breathing was slightly ragged. ‘Heatstroke? What’s that?’
‘Dizziness, headaches, weakness, confusion. Unconsciousness.’

‘Oh, so like, last night.’

‘Mm,’ Pitch said. ‘I have some water for you as well. You’ll need to rehydrate.’

‘Oh, cool. Thanks. So…that’s it then? You’ll be on your way?’

Silence. Jack turned his head sideways and peeked at Pitch, who had his head tilted, and was staring back.

‘Because you’re all busy and stuff?’ Jack added.

‘I’ve cleared my schedule,’ Pitch said blandly.

‘I’m awake and not unconscious anymore and I feel better. Like, rough, but better. So—’

‘Jack,’ Pitch said, a sternness in his voice that made Jack shiver. Pitch didn’t even raise his voice. Jack couldn’t keep looking at him, and looked back up at the ceiling. He felt too restless. It was hard just lying there. He felt—It was weak, to have been that affected by just talking with the Tsar.

He pushed himself up – reclined enough that the cloth on his forehead stayed in place – and ignored both Pitch’s sound of frustration and the wave of dizziness. At the side of his bed was a jug of water, an already filled glass. Jack reached for the glass, catching the irritation on Pitch’s face as he did. The very first sip of water felt incredible, and Jack drained the rest quickly, almost relieved at how good it was to drink something.

When he went to refill the glass from the carafe, Pitch plucked the glass away and refilled it himself. Then he handed the newly full glass back, and Jack drank half of that and then sighed, closing his eyes in relief. He curled his legs under himself. The water had already helped a lot. The headache was still there, his body still ached, but he felt more alert.

Still, when he tried to ice the glass, nothing happened.

Jack frowned and held it with both hands and tried again.

Nothing.

He felt queasy, already so used to the ice being second nature. Even last night, he’d been making frost on every step down to that weird room where the Tsar had been. It was just natural. It didn’t even come from him, he could make endless amounts of it, so it wasn’t dependent on the water in his body.

‘I can’t make it,’ Jack said. ‘The ice.’

‘It’s temporary,’ Pitch said. ‘I assume so, anyway. When your body temperature rises, you make less. I noticed when I had you over my lap.’

Jack swallowed and put the glass down, refusing to make eye contact. Right. A glance up at Pitch showed that he was smirking again, like usual.

‘I could still make it,’ Jack said finally.

‘Jack, we have to talk about this,’ Pitch said, his voice far more serious, countering whatever petulance had leaked into Jack’s tone. ‘The Tsar tortured you. And you don’t seem to see it that way.’
‘It was a chat,’ Jack said, anger rousing inside of him, irritation snapping at the inside of his skin like beetles. ‘It was a chat, and there was a fireplace, and—’

‘Jack, what would it mean if I were right, and it was torture? What would that mean to you?’

‘Did you just wait here to talk to me about this? Because—’

‘I did,’ Pitch said. ‘I know how practiced you are at evasion. I’m certain there were things you revealed last night that you would not have normally, had you not been at the end of your endurance.’

What in the Light did I reveal last night?

Jack tried to remember. He’d apologised about Fyodor. He’d said there was a fireplace. He’d said… What exactly had he said?

‘I’m not talking to you about this,’ Jack said, very sure that this was something he didn’t ever want to talk to anyone about. Already, shame pressed sticky fingers into the back of his throat, making him feel ill. The idea of sharing the content of any of his talks with the Tsar with Pitch or anyone else- Why would he ever want to do that to himself? Reveal how bad he was at talking to the Tsar? How many things he’d messed up? How much the Tsar couldn’t stand him?

‘I’m going to just sit here until the etiquette tutors come,’ Jack said finally, folding his arms.

‘They’re not coming today,’ Pitch replied equably.

‘Then, I’m just going to—’

‘How long has the Tsar been telling you that you’re stupid?’

Jack stared at Pitch and then looked down at the blanket. He’d just…not talk. Pitch couldn’t make him do it. There’s no way Pitch could out-stubborn him, Jack had proven that before.

‘Was it since the beginning?’ Pitch said quietly. ‘It wouldn’t surprise me—’

‘It wasn’t,’ Jack said, annoyed. Pitch had the wrong idea. The Tsar had given him so many chances before things had changed. ‘It wasn’t like that. Not since the beginning.’

‘Last night you said it was.’

‘Last night I had heatstroke,’ Jack said. ‘I didn’t know what I was saying.’

‘Ah,’ Pitch said, like he was seeing clearly. But he still didn’t move. Jack was tempted to slide off the other side of the bed and just leave the room. At the same time, there was something about being here, the cloth on his forehead, and he didn’t quite want to leave. It was hard to believe this was even happening. Why hadn’t Pitch turfed him to a Priest?

He probably doesn’t trust them. Or maybe he doesn’t want them to know how sick I get around fireplaces.

The silence built, and Jack grit his teeth, then reached out and drank some more water. He placed the glass down and looked around the room, at anything except Pitch. It was like pressure just waiting at the side of him, and Jack wanted to slip away from it, even yield to it. Pitch already knew how stupid Jack could be. So why would it even matter if he answered the question? It wasn’t like Pitch was going to care one way or another. Jack couldn’t exactly damage Pitch’s
opinion of him. Pitch hardly cared about anyone.

Jack shifted, then held the cloth in place. A piece of ice slid out of it, and Jack caught it, and absently placed it in his mouth, crunching down. It was refreshing, just on the edge of too cold.

‘He first said it at the after-party,’ Jack said begrudgingly. ‘After the Parade.’

‘Why?’ Pitch said.

‘Because I’m me?’ Jack said, glaring at Pitch, looking away again. ‘I- He introduced me to the nobles.’

‘He separated us from each other – you had asked me to accompany you beforehand, remember?’ Pitch added, and Jack shrugged. He’d forgotten about that part. He remembered Pitch being with him, and then Pitch had needed to go do something else, and later Anton had reminded Jack more than once that the Tsar had separated them. It just didn’t seem to be connected to how the Tsar has behaved around Jack, so he hadn’t really thought about it. ‘Continue.’

‘sSure,’ Jack said, almost mocking. ‘No, well, I… I was overwhelmed and they kept giving me things to drink? The Tsar had told me at the last meeting that he found those things hard sometimes. That maybe we had that in common? So I kind of pulled him aside and told him – I mean he told me to come to him if I was upset. So I told him I was upset. And then he didn’t get it? So I said it was- He asked if I was unhappy with him doing so much for me, and I just- Look, I know how this sounds, but maybe if I tell you, you’ll shut up about it.’

The darkness in him was shifting quietly, stirring. Maybe he’d need to use his ice at some point. Get out and let it loose. He had no idea how. Could he even leave these rooms again? The idea of seeing Sharpwood somewhere, dispassionately waiting for him, filled him with dread.

‘So, you know, I just reminded the Tsar that he said we had it in common? This- Being overwhelmed in situations like that. He was so disappointed. He called me stupid then. He said I needed to be stronger. And then he told me not to be weak when I apologised. And then he told me to keep drinking. That’s it. Big deal, huh?’

Jack looked up, feeling vaguely triumphant. Even looking over it himself, he felt nothing but anger at himself for it. The way that whole night had panned out. And then he’d gone and lost control of himself around Bunnymund. The Tsar was right. He was weak.

Pitch looked considering.

‘Well?’ Jack said. ‘We done?’

Pitch’s lips curled up and he looked almost dangerous for a moment. Looked as he had in the other room, when he’d reminded Jack that he could treat Pitch with disrespect almost anywhere else, except there. And Jack bit the inside of his lip and tried not to think about the tangle of feelings that inspired. He almost wanted to be in that room, and Pitch doing what he did, so Jack didn’t have to think for a while. Jack understood it better now, he could walk away faster, he wouldn’t expect to stay.

‘Have you noticed that your darkness is harder to control, after you’ve had a meeting with the Tsar?’ Pitch said gently.

‘Honestly, I think it’s mostly to do with you being the way you are,’ Jack said.

‘How did the Tsar find you? Last night? Did someone meet you at Anton’s?’
‘What?’ Jack said, thrown for a second. Maybe Pitch wasn’t saying anything about what Jack had said about the Tsar at the after-party because he didn’t think there was anything to say. ‘Oh. No. Um, I was nearly back before curfew and then Sharpwood was there like…your door was in sight.’

‘You are almost certainly being tailed,’ Pitch said, sighing. ‘And I am being lied to. I was told that the Tsar would be absent.’

‘So I’m like stuck here forever,’ Jack said morosely. ‘I need to get out. If I don’t- I mean when my ice comes back, if I don’t use it, I’m going to do something really dumb in here.’

‘I’ve been thinking about that too,’ Pitch said. ‘This is not tenable. There are a few rooms I have that possess windows that can be opened, and you can fly, yes? It may be the only way. But you’re barred from the rest of the Palace for now. If you wish to meet with Eva or Anton, or anyone else here, they must meet you here.’

Jack pulled the cloth off his forehead, opened it, and began picking up the ice cubes and crunching on them.

A moment later, Pitch stood and walked over to the cold, dark fireplace and brought back a bucket. He set it on the bed by Jack, and Jack stared at all the ice in it. Without thinking, he plunged his left hand into it and winced. Too cold. His temperature was really nowhere near back to normal yet, even if he felt better. Still, it was a relief to feel the cold inching up his arm.

‘I’ll put you in an ice bath if there’s ever a next time,’ Pitch said, sitting down, and Jack almost smiled.

‘The thing about Gavril,’ Pitch said, leaning back in the chair and apparently ignoring the way Jack tensed, ‘is that he’s a chameleon. He talks to different people in different ways. It’s put me at a disadvantage here, because of my ignorance. Most of my life I’ve been around very privileged people, and I’ve been a very privileged person. As nobility, and a member of the Kozmotis lineage – who have ever been confidantes of the Tsar or Tsarina – I am used to Gavril talking with me in certain ways. If he wishes to harm me, he’ll remove funding to the military, or he’ll send us on an assignment that will ensure deaths, or he will attack those I love. But when he speaks to me, he doesn’t call me weak, or stupid, or – I imagine – some of the other things he’s called you.’

‘Because you’re not those things,’ Jack said, exasperated.

‘Nor are you.’

Jack felt his face twist, something ugly crossing his face. He looked at his staff. He almost picked it up. Could feel violence writhing inside of him. He didn’t want to hear any of this. Even as he knew that the Tsar would probably kill him one day because he was weak and disloyal, even as he knew that he couldn’t fight for the Tsar anymore.

It wasn’t because the Tsar was wrong about him, it was because the Tsar had threatened his life; Jack had a survival instinct. That’s all it was.

‘You don’t know what I am,’ Jack said. ‘You read my file- You’ve- You talk all the time about how I treat you with disrespect!’

‘And so you do,’ Pitch said benignly. ‘But treating me with disrespect does not mean you are not intelligent, or that you are not strong. Sometimes you can be foolish or naïve, as I can be ignorant or cynical. That doesn’t define my worth as a person. It doesn’t define yours.’

‘Philosophy,’ Jack said, laughing. ‘Great. Okay, how about you teach me what does define your
worth, now that you’ve basically given up on life and happiness, and had so many things you love taken away from you.’

Pitch’s eyes flashed, and Jack almost wanted it. After the stress of the night before, it’d be good to yell at someone. Though he was alarmed to listen to himself. His headache grew in strength. He dragged his hand from the ice bucket and pressed it against his face. He felt feverish.

‘Sorry,’ Jack added.

‘It’s not inaccurate,’ Pitch said after a while. ‘And it’s an effective way to deflect. But it’s not going to work this morning.’

‘I don’t know what you want from me.’

‘I want to know how the Tsar has been tormenting you.’

‘By the Light, he hasn’t been,’ Jack groaned. ‘He doesn’t. Okay? I mean last night he did, sure. But otherwise-’

‘Are you lying to me? Or yourself?’

Jack’s sentences fell apart, and he closed his eyes. His heart raced.

‘I don’t see why it matters,’ Jack said finally, his voice muted.

‘It matters to me,’ Pitch said.

‘So you can, what-? Tell me how ridiculous it all is? That it’s getting to me at all?’

‘That what is?’ Pitch said.

Jack slammed his hands down onto the blankets and glared at Pitch, and hated that Pitch wasn’t looking angry or anything. He was just watching. He seemed so calm. There was a slight frown at the corners of his mouth, but it didn’t seem angry. Jack thought of the Tsar telling him how much Pitch didn’t really care, couldn’t really care. But if Pitch didn’t care at all, then why would he stay like this? It didn’t make sense.

He ran a hand through his hair and it was spiked with sweat that had dried in overnight. He needed a shower.

‘Would it help if I got it out of the way, and mocked you now?’ Pitch said. ‘If I told you it was ridiculous now, and that it’s silly that it’s getting to you at all, would you actually tell me then? Or are you done deflecting?’

Jack hissed and Pitch leaned forwards in his chair.

‘I think you have every reason to be afraid of the Tsar, not least because he has threatened you. I think you have no allies when it comes to him, and I am trying to find out the best way to be one.’

‘An ally,’ Jack said dubiously.

‘Would you prefer to talk to Anton? Eva?’

‘No,’ Jack snapped, and then winced. Anton would give him that look, which was like pity but… not. And Eva had offered to be there for him, but he couldn’t snap at her. He couldn’t lash out when he felt trapped. He didn’t know how to talk about this while managing those sharp bursts of
‘North? Bunnymund?’

‘The Disciplinarian? Are you serious?’

‘North, then,’ Pitch said, eyebrows drawing together.

‘No!’

‘Would you like to know how terrifically happy Gavril would be with this situation?’ Pitch said, smiling a little. ‘How pleased he’d be? Not with you, precisely. But with the fact that he has you right where he wants you? You won’t tell anyone a thing about those meetings, which means he can become more and more monstrous and you’ll say it was just a fireplace – the largest in the Palace, as far as I know. Your anatomy is no longer normal, and he knew that, and he tortured you. He possibly went to his advisors to double check the best methods to go about it. Sharpwood likely knew what he was walking you into. Gavril may have tried something else before now, that you haven’t told anyone about, because you are so desperate to protect him, and protect people from seeing whatever he’s told you that you are.’

The truth, Jack thought bitterly. I’m hiding the truth from you all.

‘It works so deeply in his favour,’ Pitch said. ‘He tried to sway you completely to his side, but for whatever reason – likely your strength of spirit – it didn’t work. So, instead, he’s escalated against you to see what we’ll do. Or what you’ll do. If you don’t wear the brooch, I doubt he will actually resort to murder. Not immediately. I know. He’ll escalate again, and again, and again, until you have no choice but to break. And where you break, and around whom – he will watch to see who you feel safe around. And if it is Anton or Eva, he will put them under higher surveillance. And if it is North or Bunnymund or the others, he will put them under higher surveillance too. Anything you do, at this point, gives him something.’

Jack’s breathing was so shallow he wasn’t even sure he was breathing.

‘The one thing that doesn’t give him something,’ Pitch said, voice measured, ‘is you talking to me about this. Or talking to someone, even if it isn’t me. Because he doesn’t think you’re capable of that, and he knows you’re terrified. I think he believes that you wouldn’t open up to me, for whatever reason, and lo, how surprising then that you miraculously do not want to after seeing him. I don’t know what he tells you about me, Jack, I’m sure some of it is true. It’s his greatest weapon, taking fragments of the truth, and turning them to a rusted blade to gut you with. Either with words, or actions.’

‘He’s the Tsar,’ Jack said.

‘In which case, he can act with total impunity. Has he used that against you? Have you tried to argue with him? Only for him to say, ‘but I am the Tsar,’ and leave you at a complete halt in the conversation?’

Jack’s breathing hitched. He remembered:

Ignore me. What am I? Only the Tsar.

‘He is the Tsar,’ Pitch persisted, eyes heated through, almost molten. ‘He wields total power. He doesn’t even have to try to crush any one of us. He doesn’t try. He waves his hand casually, and it happens. It breaks people, and it kills them. To him a fly would be harder to kill. I thought I knew all of his methods, but I don’t. I think he treats those who come from the lowest creches differently
to how he treats nobles or those from the better creches, and I’d not considered it before. Not properly.’

‘He just says things,’ Jack said finally, his throat dry. ‘He doesn’t do anything.’

‘He is the Tsar,’ Pitch said, ‘and his words are enough. He has held a position of godlike authority over you since before you were born, and he is the reason you believe you are alive and possess privilege today. He would only need to look at you as though he is disappointed, to hurt you. But I suspect he has been doing far more than that.’

‘No,’ Jack said, shaking his head, looking away. ‘I’m not that- It’s not that easy to-

*It’s not that easy to break me.*

Jack felt a wrench inside of him, exposing something ugly. What if it was? Jack felt small then. Pitch talked about his strength of spirit, and Jack felt like no matter what he said, he’d reveal something awful about himself.

Pitch stood, then walked over to the bed and sat upon it. The mattress shifted, and Jack looked at the creases in Pitch’s robe. He was still wearing his clothing from the day before, but the robe looked new. Pitch folded his hands into his lap and looked across the room.

‘If I talk to you about it, it still gives him something,’ Jack said. Pitch looked at him, and Jack shrugged. ‘You’ll realise how pathetic I am. And whatever you did because of that, it would probably drive me back in his direction anyway.’

‘I think…no,’ Pitch said. ‘That word you’re so fond of today.’

‘You can’t know,’ Jack said.

‘I do. I am frustrated with myself that I haven’t seen this before. He began whatever he meant to do with you from the first. And I haven’t been much at all in place of that. Because – as I’ve gathered you’ve now deduced – of Fyodor.’

‘Yeah, no offence, but I don’t really see you being much at all in place of that even if you do know,’ Jack said wearily.

‘Perhaps,’ Pitch said. ‘But I am not going to think you’re pathetic. And I am not going to do whatever you’re imagining I might do. I will be angry on your behalf, as I already am, and I will be thinking of ways to keep you out of his path, as I have already been doing.’

‘Then if you’re already doing it, I don’t actually need to talk to you at all, do I?’ Jack said, lifting his eyebrows in what he hoped was the most aggravating expression ever.

Pitch stared back steadily, and Jack held his gaze for a minute, then looked away again, mouth tense.

‘You don’t think,’ Pitch said, his voice soft, ‘that the way you’re reacting – the way you’ve been reacting to me – is a sign that things are not all right?’

‘First he tells me that you’re turning me against him. And then you tell me that he’s turning me against you. Maybe I just think the both of you aren’t…’ Jack’s eyes went wide at the half-formed thought in his head, unable to say the words.

‘Maybe you don’t really want to be for either of us?’ Pitch said. ‘That almost looked like
autonomy.’

Jack’s breathing caught again, and he hunched in on himself, afraid of his own mind. He was so far beyond treasonous, he couldn’t even see the line anymore. Even if he tried to go back to how he used to be, he’d always know this about himself. He could never unmake it.

‘It’s all right, Jack,’ Pitch said.

‘Really?’ Jack said. ‘Because none of this seems like it’s okay.’

‘Then I’ll rephrase. Whatever you’re thinking, or feeling, it’s all right to think or feel those things.’

The flash of anger was too huge, too big to contain. And Pitch was right there. In a moment Jack was up on his knees, gasping at the spike of dizziness in his own head, even as he grabbed the collar of Pitch’s shirt and bared his teeth at him.

‘Stop manipulating me.’

He sagged, hanging onto Pitch’s collar, glaring at him. If he’d had his ice, he wasn’t sure what he would have done. His vision spun before righting itself. Pitch’s eyes were bright, and Jack couldn’t look away from them. He expected to be pushed away. He wasn’t.

‘Do you wish you could say that to him?’ Pitch said gently. ‘Or are you too afraid to even wish for it?’

‘I can’t…’ Jack closed his eyes, trying to think. ‘You’re doing this on purpose.’

‘I only want to know what he’s been saying to you,’ Pitch said. ‘And you won’t tell me. You’re so good at protecting him. Is he proud of you?’

‘Stop it,’ Jack whispered. ‘Of course he’s not.’

Jack slid back onto his heels, not making eye contact. His head hurt, and he felt warm. He took his staff and crawled off the other side of the bed slowly, expecting Pitch to stop him.

Pitch didn’t say a thing. Not as Jack slowly crossed the room. Not when Jack placed his hand on the doorknob. Jack didn’t even know where he’d go. He just wanted to have a shower and sleep the nightmare off. He kept his hand on the cool of the metal, and stared down at it.

‘He hates me,’ Jack said, lips quirking up to hear himself say it aloud. But it was true, wasn’t it? He remembered the Tsar saying, ‘You’ve spoiled it. What we could’ve had.’ He’d felt so sick with fear, the whole evening. It wasn’t torture, but Pitch was right. The words hurt too.

‘Why would he hate you?’ Pitch said from across the room.

‘I think you should lie down,’ Pitch said.
A nod. Jack agreed. It wasn’t the reaction he was expecting. Walking back over to the bed seemed like a bit of a task, so he’d just wait for a second, get some energy back. The Tsar had said Pitch’s wing was broken, had said Pitch couldn’t really care anymore. Jack knew it, hated it, wondered if he should have talked to someone else. Somehow, he couldn’t imagine it.

‘Jack, come lie down again,’ Pitch said, his voice softer than before. ‘You’re in no state to leave.’

‘Yeah,’ Jack said.

‘If you don’t come over in ten seconds, I will fetch you and make-’

‘Nope,’ Jack said, pushing away from the door and walking back to the bed, getting onto it and placing his hand back into the ice bucket. It tilted alarmingly, some of the ice spilled, but the cold was worth it. After a few seconds it was too cold, and he withdrew his hand and curled up on a bed made damp from a night of cool cloths and ice compresses. ‘So you got what you wanted and you can go now.’

‘Not yet, I think,’ Pitch said. Jack risked looking at him, but couldn’t read the expression on his face. He didn’t look mad, anyway. ‘Can I just also say how very far off the mark you are, regarding what I want?’

‘Sure, sure,’ Jack said.

‘Honestly. If it wasn’t for the fact that you’ve been perfectly adequate at demonising me yourself, I’d think the Tsar was a dab hand at it.’

‘Yeah, because you’ve never done anything wrong. Like putting me on the bottom of the callout sheet, or hypnotising me that time, springing Bunnymund on me and getting him to do whatever forsaken magic that was or…the other million things you do. Whatever.’

A long silence, and Pitch sighed.

‘I’ve not given you much cause to trust me, have I?’

Jack thought about it. Turned over everything. Pitch had done things Jack hadn’t liked, but they always seemed to make sense. Jack knew why he’d been put at the bottom of the callout sheet, and he knew it made sense an Overland would go last; especially one that Crossholt hated. He knew why Pitch hypnotised him, and he remembered how Pitch didn’t make him take that vial of liquid; he could have. Even the situation with Bunnymund, Jack had hated it, but since then he’d gotten a better grasp on his darkness, and it had been one of the more effective things Pitch had done.

Then there were the other things Jack tried not to think about, because it made him feel complicated things. How Pitch had sat there with him under the blue sky, after Jack had killed Crossholt, and told Jack that he should choose to live. How Pitch had reacted to Jack seeking the darkness off-planet, and how he’d sat with Jack in the isolation room and spoken quietly with him; not angrily, not in condemnation, but in understanding.

Whatever connection he had with Pitch, it wasn’t nice and neat, but it was something Jack had come to have faith in. Pitch said things that scared him sometimes, that shook his understanding of the world; but he apologised for things too, and he’d apparently fetched ice, put it in a cloth, and placed that on Jack’s forehead multiple times in the night, trying to help.

‘I suppose,’ Jack said. ‘You’ve had your reasons for doing what you’ve done.’

‘Be careful with that,’ Pitch said abruptly. ‘The Tsar would say he has his reasons for doing what
he’s done. Jack, people *always* have their reasons, it doesn’t mean they’re doing the right thing by you.’

Jack blinked, surprised to hear that. It was so different to what he was raised with in the creche. The individual never came first, the ego was poison, self-aggrandisement a step closer to inviting the Darkness into your mind. If someone did the wrong thing by you, but it was right for Lune, then it was the right thing. Pitch made it sound like that could never be true.

‘People don’t have to do the right thing by me,’ Jack said, testing it.

‘Not if they have more power than you,’ Pitch said. ‘Ethically, I rather think it’s a different matter.’

‘You know it’s not what they teach in the creches.’

‘It’s not what they teach in most places,’ Pitch agreed. ‘But what they teach on Lune now is different to what they used to teach. And different to what’s taught elsewhere. It buys you an awful lot of leeway to treat people badly – whole tracts of citizens – if they really believe there is value in being a brick for other people to step on.’

‘How are you not in an Asylum?’ Jack breathed. His eyes were wide. People could be destroyed for saying this stuff.

Pitch rubbed at his face, and then looked at Jack, the shadows under his eyes showing how tired he was.

‘Who’s to say I haven’t been in the past? The Tsar…needs me. At least, so far, possibly not for much longer. So he hasn’t put me in an Asylum for a long time. He called you a cur? I am his dog too, also disloyal. He doesn’t call me such to my face, but the rumours spread a long time ago. Whatever he needs. The guard dog of Lune.’

A long time ago, when Bunnymund and North had visited him, Bunnymund had said to Pitch:

‘Come on, North, let’s go. Can’t get much done while the guard dog is here.’

‘Why do you let the Tsar treat you like that?’ Jack said, his voice breaking.

‘Why do you?’ Pitch said, his face grave.

Jack couldn’t think of what to say. Couldn’t bring himself to say the words.

*Because I don’t have a choice.*

It was unbearable. His life was hallmarked by moments of losing all his power, his ability to do anything. He’d lost Pippa, because of that. Because he didn’t have the skill, the knowledge, anything at all. In a moment, his whole life had fractured, he’d lost everything. He’d been determined to never be placed in that position again.

‘So,’ Pitch said, looking down. ‘You see?’

‘I don’t think I know how to keep trying if there’s nothing to like, try for. Not Lune. Not the Tsar. Maybe not you.’

‘Definitely not me,’ Pitch said, with a wry smile.

‘I can’t give up like you have,’ Jack said. He felt awful for saying it, but Pitch didn’t even look mad. He’d just accepted it.
'Then don’t,’ Pitch said, ‘and find something you think is worth fighting for. If not Lune, or me, or the Tsar. Then what? Me, I think of my daughter, and I think of the Warriors, and I think of my comrades, those who made it, those who did not, and those who are still in Asylums – if there are any left now. Often it’s not enough. Sometimes it is.’

Jack’s knees bent up and he hooked an arm around his shins as he thought about it. He had no living family. Eva meant well, but he wasn’t there yet, wherever he was meant to be. Wherever she wanted him to be. The only family he’d had was Jamie and Pippa.

He became a Golden Warrior for Pippa. He swore to defeat the Darkness for her. He’d heard her voice in the mountain, and he knew somehow – in his heart – that she was the reason he had this miraculous power with winter.

Jamie wasn’t dead, though Jack didn’t think he’d see him again. But he was worth fighting for. Getting through his training with Jamie was the reason he’d made it. The reason he’d come through the other side of all of it.

‘Pippa would’ve hated this world,’ Jack said to himself.

‘Seraphina does.’

‘Does the Tsar ever-? With her? I mean, does he-?’

‘No,’ Pitch said, shaking his head. ‘I’m not naïve enough to think he wouldn’t have her executed if I went far enough against him, but he knows me well enough to know that…he cannot come at me through her. Should she ever tell me of any private meetings they have – and she would, in an instant – I would lay waste to his Palace even if I couldn’t touch him.’

His voice had changed, become ominous, and Jack’s skin prickled at how menacing he sounded. That, there, was the force of will that Jack had admired when he’d seen Pitch in the posters, in the books. When he’d seen his silhouette painted in black and his golden eyes staring forbiddingly at the Darkness. But instead, Pitch could only manage it in a moment, before returning to that weary shell of himself. Jack wondered if the other Warriors could see it. Eva could, Anton could, and Seraphina knew it was there.

Jack wanted to make it easier for all of them somehow. He wanted it to be a world that was good enough for Pippa to live in. He’d thought it was that world.

*By the Light, I don’t want to think about any of this anymore.*

‘When’s the next time we can do stuff in that other room of yours?’ Jack said, the words coming out in a rush.

Pitch looked at him and Jack had the distinct impression that he’d shocked Pitch out of whatever he’d been pondering. Pitch opened his mouth, closed it again, and then his eyebrows lifted.

‘Not until you’re well,’ Pitch said.

‘Seriously? You gave me bruises.’

Shock transformed into smugness, a faint smile. ‘Yes, but you have to be well to earn those bruises.’

Which meant he was stuck with his thoughts until then. And an inability to make his ice. Not-quite-imprisoned for his own safety in Pitch’s home. Disloyal to the Tsar and living in the Tsar’s
Palace. Jack grasped at his leg and stared ahead, wondering if he preferred Crossholt and the Barracks and Jamie to this.

Of course he did.

‘Never thought I’d miss Crossholt,’ Jack said.

A pause, and then Pitch laughed. The sound soft, even sad. Jack froze when Pitch reached out and rested his hand over Jack’s, where it gripped at his leg. Jack met his face and saw not the menacing, heroic Royal Admiral from the posters, but someone who Jack was only now coming to understand. Maybe.

‘Jack, I’m not sure you’ll believe me – I’m not sure you can, but we should have done better by you.’

‘What? No, I-’

‘You don’t have to argue with me,’ Pitch said, stroking his fingers along the back of Jack’s hand, his touch a warmth that didn’t feel bad. ‘I apologise, that I couldn’t stop the Tsar from seeing you. I apologise that I may not be able to do it again.’

‘The Tsar would call that weakness,’ Jack said, even as he craved what Pitch was saying. It was a balm inside of him. Maybe he couldn’t believe that they should have done better by him. But the apology did something, unlocked something he hadn’t realised had been tense in him the entire time.

‘Then we are both dreadfully good at being disloyal, now, aren’t we?’ Pitch said, squeezing the back of Jack’s hand and letting go. ‘A person who doesn’t let you apologise to at least attempt to make something right, is someone who never wants you to feel right around him.’

Pitch stood, looking around the room before his eyes settled on Jack once more.

‘You need a shower. And food. I’ll fetch something. I’d like some time to divine who your spies may be, and if they’re any of the people who see you regularly, like your tutors. It’s no matter. I think some bland for you in the meantime. Perhaps some eggs on toast? Could you stomach it?’

‘Why wouldn’t I?’ Jack said, though he didn’t feel all that hungry.

‘You may not remember, but you tried to vomit up a great deal of nothing, last night. And again, a few hours later.’

‘What?’ Jack didn’t remember that at all.

‘Heatstroke, Jack. It could have – were it more severe – killed you.’

‘What?’ Jack said, shocked. ‘Are you serious?’

‘Yes,’ Pitch said, ‘do I look like someone who would joke about this? I am not one for hyperbole. As it is, he was merely making his point, and he’s made it. Now, eggs on toast?’

Jack stared at him, speechless. Pitch nodded to himself and walked towards the door, opening it and closing it behind him.

Jack stretched his legs out. The blankets on his bed were rumpled, the pillows were damp. There was a wrinkled wet towel at the foot and a smaller cloth that had held the ice cubes he’d eaten. The
ice in the bucket was slowly melting.

Carefully, he slid off the bed and walked to the bathroom, turning on the light and wincing after the natural dimness of the main room. He was shocked at how worn he looked. There were dark circles beneath his eyes, and his lips were dry and chapped. He’d become paler after the initiation in the mountain, but now his skin looked white-grey and clammy. His hair was a mess.

He drank several handfuls of water directly out of the tap, and then stripped off, stepping beneath the spray of the shower. Only now that Pitch had gone, could Jack admit that what the Tsar had done wasn’t just ‘a talk.’ He still didn’t think of it as torture, but it was…something.

Jack forced himself to focus on washing, and repeatedly tried to make frost against the tiles, until a space behind his eyes ached sharply. He’d just have to wait for it come back, but he hoped it wouldn’t take too long. He didn’t feel safe without it.
It was two days before Jack was able to make his ice again, and then another half day before it felt natural. In that time, Seraphina visited him frequently. Apparently her idea of how to look after someone who was, in her words, ‘very sick,’ was to use all of Jack’s free time for teaching him.

He was improving though. He was beginning to remember some of the mnemonics used to remember specific types of alphabet, and learning that certain lines and symbols would automatically mean certain sounds. He was amazed at Seraphina’s competence. She was like a little scholar, and it was clear that for all that she shirked her formal classes, she loved to learn, and she absorbed knowledge readily. She was an impatient, confusing teacher, but Jack would go over the primers after she’d left and find that she wasn’t incorrect.

The conversation he’d had with Pitch kept turning over in his head. For once, it wasn’t as terrible as he feared, to think about his future. He didn’t know why that was, because the future looked pretty grim. The Tsar was probably going to try and kill him or imprison him at some point, unless Jack could somehow become useful to him, like Pitch had. That didn’t seem great either, Jack could see now how it wore someone down, to live under someone else’s thumb. Pitch wasn’t someone who could do whatever he wanted, whenever he wanted. For all he spoke of his privilege, Jack saw more and more how Pitch answered to people, and how he had no choice but to play the role of arrogant Royal Admiral.

I suppose the arrogant part comes easy to him, though.

Jack found himself thinking of Flitmouse and the resistance. He thought of the posters he’d seen and he wondered how many people in the City of Lune saw them and thought about them seriously. Family members couldn’t often talk to each other about rebellion, because if one privately spoke of dissent in a house, it only took another family member to report them for the entire family, and their older generation, and their younger generation, to be imprisoned. The person who spoke out against them would keep the house and get a stipend for loyalty to Lune.

But what if there were families out there who were managing it? Flitmouse had given the impression that there was more dissent against the Tsar than anyone had realised. Jack knew that for himself, everyone in his immediate circle didn’t like the Tsar, and didn’t seem all that loyal to him either. From Anton and Eva, who had gone out of their way to shelter Jack from him in the beginning, to Pitch and Seraphina, to North and Bunnymund and even Toothiana, who was clearly some kind of double agent.

That conversation with Pitch had given him something he didn’t know he needed; an ability to accept his own seditious mind. At least, sometimes.
At other times it was too much to live with his own thoughts, and he trained himself as hard as he could, and wished for the distraction of Pitch’s other room.

*

As though Pitch knew that Jack needed the distraction, on the fifth day after his visit with the Tsar, Pitch interrupted him while training and said:

‘Shower, and then meet me in the scene room.’

‘Scene room? Oh. Oh. Scenes?’

‘I thought about calling it the room where all the whips are kept but you’d likely find that offputting,’ Pitch said casually, and closed the door behind him.

Jack glared after him, even as his heart began beating with excitement.

_Play it cool, Jack. Just play it cool. You’ve got this._

So he showered quickly, thoroughly, and hurriedly got dressed. Even putting his shoes on – though he didn’t know why, it seemed like maybe Pitch would expect that?

Whatever Pitch called it, Jack was just going to think of it as the room.

He told himself to get a hold of his breathing as he walked towards it, fidgeting with his clothing and his own hands, but he knew that was a lost cause.

*

When he entered, Pitch said without preamble:

‘What do you want today?’

‘Um,’ Jack said, lost for words even as he closed and locked the door behind him. ‘Sex, maybe. I don’t know. What do you mean?’

‘Do you want to not think? Do you want pain? Do you want to serve? Pick one.’

That was easy. It was almost too easy.

‘I don’t want to think,’ Jack said. Afterwards, he wondered if he also wanted to serve. What did that even mean? Like give Pitch food and stuff? Serve dinner? No, it probably meant something far different in here.

Pitch only smiled at him, as though Jack had said nothing surprising.

Jack had thought he’d be tipped over Pitch’s thighs. He’d expected a few different things. But what he didn’t expect was:

‘I want to see your scars, from the disciplinary action you’ve had in the past.’

Jack stared at him, and Pitch stared back.

‘I don’t want you to see them,’ Jack said.

‘I know,’ Pitch said.
Jack’s palms broke into a cold sweat and he rubbed them against his thighs nervously, and then looked around the room. The whips and canes were hidden away today, behind a black screen. In the corner of his eye he could see the bench Pitch spanked him on. Just being in here made him feel a bit twitchy.

Now he was acutely aware of the scars on his back too.

‘Why?’ Jack said, stalling. ‘Do you have to see them?’

‘I want to,’ Pitch said.

Jack said nothing. He had retorts, but he couldn’t say them. He knew that all of his reasons wouldn’t touch Pitch at all. He didn’t think it was an ultimatum. Pitch hadn’t said he’d withhold anything from Jack if he didn’t show him, but Jack also got the sense that Pitch would be disappointed if he didn’t bare his back and shoulders. He looked around the room again, and then met Pitch’s eyes, which had softened somewhat.

‘I understand that you were rarely permitted healing,’ Pitch said calmly. ‘I know what to expect.’

Jack’s fingers hovered at the hem of his shirt. He knew that Pitch wouldn’t make him. He knew there was even stuff they could do, and he wouldn’t have to take his shirt off at all. But he also knew that Pitch wanted him to do this, and even though the rest of the time he mostly ignored what Pitch wanted, in this room, he felt obliged.

He met Pitch’s gaze, and then took a breath and unbuttoned his shirt quickly. He wished his fingers would move slower, he wished that he would fumble the buttons, and that Pitch would tell him it didn’t matter.

Instead, he slipped the shirt off his shoulders, took a breath – held it – and then turned around.

There were no words of condemnation, nor anything like a gasp of horror or disgust. But the silence stretched for long enough that Jack was certain he’d done the wrong thing.

‘Look, I’m-’ Jack said.

He lurched forwards when he felt fingertips ghosting over some of the ridges, and was surprised when Pitch let him move away.

‘Oh, Jack,’ Pitch said.

Jack was aware of the unevenness of his skin. He was aware of all of it. In the day to day, he was practiced at tuning out the places where his skin didn’t stretch properly anymore, or the places where the nerves sung a different tune to what they should. Jamie had tried getting creams for the scars from his parents, but Jack hadn’t even liked Jamie to apply them. Hadn’t liked feeling fingers on them.

‘May I touch them?’ Pitch said, and Jack winced. He didn’t want to see Pitch’s expression. He grit his teeth to stop himself from clenching his fists at his side.

_Total mood-killer._

‘Why?’

‘I want to,’ Pitch said. ‘They are a part of you, and I am getting to know you still. They’re clearly important.’
‘They’re not- I don’t like it. It doesn’t feel good.’

‘Mm,’ Pitch said, as though he wasn’t all that surprised. ‘Nerve damage?’

‘I dunno,’ Jack said. Maybe. He didn’t know how that worked.

‘Still,’ Pitch said, in a tone that was somehow gentle and commanding at the same time. ‘I want you to stand here. Going into the future, whatever we do in here, I wish to know those places I can touch, and those I can’t. I can tell some parts of your back and shoulders are better than others from here.’

‘Oh.’ Pitch could tell that? Jack looked over his shoulder, and Pitch’s face was impassive. But his head was tilted, and Jack was coming to associate that with curiosity.

After a minute or so, Jack stepped backwards into Pitch’s reach again, and then couldn’t help but dig his nails into his palms.

Pitch didn’t wait. He placed his palm in the centre of Jack’s lower back, where there were less scars.

‘There shouldn’t be any here at all,’ Pitch said, his voice going dark for the first time. Jack swallowed. ‘Why do you have these?’

‘Um,’ Jack said, and then shook his head. ‘I dunno. I don’t remember… In the beginning, they didn’t always tie me down? And I was not used to just...standing still through it. I think I went up on my tiptoes a few times? They were never happy about it.’

‘No,’ Pitch said, sighing. ‘How old were you? The first time?’

‘Dunno,’ Jack said, staring ahead and trying not to think about it. ‘They didn’t strike me like this in the creche though.’

‘But in other ways…?’ Pitch said.

‘Nothing that scarred.’

‘Ah,’ Pitch said, his fingers curling a little on Jack’s back. ‘How long were you in the Barracks before you were first written up?’

‘Like two months,’ Jack said, laughing a little. Pitch’s hand was warm. It didn’t feel threatening at all. Jack almost wished Pitch could keep his hand there and not move it up, not feel how much worse it got. Maybe he could handle it, someone stroking the dip of his lower back like that. But it still wasn’t hot. Jack didn’t know what it was.

‘How many strikes, the first time?’

‘Like thirty,’ Jack said, closing his eyes. He didn’t like to think about it. He’d embarrassed himself.

‘I’m sorry?’ Pitch said, incredulous. ‘Why?’

‘I dunno,’ Jack said. ‘Talking back, probably. I dunno what it said on my write up sheet. Don’t you know? You’ve read my file.’

‘There aren’t nearly enough write ups to justify- And… Jack, Crossholt lied in the paperwork. The notes always said he sent you for one or five strikes. At most, ten.’
Jack took a breath to laugh, but couldn’t. Was that funny? Pitch’s fingertips were inching upwards, and even though his touch was clinical, Jack still felt like it was foreboding. A whisper of numbness on the left, and Jack grunted when Pitch hit the cluster of sensation above it. Not quite pain, definitely not pleasure. His body didn’t know what it was trying to tell him, only that it was on the edge of too much, and he knew Pitch was hardly touching him at all.

‘Nerve damage,’ Pitch said to himself. ‘Lack of sensation too?’

‘Sometimes,’ Jack said. ‘Some areas. It’s not so bad.’

‘I beg to differ,’ Pitch said, smoothing his thumbs from the centre of Jack’s spine outwards. ‘Bunnymund did all of this?’

‘What? No,’ Jack said. ‘No, he didn’t do most of it, actually. Like, you present at the tower and whoever is there is like…the person who does it. Bunnymund always gets mad at me. The others just – there’s one who likes it, and he hits harder. The rest just do it and get it done.’

‘Mad at you?’ Pitch said.

‘Uh huh.’ Pitch’s fingers kept moving upwards, outwards, more thorough than Jack had ever touched his own back. An entire centimetre of skin could hold flashes of numbness, of heat, of cold, of nothing at all. Jack’s toes curled, and he scraped his foot along the floor to try and balance it out. He was becoming top heavy with sensation.

‘When you shower? Sleep? How does it affect you then?’

‘I just don’t think about it,’ Jack said. ‘I really just don’t think about it, unless you know, this. Someone sees them. No one’s touched them like this before.’

‘Why does Bunnymund get mad at you?’

‘He just does,’ Jack said.

A breath in, and a sigh of exasperation. That was so familiar that Jack almost smiled through the tension he was feeling.

‘Jack, would you try to give me a proper answer?’

‘Well, I dunno. He gets mad. He says I’m a troublemaker. Sometimes he’s asked me if I want to report Crossholt. But he mostly just acts pisssed. He gets mad at me for never letting the wounds heal, but how in the Light am I supposed to- I mean, I just… Crossholt never gave me much time to heal. You know, I didn’t go back and lie down for a few days. I think Bunnymund just thinks I get up and run around for fun? And Bunnymund doesn’t pull his strikes either. But he’s- I mean he gets it done, he makes sure I have something to bite into, and he ties me up when he needs to. I mean I can stand through a few, without needing that. But sometimes- You know how it is, right? I mean you hit people.’

Pitch’s hands paused, then they dropped to Jack’s lower back, where the sensations mostly felt like hands on skin. Jack sighed out about half his tension and still hurt from how much his muscles were locked up.

‘Jack, what I do to people is not what happens to you,’ Pitch said. ‘I know they seem the same, because I have some of the same tools. But the people I share that with both want it, and can make it stop at any point.’
‘You can’t talk me into it,’ Jack said abruptly.

‘I wouldn’t dare,’ Pitch said, his thumbs smoothing small circles on either side of Jack’s spine. ‘But do you understand that there is a difference? You know that what happened between us in this room the first time, isn’t like you being sent to the Disciplinarian?’

‘What?’ Jack said, blinking. ‘Yeah. Of course.’

Jack didn’t really understand how anyone could want to be hit with whips or canes or anything designed to break the skin open. It was possible to get a write-up that meant execution by corporal punishment, those tools were so brutal. Crossholt once threatened it. He didn’t threaten it in front of others, so Jack knew he wasn’t exactly serious, but...it had stayed with him.

‘If any of us had any inkling that this is what Crossholt would have become...’ Pitch said, and then made a sound almost like a growl. ‘This should never have happened to you.’

‘Yeah, but-’

‘It should have never happened,’ Pitch said. ‘No disclaimers, no caveats, no mutterings about how you talked back or were a troublemaker. And Bunnymund should have reported Crossholt a long time ago. Bunnymund – that coward – is more scared of what the Tsar would do to him should he disobey, to remember anything like personal ethics. This?’ Pitch’s hands moved unerringly to a place that was just a fog of tingling pain when touched. Jack jerked, but held still. After all, it was only really an echo of what had happened to him, and not the thing itself. ‘This is...’

‘A total mood-killer?’ Jack supplied, when Pitch didn’t seem to be able to say anything.

A pause, and Pitch dug his fingers into it, and Jack’s breath strangled in his throat. For some reason he still didn’t step away, and Pitch released the pressure almost immediately. His hand moved down, and he applied that same pressure again to a new place, a sensitive place, and Jack couldn’t tell if it was pain or not, and didn’t move.

‘It’s not a mood-killer for me,’ Pitch said. ‘Look at how obedient you’re being.’

Fingers dug into his lower back and moved horizontally, from one side of his flank to the other, hard enough at his spine that Jack felt himself being pushed forward even as his feet didn’t move.

‘I’m not being obedient,’ Jack said, trying to sound indignant.

‘Aren’t you?’ Pitch said, like he didn’t need Jack to answer.

Jack stared ahead, not able to tell if this was a turn on or not. It was something. He felt his breath tight in his chest, almost dizzy, but it wasn’t the same as the fear or embarrassment he’d first felt, either.

‘Y-You haven’t asked me to do anything,’ Jack said.

‘I asked you to stand here,’ Pitch said, now standing and dragging his palms up Jack’s flanks, and then turning his hands so that his index fingers rested against Jack’s ribs, palms down, forcing Jack’s arms to move out a little, sideways. Pitch finished by curving his hands around Jack’s ribs, sliding his hands up, his thumbs resting against scar tissue, and the four other fingers of each hand slotted neatly into Jack’s armpits, like he could pick him up. It wasn’t ticklish, but Jack was shocked at how strangely intimate it was. No one touched him there either.

‘And I know,’ Pitch continued, ‘that this hurts you.’
He dug his thumbs into scar tissue again, and Jack’s nostrils flared. It did. It seemed like Pitch had not only found the places where it didn’t hurt, but also knew exactly where it would hurt the most.

‘But you stayed still for it,’ Pitch said. ‘I think you have an instinct for this. Novel, isn’t it?’

Pitch pulled until Jack’s naked back was pressed against Pitch’s robe. Okay. Maybe it was hot after all. It hadn’t really been what he thought would happen in this room today, at all, but it was still exhilarating. And scary. He was starting to get the impression that Pitch liked that too. Maybe- He’d said once that he dealt with his darkness in this room. Maybe this was how he did it?

Arms slid around his chest, and then up. One cupping his chin and forcing his head backwards, the other secure around Jack’s throat. Pitch looked down at him. From this angle Jack mostly saw nose and chin and a strong jawbone, but it left him breathless. It made him aware of the height difference between them.

The fingers underneath Jack’s chin slid higher and tapped just below his bottom lip.

‘Open up,’ Pitch said, and Jack blinked, then opened his mouth automatically.

He expected Pitch to slide his fingers in. But it didn’t happen, and Jack felt confused. After about half a minute, he went to close his mouth again, and heard Pitch clicking his tongue like he was disappointed. So Jack carefully let his mouth fall open again and could hear his breathing, it was strained like this, his head so far back, Pitch’s other hand on his throat feeling every breath.

Time passed, and Pitch only kept Jack like that, and Jack thought it was weird, but his heart raced. His scars were still against Pitch’s clothing, and every now and then Pitch stroked the line of Jack’s throat with his thumb. He kept looking down, and Jack kept staring up, and thought that okay, maybe he could see what Pitch meant about Jack being obedient or whatever, but what else was he supposed to do? It wasn’t like he had a manual of the perverted crap Pitch got up to in here.

And he liked it. Being pressed back into Pitch’s body. Feeling Pitch’s body heat – it was nothing like the Tsar’s fireplace, at all. Jack’s body warmed in response, but it felt natural, like feeling decent spring sunshine after a cold spell.

‘Close your mouth,’ Pitch said.

Jack closed it, a little disappointed that Pitch hadn’t moved his fingers inside. He licked at his lips, they’d gone dry.

Pitch’s hand slid back beneath Jack’s chin and kept his head tilted up and back.

‘Now, lose the pants, please,’ Pitch said. ‘I don’t care how you do it, but you will stay with your back to me, and your head like this.’

Jack almost said: ‘but my shoes’ and then thought the better of it. He shifted, uncomfortable, and dug the toe of one shoe into the heel of the other, levering it off, then doing the same with the other; a bit more difficult with his sock slipping against the heel. Getting socks off wasn’t easy either. Pitch’s hands tightened at his head and neck, but it didn’t feel punishing, it was more like Pitch wanted to make sure that Jack wouldn’t change position while he was wriggling about trying to figure out how to do what Pitch wanted. Jack closed his eyes as he moved, trying to concentrate.

He got his shoes and socks off and kicked them out of the way – which was weird, Jack couldn’t even watch himself kicking them away, which meant he missed the left shoe and had to try again. That felt kind of stupid. But Pitch didn’t mock his clumsiness or say a word.
So Jack’s hands drifted down to his pants and he worked at the belt, the fastenings. He dropped the belt to the floor. The pants were looser, but they were a perfect fit, because Flitmouse and his team had been good at their jobs. It meant removing the belt wasn’t enough.

Jack’s shoulders moved instinctively to bend and pull his pants down his thighs, and Pitch’s hands tightened again.

‘Ah,’ Pitch said in warning.

Jack hesitated, went still, thinking. He realised that with the heat against his back, he could also feel Pitch hard through his clothing. Or getting harder. Jack wanted to say that was kind of bizarre, except he was sort of made breathless by what was happening, and he liked what was happening. How did someone even ask for this?

_I want you to just kind of place your hands on or near my face and tell me to do something hard. It’ll be hot._

Yeah, he couldn’t ask for it.

He placed his hand on the upper hem of his pants and pushed down, lengthening his arms and rising on the balls of his feet. He couldn’t even go all the way up, Pitch wouldn’t let him, but it was enough leverage to get his pants halfway down his thighs. Then he realised he’d kind of have to wiggle, or stomp his feet, or some variation of a whole lot of different movements to get his pants off the rest of the way and his cheeks flushed. Okay. Humiliating. Now it was going to be humiliating.

He felt his cock starting to get hard and pressed his head back against Pitch’s chest. This was some weird kind of personal misery, and Pitch could see all of it.

‘Don’t dally,’ Pitch said, and Jack could hear the smile in his voice, and knew Pitch was aware of exactly what situation he’d placed Jack in. ‘I haven’t got all day.’

‘You suck,’ Jack muttered.

‘Mm,’ Pitch said, and Jack didn’t open his eyes to see Pitch smiling, because he knew he was.

So, Jack sucked in a short breath and firstly made sure he couldn’t push his pants down any further with his hands. He couldn’t. Then he tried wiggling. The fabric moved a little, but not much. It also had the – probably not inadvertent – side effect of having his ass move back and forth against Pitch’s upper thighs. Jack was too short for his ass to neatly line up with Pitch’s crotch, but he was pretty sure Pitch was enjoying it anyway.

Then he tried light kicks with one leg after the other. Not _that_ successful. So he tried moving his hips more.

‘I hate these pants,’ Jack exclaimed.

‘I don’t,’ Pitch said.

‘If you wanted me to grind up against you, you could’ve just _asked_ me.’

‘I don’t _ask_ you to do things,’ Pitch said, leaning down and sounding happy. Jack felt a shuddering warmth to think that what they were doing – this ridiculousness – meant that Pitch was enjoying himself. He obviously didn’t enjoy much else. And then his brain short-circuited as Pitch kept talking. ‘In here, you will do what I say. If there’s ever a question in my sentences, if I ever say
please, it’s only because I remember my manners. But make no mistake, you have orders in here, and you will follow them. Be grateful I don’t make you call me Admiral. I’d only then have to punish you for every time you didn’t do it. Now, Jack, remove those pants, if you please. If it’s not done in the next sixty seconds, we’ll call it a day.’

So Jack tried everything he could think of, and Pitch’s hands tightened on his face and neck. After swearing, and moving his hips, and shaking his legs out more roughly, his pants finally – finally – slid all the way down to be kicked away and Jack was naked, breathing unevenly, and his cock was half-hard.

The hand at the underside of his chin stayed in place, but Pitch’s other hand dropped quickly. It first grabbed roughly at Jack’s hip, as though testing his flesh. Then it lowered more, and Jack squeaked when Pitch slid a booted leg between Jack’s thighs and firmly nudged his legs apart. Pitch bent enough that Jack’s back was no longer pressed to Pitch’s robes, enough that he could trail his fingers along the inside of Jack’s thigh and then cup his balls. Jack tensed automatically.

Pitch stroked his fingers over the soft skin, then gripped a little tighter and rolled the testes inside. It was a not-entirely-pleasant swooping sensation, like Jack’s gut was flipping, and he groaned. Pitch did it again, and Jack strained backwards, trying to escape it, even though pressing back into Pitch wasn’t going to help that at all.

By the time Jack was panting, Pitch reached around and grasped Jack’s cock. Pitch just held it, maybe feeling how hard Jack was – because apparently none of that had made Jack go soft – and then moved his hand back to Jack’s balls and slid his fingers behind, and then further still. Jack gasped when he felt a thumb tip pressing against his entrance, with no lube or anything. Just… there.

A faint push, not really enough for Pitch’s thumb to enter him, but enough that Jack felt it. His breath caught.

‘From memory,’ Pitch said idly, as though he did this sort of thing all the time and hardly cared about it, ‘you’d said you’d been fucked – what was it? – oh, that’s right, tons of times.’

‘Maybe…maybe not tons,’ Jack said, and then he bit his lip when Pitch’s finger moved deeper. Just the tip of Pitch’s thumb, but with no lube and his legs spread, Jack was acutely aware of it. Not painful, but he knew it could be, if Pitch was rough about it, if he was cruel.

‘No?’ Pitch said. ‘Not tons of times?’

‘I…’

‘And what about your mouth? How many times has that been used? Lots?’

‘Not lots,’ Jack said, cheeks just about burning. He didn’t know how they could still burn when his temperature was so much lower than it used to be, but apparently they managed.

‘Ever rimmed someone?’ Pitch said, and twisted his thumb so that Jack felt it along all of those sensitive nerves. ‘Or had a tongue here?’

Jack raised his hands to his face.

‘Darkness take me, I gonna die.’

Pitch pressed his lips to the top of Jack’s shoulder, and then a scrape of teeth, a sharp canine dragging across skin and scar tissue both.
‘I’m not some innocent,’ Jack blurted out through his fingers.

‘But I wish you were,’ Pitch said. ‘I wish you were someone who hardly knew about any of this world. Do you know how much I like it? The idea that there’s so much of this you don’t know? But ah, well, if you’ve done everything... This won’t be a problem for you, will it?’

Pitch’s thumb pressed deeper, and it was uncomfortable, inexorable. Jack bit his top lip and wanted to lean away, also somehow wanted Pitch further in him. He rode out the burn of it, the discomfort. He tried to catch his breath, and the fingers underneath his chin were stroking gently, like a reward.

‘The day I fuck you-’

‘Not today?’ Jack said automatically.

For the interruption, Pitch withdrew his thumb and Jack dropped his arms, fingers splayed by his side.

‘Why not today?’ Jack said.

‘So not that obedient,’ Pitch said, sounding mildly disappointed. Jack shook his head, wished he could just start jerking himself off, because something about the whole situation was doing him in. Even just – he could feel where Pitch’s thumb had been. The ghost of it. Some kind of promise.

‘Seriously, when are you-’

A hand over his mouth, index finger bumping up against the underside of Jack’s nose. Jack’s voice muffled and then died. Pitch straightened and pressed his front into Jack’s back, and held him still. Jack felt chastened, but seriously when were they actually going to fuck? Like, in a million years?

‘We’re not doing what you want,’ Pitch said. ‘We’re doing what I want. I’m not fucking you today, and the more you keep questioning me about it, the longer you’ll wait.’

Jack licked the palm against his mouth, and Pitch dropped his lips and nose to the top of Jack’s head. Jack could feel his warm, even breaths. He wasn’t reprimanded, so he kept doing it. Pitch’s fingertips scraped against his cheek, nails sharp.

The hand at his throat – that had been an anchor for a while – moved, and then Jack stiffened when he felt Pitch drag his hand down the scars on Jack’s back, fingers spread.

‘So brave,’ Pitch said quietly, into Jack’s hair. ‘Aren’t you?’

Jack reached up and tried to pull Pitch’s hand away from his mouth.

‘Stop,’ Pitch said.

So Jack stopped. Pitch kept stroking over Jack’s back and shoulders, and Jack sucked in a breath through his nose. By the Light, was he still hard?

‘If you ever need to signal the words shadow or lumen while you can’t speak, you can tap against me or a surface three times.’

Jack reached behind automatically and tapped Pitch’s hip once, without thinking, before halting. Pitch’s hand had stopped somewhere in the middle of Jack’s shoulders. They didn’t move, and Jack tried to sort out his thoughts. Did he need Pitch to stop? Was that it?

No. He just needed Pitch to know the impact of what he was doing. It couldn’t be done casually, it
wasn’t something he could bear as an act of comfort. It wasn’t soothing.

But Pitch must have known that, or he wouldn’t have said what he’d said. So he was doing it on purpose. Jack’s eyelids fluttered and then abruptly he sagged back against Pitch, realising that Pitch somehow got it. He understood something that even Jack didn’t know how to put into words. And maybe he didn’t find the scars gross and disgusting. His touch was warm, caring somehow, but it wasn’t empty, it wasn’t some kind of gestural platitude. It didn’t parse, but a part of Jack craved it, even though he was horrified by it.

‘That’s good, Jack,’ Pitch said softly, though his hand still didn’t move at Jack’s shoulders. Like Jack had signalled to slow down, even though he’d only tapped once. ‘I know this is new. I want you to try and stand straighter for me. Just for a little while.’

Jack did it, and tensed automatically when it meant Pitch could freely move his hand across the scars at Jack’s shoulders. His breathing sped up. From numbness to fire to ice to nothing to pain and then pleasure even, when Pitch rubbed his hand at the base of Jack’s spine. Pitch didn’t move his other hand from Jack’s mouth, but he liked that too, even if he worried about how Pitch could feel all of his breaths.

By the time Pitch stopped, and pressed his front to Jack’s back once more, Jack felt dazed. His eyes had been closed for some time. He knew he was still hard, maybe not as much as before. His breathing was settling. His whole back – from the top of his neck down to his hips – felt like it was tingling. Like all the nerves had tangled with each other, and left a hum in his skin. It was bursts of light behind his eyelids.

‘Good,’ Pitch said from somewhere above him. ‘Very good. We’re moving now. Over here.’

Jack expected Pitch to let him go, but instead Pitch kept his hand over Jack’s mouth, and grasped Jack’s side, directing him towards one of the low lying benches that Jack knew could be used for spanking. It was awkward to walk like this, he had to follow all of Pitch’s steps, had to make sure he paid attention, had to open his eyes.

Instead of being made to lie over Pitch’s thighs, Jack was guided down to lie on his back, body supported by cushioned leather. He watched Pitch quietly, and saw no reason to talk as Pitch lowered Jack’s arms to the moveable armrests at the bench.

‘Ropes, I think,’ Pitch said to himself, and then touched Jack’s arm. ‘I’ll be here in the room, getting some things for this. You can watch, but don’t sit up.’

Jack nodded, and watched as Pitch walked off, and then craned his neck when Pitch moved out of view. He heard drawers opening. Things being shifted around. Eventually he dropped his head back to the leather again. He felt weird. Was it magic? That Pitch somehow could get him to a place where nothing else seemed to matter as much? Or could anyone have done it? Did Jack just need to touch his scars a whole bunch when he was on his own?

Except he knew that when he did that on his own, it just made him squeamish.

‘How did you learn to do this?’ Jack said abruptly, his voice sounding loud in the room.

‘I took a course,’ Pitch deadpanned. ‘Alongside my Warrior training.’

It took a beat for Jack to realise that Pitch was lying.

‘You could actually answer,’ Jack said.
'I’m trying your method,’ Pitch said, ‘of never really answering anything at all. If I just move words around after a question, that’s adequate, isn’t it? It’s what you do.’

‘It’s not,’ Jack mumbled, and then rolled his eyes and wished Pitch would come within kicking distance.

‘If you say so,’ Pitch said, walking back into view. He carried lubricant, and several looped lengths of white rope hung from his forearm. Jack’s eyes widened in alarm. Pitch put everything down, and then picked up one of the loops and measured it out, and then calmly started tying one of Jack’s arms to the armrest. He worked quietly and methodically, and instead of just securing Jack’s wrists, he anchored Jack down at multiple points, loops and loops going around Jack’s forearm until Jack realised he’d not be able to move at all.

‘Uh…’ Jack said.

‘Mm? Something to say?’

‘You’re tying me up.’

‘Am I?’ Pitch said, looking at Jack with a droll expression.

He moved to Jack’s other arm, and Jack felt his breathing speed up. Pitch grinned at him, teeth flashing. Jack tried shifting the bound arm and then found himself moving his legs, because at least he could still move those. He did it more, to compensate for not being able to move his arm.

When both arms were secured, Jack stared wide-eyed up at the ceiling. He gasped when Pitch’s palm dragged roughly over his cock. The sensation was sharp and he gasped, eyes moving to Pitch automatically. Pitch kept moving his hand on Jack’s cock – no lubricant – until Jack was squirming his lower body, and his fingers were curling into leather.

Then Pitch stopped, bent down, picked up what looked like a wedge of foam, and calmly lifted Jack’s hips and slipped it beneath so that his hips were tilted up. Then, another length of rope, and Pitch bent Jack’s leg back into something like a stirrup, and began binding his calf and ankle to the bench.

Jack’s breathing caught in his chest.

‘My arms- Isn’t that enough? Not the legs too.’

‘Yes,’ Pitch said. ‘Legs too.’

‘I…’ Jack swallowed thickly, felt exposed. What if he needed to cough? What if his mouth got too dry and he couldn’t sit up to drink something? What if an emergency happened and Pitch just left him there? What if-

A hand on his thigh, rubbing gently, and Jack dizzily tried to concentrate on it, lifting his head to look down. Pitch was watching him, and then said:

‘You can do this,’ Pitch said. ‘And if you can’t, you have words to make it stop.’

‘You like scaring me,’ Jack said, shoulders trying to shift. Jack couldn’t get any leverage at all.

‘I do,’ Pitch said, as though that was a normal thing. ‘And you like being scared.’

Jack stared at him, wondering if that was true. Did he like it? He thought back to last time. How the
fear had played into it. How he’d been scared of what Pitch could do and embarrassed by it all and how Pitch had somehow made it good. Built the fear up, then dispelled it with pleasure and pain. Jack’s cheeks flushed. Pitch held his gaze for a while longer, and then nodded to himself and turned back to what he was doing, looping the length of rope over and over again, tying Jack down to the bench.

Pitch didn’t stop until all of Jack’s limbs were tied down, and then Jack startled when he felt rope looping over his ribs, just below his nipples. He wouldn’t even be able to arch up. Somehow, he wasn’t as scared as before, but it was still frightening. Having Pitch’s hands on him, even if it was to nudge the ropes into position, or just knuckles or fingers brushing against him as Pitch worked, was anchoring. He felt like he was at the centre of something, and Jack wanted to relax into it, but couldn’t. His hips were raised, his legs were apart and bound, he couldn’t squirm.

Then, Pitch walked off again and came back with a chair, sitting in it. He was on Jack's right, facing his belly, close enough that he could easily reach out and stroke Jack’s hair with one hand, and brush his nipple with the other. Jack gasped, turning his head to look at Pitch.

‘I can do whatever I like to you now,’ Pitch said.

‘Pretty sure...you could do that anyway,’ Jack said. ‘But yeah. Don’t you think this is overkill?’

Pitch smiled as though Jack had said something genuinely funny. His fingers kept playing over Jack’s nipples until they were hard again, and then he left them alone and picked up the lubricant, slicking his fingers with a generous amount. Jack watched and shifted automatically, as though to express some restlessness inside of him.

Except he couldn’t move.

*Screw you, Pitch.*

He probably knew exactly what he’d done.

‘Like can’t I just have an arm free or something?’ Jack said.

‘If you can get it free,’ Pitch said, stroking a slick hand over Jack’s cock until it was wet and everything felt smooth. Jack cried out, and then tried to bite down his sounds, tried to get that feeling balanced through him by squirming, and couldn’t. He pressed his head back into the leather and growled. ‘Oh, Jack. I’m going to take you apart like this. You don’t even know.’

‘When are you going to fuck-’

His words strangled when he felt Pitch’s other hand, also slick, move between his legs. Jack’s hips were arched high enough that Pitch had all the access he wanted. A finger slid into him smoothly, and Jack forgot what he’d been trying to say.

One finger became two, thrusting lazily, matching the pace Pitch set on Jack’s cock. Even with the lubricant, it still burned a little, still rode the edge of too much. Jack wanted to clench his hands into his hair, or cover his face, or move his legs, and he couldn’t do any of it. With no physical outlet, his mouth opened and he panted, his fingers making the leather creak beneath him. His toes curling.

‘Whenever I like,’ Pitch said, as though Jack cared what he was talking about now. Pitch’s fingers were long enough that Jack thought maybe it didn’t matter when Pitch fucked him. This sort of felt the same. ‘Aren’t you meant to be getting an arm free?’
Jack laughed weakly and then groaned when Pitch’s fingers slipped out of him completely. A moment later, they pushed back in, angled upwards, and Jack’s eyes flew open unseeing, a flare of tension knotting into his gut, into his cock, pulling at his balls. Tension became a strong pleasure, a knife’s edge of it, and Jack groaned.

‘Well?’ Pitch said. He repeated the motion, over and over, and Jack moaned and yanked at the ropes without thinking.

He was going to come. And soon. Really soon. Noises caught in the back of his throat, building until he was whimpering, and he opened his mouth to say that he was close, to give some warning, and then Pitch let go of his cock, and removed his fingers from Jack’s ass, and nothing touched Jack but ropes and air and leather.

The shock of it didn’t hit straight away, Jack was too busy falling away from the building, heated pleasure to realise. Then his eyes flew open and he stared at Pitch in outrage, and Pitch watched him calmly, looking completely unaffected.

Jack didn’t know why that hurt, but it did.

He opened his mouth to protest, but the words didn’t come. He shifted, but aside from his hips wiggling a little, nothing happened. His cock was pressed wetly against his pelvis, and Jack gasped then, realised that he’d been so close and now nothing.

A minute passed, another, and then Jack blinked when Pitch stroked the underside of Jack’s cock with the tips of his fingers, massaged his thumb into the slit, traced the glans. Jack shivered, and then closed his eyes when Pitch grasped him again, and started jerking him off again, a slower rhythm this time, but firm.

Fingers slipped into him again, and Jack realised with a vague sense of despair that Pitch could do this for as long as he wanted.

‘Let me go,’ Jack said.

‘No. Like I said, I’m going to take you apart, Jack. I’ll hardly have to do anything at all.’

‘Don’t be mean,’ Jack managed, his voice thick. It felt so good. He was being pushed towards orgasm again, and Jack’s forehead furrowed as he tried to chase the sensation.

‘What if I want to be?’ Pitch said. ‘It’s very nice, watching you react to this. Unable to move. Unable to hide. Tomorrow, when I have to do paperwork, or when I’m speaking to other Warriors, or even when I’m reading, I’ll think about you like this.’

Jack moaned weakly, pressing his hips up into Pitch’s clever fingers. He was close again. It hadn’t taken much at all, and Pitch was moving expertly. This time, Jack was determined to keep his breathing as even as possible. If he didn’t warn Pitch, if he didn’t make any noise – almost impossible with his limbs tied – then maybe he could come anyway, and that’d be that. With the added bonus of beating Pitch at whatever game this was.

So he fought to keep his breathing steady and he fought to pretend it wasn’t getting to him that much and his body ached from fighting his need to move and struggle against the ropes and he was so close. Jack bit down on a gasp, he was close, he just had to hold it together. He just had to- He was going to come and it would be-

Pitch removed his hands again. All contact gone.
‘No,’ Jack said, yanking hard at the ropes. His cock twitched against him, and Jack arched up into air, where there was no friction at all. ‘Fuck you. Put your hands on me again.’

‘Perhaps not obedient at all,’ Pitch said, leaning back in his chair. Then, when Jack was watching, Pitch slid a hand into his own pants and was clearly touching himself. Pitch sighed and his head tipped back, a smile on his face.

Jack bit at his top lip several times, until he could taste the almost-copper tang of raw skin, and then he concentrated hard, pointing his fingers towards Pitch’s chair.

A crackling sound, and ice crawled up Pitch’s legs. Pitch stilled, and then he rocked forwards and stared at Jack like he was impressed.

‘Jack,’ Pitch said, smiling. ‘If you freeze me, who will untie you?’

‘This isn’t as much fun as you think it is,’ Jack said, annoyed. ‘Just- Come on, this isn’t fair.’

‘I’m sorry, when you said you wanted to not think about anything, I didn’t realise that you also meant it to be fair. Are you questioning my methods?’

‘Yes,’ Jack said darkly.

Pitch grinned at him, and Jack wanted to slap the expression off his face. Pitch had gone from amusement to something that was almost gleeful. No one should enjoy tormenting people this much. No one. His cock was still hard. His ass felt empty. This was insane. He couldn’t move. He tried to get free again, knowing it was stupid, unable to stop himself.

When he’d exhausted himself, Pitch – who must have removed his hand from between his own legs – trailed his fingers down Jack’s chest and stomach, and then rubbed his palm against the head of Jack’s cock, where everything was way more sensitive than it had been before. Jack cried out, tried to buck up, and then tried to wriggle away.

Not that it mattered at all. Pitch didn’t stop. With his other hand, he held Jack’s cock still, and continued to calmly but firmly rub his palm over the top of Jack’s cock, until Jack’s neck was arched and he was sucking down breaths. It was too much, he needed Pitch to stop. He thought about saying the word to slow things down, but he wanted to come so badly. He didn’t think this would make him come, but at this rate…maybe it could.

Just as Jack thought he’d scream from it, Pitch shifted so that he was just lazily pumping his hand over Jack’s cock again, fingers of his other hand stroking over Jack’s entrance. Not much, and somehow too much. Jack wanted to swear at Pitch, wanted to come, wanted more. He wanted to kiss Pitch, or press against him, hated feeling so much cool air against his skin.

He almost begged then, but bit down on the words, pressing his tongue to the roof of his mouth.

Pitch slipped his fingers back into Jack’s ass, brushed teasingly over his prostate, and Jack knew the moment he’d been tipped onto the track where he was going to come. This time, he almost dreaded it. He concentrated on it, trying to block Pitch out, even though it was impossible. Perhaps if he just focused on the pleasure of it, even as his lower body hummed with too much stimulation, he’d just come. It felt like it was going to be intense.

There, he felt his balls begin to draw up, and he couldn’t stop the strangled gasp he gave, or the way his hips tilted.

This time, Pitch let go of his cock, but kept his fingers deep inside Jack. And Jack made sounds of
frustration, tried to rock to somehow keep up the stimulation. Nothing. Frustration and pleasure and pain built inside of him, a bubble too thick, too wide. He whined, and then made a long, low noise when something sharp shivered through his entire body. He lay lax then – it wasn’t an orgasm, not even close, it was almost painful. But afterwards he felt like he was floating, couldn’t concentrate.

‘Please,’ Jack said, his voice weak. ‘Please, Pitch.’

‘Oh no,’ Pitch said. ‘Not yet, Jack. Let’s see what we can do with this, hmm?’

Jack shook his head, and then moaned as Pitch started thrusting his fingers back and forth. Later, a hand on his cock again, and Jack tried tilting away from it, knowing what Pitch was going to push him towards. Knowing that he wasn’t going to get to come. Not this time, anyway. It was too much pleasure, it was a strange kind of misery, it was the most attention anyone had ever lavished on him, and Jack unravelled beneath it.

The next time Pitch stopped, Jack’s voice broke, and he didn’t want to beg, but couldn’t help himself. Pitch kept his fingers inside Jack again, rubbed Jack’s chest firmly, pushing him back down into the leather, matching the ache in his body with something at his skin. It helped. Jack sagged back into the bench, the ropes, and the words drifted away. He felt constantly close to coming now, even when Pitch waited minutes.

When Pitch started up again, Jack craved something else, and didn’t know what it was. Not until Pitch stopped, and then Jack spilled words without being quite aware of what they were, until he felt Pitch’s lips upon his and realised that he’d just been saying ‘kiss me’ and ‘please’ over and over.

Pitch’s mouth on his was firm, overwhelming, contained so much heat. Jack moaned brokenly into his mouth, forgetting about the ropes, the transient aches from being tied down for so long. Pitch’s tongue slid along Jack’s, teeth scraped at his bottom lip, and then Pitch rubbed his lips against Jack’s. When he stopped, Jack could tell he hadn’t lifted his head entirely away, and Jack risked opening his eyes, looking blurrily upwards. Stared into gold.

Pitch didn’t sit down again after that, but stayed standing, bent over Jack, watching him as he moved his hand back down and started moving it on Jack’s cock again. Jack thought, somehow, that meant Pitch would let him come this time.

When Pitch didn’t, Jack thought he was breaking apart.

He cried out in rage, and lips caught the sound, Pitch bending down to kiss him again, like he could devour all of Jack’s frustration and need. Jack wanted to beg, but couldn’t coordinate voice and lips at the same time. Kissing seemed more important. He needed something. Some kind of contact. This would have to do. His chest hurt. He couldn’t catch his breath. The corners of his eyes were wet.

All too soon Pitch started again, and Jack sank into it, hating the rise and fall of it, but knowing that if Pitch wanted to do this to him all day – he probably could. Jack would probably die from it. Jack keened weakly and then shuddered down hard into the bench, eyes closed. His next exhale a tired sob.

Except Pitch didn’t stop this time. Jack didn’t quite realise, until he felt himself build past the sensations of before, skyrocketing towards his release, and started gasping over and over again. It was clamping down along his spine, making him dig his feet hard into the leather, spiralling him upwards until he couldn’t think about a single thing and he knew that he’d die if Pitch stopped now.
A threshold crossed, a surety in his balls tightening and the spasming in his chest and Pitch’s hand worked Jack’s cock so firmly it hurt. Tears of relief spilled from Jack’s eyes seconds before the first convulsion of release hit him, stronger than any orgasm he’d experienced in his life.

It went on for ages. Pitch dragging it out, Jack imprisoned by the ropes and still trying to twist against them, unable to contain it in his body. Ice spilled from his hands, crazing in sharp spirals across the ropes, the leather, the ground. It didn’t matter that he felt overheated, his ice poured anyway. Every breath raw in his throat, not caring about the sounds he made. It washed him away from himself.

Then, a floating marked only by aftershocks. Resting in ropes and knowing that he could go completely limp and he wouldn’t fall. Sounds and movements around him, and a cloth wiping him clean of lubricant and come, and Jack was stuck in the reverberations of his own breathing, his mouth open, eyes closed. He hung, suspended in it, and couldn’t even react when he was kissed again. His body didn’t feel like it was his own.

Ropes loosened, being moved away, and his legs were laid flat on the bench again. Then his arms were untied, and a palm rubbed over the place where the ropes had been. Jack didn’t bother moving, he wasn’t sure he could. A cloth at his face, passing over the places where he’d leaked tears, when he’d been too overstimulated to keep them back.

A clean hand in his hair, stroking rhythmically. Jack sighed and then hummed a low note, vaguely aware that Pitch hadn’t come – like last time – and didn’t seem likely to ask for it. One day in the future he was going to see Pitch undone. He’d cause it.

Until then, he drifted down back to himself like a leaf. Opened his eyes and didn’t look at Pitch. Not yet. Just felt those fingers in his hair. He wanted it to last forever.

On realising that, he knew he couldn’t stay. An ache inside of him, spreading like spilled water. He couldn’t bear Pitch helping him up and walking away again. He’d have to get up. Soon. He knew. He’d been thinking of this part too, ever since last time. How to strengthen himself against it, the things he’d tell himself:

*Everyone can do this part. Everyone. Don’t be greedy. Look at what he gave you. Whatever you want afterwards, it’s not going to happen. Be like the other Warriors. Be strong.*

Jack pushed his head back into Pitch’s touch, and took a few more seconds of it. Just a few more.

Then, he pushed himself upright into a sitting position, and sensed Pitch’s shock that he’d done that much. Hands at his lower back and his shoulder, supporting him. Jack felt dizzy, but it was fine.

He was fine, right?

‘Wow,’ Jack said.

‘Good?’ Pitch said. Jack realised he was asking, and Jack looked at him, incredulous.

‘Yeah,’ Jack said, unable to really convey how good it was. Especially now, when he’d have to wade through this part that didn’t feel great at all. He just had to get dressed now. He was already clean, thanks to Pitch.

He slid off the bench, Pitch on the other side of it, and stood, looking around for his clothing.

Jack had been prepared for this moment, even as he was dazed and his chest ached as he wished for something different. He pasted a smile on his face and looked at Pitch without seeing him
properly.

‘This was cool, thanks.’

The air felt cold on his back. He’d get some water. Maybe take another shower. He could do this part. He was like the others that Pitch saw, he could accept all of the things that Pitch gave him, even if this part was hard. He just wasn’t used to it yet.

‘Jack?’ Pitch said, sounding confused. ‘Where are you going?’

‘Oh,’ Jack said, in the process of finding his clothes. ‘Thanks for this? But I’m gonna get out of your hair now. You know how it is.’

Pitch was staring at him, and Jack didn’t want to meet his gaze. Not after what had just happened. He’d ask for something he couldn’t have. He’d probably beg for it. And he already knew Pitch didn’t give into begging. That had been…weirdly hot too.

‘Are you sure?’ Pitch said.

‘Uh huh. Yeah. I’m gonna nap or something. Shower. That was amazing.’

‘Jack, I think you should-’

‘I’m good, hey.’

Jack shoved his legs into his pants and hissed as he buttoned them over his cock. It was soft, and it hurt. Even with all the lubricant, Jack knew he’d be feeling what Pitch had done for a couple of days. By the Light. When Pitch finally fucked him, Jack would probably need to be stretchered out or something, but he could deal with that when it happened. He pulled on his shirt. He toed back into his shoes, feeling the heels crushed beneath his feet as he didn’t put them on properly.

It felt like he was running away, which was stupid.

‘Jack,’ Pitch said, his voice firm, and Jack was suddenly sure that he didn’t want to stick around for whatever was going to happen next. Whatever conversation was coming. Was Pitch mad that Jack hadn’t left already? Could he see that Jack wasn’t comfortable? A reprimand coming maybe?

Yeah, no way. Just get out of here.

‘Thanks,’ Jack said again, walking towards the door. ‘Thanks for this. I know you’re busy.’

He opened the door, closed it behind him, and then walked quickly to his room in case Pitch decided to come after him. Though why would he? Jack closed his own bedroom door behind him and then leaned against it, looking down at his hands, looking at the faint, red rope marks on his arms. Squeezed his eyes shut. It was exhilarating. It was like nothing else he’d ever done in his life and he loved it.

But this part was the worst part, and Jack tipped his head back against the door and caught his breath, and told himself coldly that he just had to suck it up and get used to it.

All he had to do was get used to it.
One morning, after Jack had finished training, going over the primers – Seraphina was away doing something with her mother – and writing out what he knew of the formal alphabet, he was surprised at a knock on the door. He opened it to see Anton carrying a kettle, a teapot, mugs, and the other fixings for making tea, along with a sheepish expression that turned into his regular charismatic grin.

‘Tea?’ Anton said.

So Jack let him in.

Jack sat at the table, watched as Anton set out everything before him in silence. Anton smiled again at Jack, as though checking he was still there, and then carefully poured the water over the curled tea leaves, which released their aroma as the heat touched them. It reminded him so much of Flitmouse that he almost touched his chest from the pain of it.

‘I love brewing tea,’ Anton said quietly. ‘It’s a comforting ritual. As a child, I never liked the taste of it, but I loved to be a part of making it.’

Anton turned the hourglass, briefly smiling up at Jack.

‘Do you like tea now?’ Jack asked.

‘Yes,’ Anton said, looking wistful. ‘It reminds me of someone I care about. But also, my palate adjusted. Or perhaps the love of one thing became the love of another. Love is tricky that way. Tricky, tricky.’

‘Sounds deep,’ Jack said. Anton laughed, sitting and leaning back in the chair, rocking it briefly, before letting it settle on all four legs. He looked around Jack’s room, curious.

‘Who did this room belong to?’ Jack said.

‘Hm? Oh, you mean like Fyodor? No one, I think. It’s always been a guest room. Pitch used to host events here, a long time ago, and it helped to have a place for them to rest their alcohol-numbed minds. Or a convenient place for people to make out, since Pitch is particular about who gets to see his bedroom, or even his scene room – he wouldn’t let anyone in there unsupervised. There are other guest rooms along the corridor for that reason. I always liked this one. The fireplace with the carved horses, I don’t know who he got to make it. North, probably.’

‘North?’ Jack said, shocked.

‘North’s touch is through a lot of this place,’ Anton said, shrugging.

Bunnymund’s too, from what Jack knew of the magic. How close had Pitch been to the Guardians? They’d been treating him like an enemy ever since Jack had known them, and yet…the way Pitch
talked about them…it made him wonder.

Anton ruffled a hand through his hair and poured them both cups in fragile porcelain once the hourglass had run through its sand. The cups were fringed with familiar constellations, the saucers painted with a small compass in the centre.

Jack thought Anton was stunning, with his eyes so bright they were almost unreal. The Light had blessed him. Today, his hair was a pale blue, with deep azure roots, and his thick eyelashes and eyebrows the same azure. He only ever looked about twenty three, but he carried some of his true age with him, despite his playfulness.

‘I heard about the Tsar,’ Anton said, and Jack stiffened. ‘I’m so sorry, Jack. I should have escorted you back.’

‘I walked out,’ Jack said, shocked. ‘I, like, got mad, and then left.’

‘Even so, even so,’ Anton agreed, looking angry at himself. ‘I’m sorry too. I’ve been stressed, we all have. I’ll do better next time.’

‘Was Pitch mad at you?’ Jack said, the thought not having occurred to him until now.

‘He was annoyed,’ Anton said delicately, sipping at his tea. He flashed a quick, warm smile, showing perfect, white teeth. ‘He should have been.’

‘It wasn’t your fault!’ Jack said, anger growing. He brushed bits off ice off his hands. ‘Like, he also-’

‘He’s protective of you,’ Anton said.

‘Because I can’t do anything?’ Jack said bitterly.

Anton stared at him, as though the thought had never entered his head. Mollified, Jack took the teacup by its saucer and began to gently cool it. Not enough to crack the ceramic – he’d learned that the hard way. He just needed a little stream of air circling the base of the cup.

‘Because…he cares for you,’ Anton said. ‘Honestly, if you let him, I think he’d take you into that room of his and debauch you, so… Oh, already?’

Anton’s eyes gleamed. Jack scowled, and Anton lifted a hand and splayed his fingers, self-satisfied, not an inch of apology in his body.

‘Eva owes me a bottle of wine,’ Anton said.

‘Wait- You placed bets?’

‘A bottle of wine is not a bet,’ Anton said blithely, then smiled down into his teacup as though he was truly pleased. Jack didn’t know what to say, and watched as Anton sipped, closing his eyes as though really savouring the brew. Jack tried to imagine Anton and Eva talking about it enough to make a bet about it. He sighed. That was so easy to imagine. They’d probably done it in under five minutes.

‘I can’t believe you had a bet,’ Jack said.

‘Can’t you?’ Anton said. ‘Sometimes we make light of serious subjects, Eva and I, but both of us want you each to be happier than you are now, and I do think that’s a step in the right direction,
don’t you?’

‘But I thought… I mean you- We’ve kissed, and you’ve talked about…doing other things?’

‘We’ve had some marvellous conversations like that, I agree,’ Anton said, winking at Jack. ‘Would I still get to be the first to show you how-spanking can be? Or did Pitch show you that first?’

‘Oh. Uh…’

‘I almost think it was better that it was him,’ Anton said, looking off as though remembering something fond. ‘Intense though he may be. The quality of care he provides afterwards is par none, and as much as I’d like to explore those things with you – and I very much would – at least you started with one of the best. Eva is too, you know. One of the best. But I doubt she’d spank you.’

Jack let go of the teacup, drew his hands back from the saucer. The quality of care afterwards? Had Jack missed something?

Or maybe Pitch just didn’t think you deserved it.

It was unfair that he could keep feeling cold, when his body temperature was already colder than it used to be. He hated it.

‘Jack?’

‘…What? Oh- I’m…probably missing something really obvious, right? But what do you mean by quality of care? Like…afterwards?’

‘You know,’ Anton said, smiling warmly. ‘Sometimes I think it’s my favourite part, except I’d be lying because I love the rest of it too. It’s just…even though he’s always very professional, very clear that we’re not like he was with Fyodor, you still leave feeling loved.’

Jack tasted bitterness in the back of his throat. Did Pitch give more to the other people he slept with? Did he not want Jack to leave feeling loved? Did he worry Jack would get too attached, because Jack could be needy? Or was it something else? Maybe Jack wouldn’t know that feeling even if Pitch did everything the same with him as he did with the others. Or maybe Pitch didn’t have the energy? Maybe-

‘Jack? Am I upsetting you?’

A glance up, and Anton looked confused and troubled. Then his head tilted to the side in that way that had become alarming. Anton saw things he wasn’t supposed to. Most people didn’t bother to look deeper when it came to Jack, assumed what they want. Anton had a horrible habit of not doing that.

‘I’m not upset,’ Jack said quickly, making a point of sipping at his tea. It was too hot against his tongue, but that was a welcome distraction.

‘All right,’ Anton said slowly. ‘So, what do you like most about the aftercare?’

Later, he’d curse himself for speaking without thinking.

‘Aftercare?’

‘Well, the-’ Anton’s voice died in his throat. A long silence, and Jack’s heart started beating heavier. Then: ‘How many times have you been in that room so far?’
'Only twice.' Jack dug his fingernails into his thighs. ‘I mean I know hardly anything, which is probably why I don’t know about aftercare, right?’

‘Possibly,’ Anton said, nodding like he didn’t buy it all. ‘What have- Ah, forgive my impertinence, Jack, I’m incorrigible at the best of times. But what did he do after he spanked you?’

Jack thought quickly about lying. He knew when Anton was on some kind of information-seeking quest. But Jack wanted more information too, and he didn’t know how to get it without going along. He also wasn’t sure he wanted to know that Pitch looked after the rest of his lovers, but didn’t want to look after Jack.

He thought of the Tsar saying:

_You are nothing to him, as a result. He may go through the motions of trying to make you feel special, but he doesn’t really, does he?_

‘He made sure I could stand,’ Jack said, not meeting Anton’s eyes. ‘And then he left. And I showed myself out.’

Anton didn’t reply for so long that Jack risked a glance. Anton looked like Jack had told him something far worse than what he had. For a moment, Jack even considered taking it back. Anton clearly hadn’t expected it, and Jack realised that maybe this would get Pitch into trouble somehow. But Pitch didn’t have to like everyone he slept with, and he didn’t have to be loving to everyone afterwards. It wasn’t like Jack got that with anyone else he’d slept with? So he didn’t really get why this was such a big deal.

Jack rubbed at the back of his head and shrugged.

‘It was fine, Anton. He did hardly anything to me.’

Anton ran his hand over his lower jaw, and then his brows knitted together. Jack thought of storm clouds, and tried to think of another way to get out of the conversation. It turned out he didn’t really want any of the information he was looking for anyway. It was nothing he couldn’t figure out for himself.

‘Curse the Light,’ Anton said abruptly. ‘I can’t- He’s never before done… And why?’

Shit, I broke Anton.

‘Well, I was fine?’ Jack repeated, smiling. ‘I mean he probably just doesn’t like me very much.’

A choked sound, and Jack was mortified when he saw that Anton was tearing up. It didn’t make any sense. But then the reaction was gone and Jack almost sighed in relief. Why was Anton making such a big deal out of it anyway? Maybe he’d imagined the reaction.

‘Jack, Jack, it doesn’t matter if he doesn’t like you, he’s obligated-’

‘I don’t want him to feel obligated to do something he doesn’t want to do!’

‘No, no, I’m explaining badly. Curse it. And you being so new to all of this. By the Light- I don’t- Did he give you signal words? By the Light, Jack, did he?’

‘What? Oh. Yeah. Two.’

Anton closed his eyes in relief, but he was still shockingly pale.
Jack fussed a little with his teacup. The tea was the right temperature now, but he didn’t want it anymore.

‘This isn’t good enough,’ Anton said, standing, his chair scraping back hard. ‘I don’t know what he’s thinking, I don’t know why he’d— I mean of all people, for him— I need to talk to him.’

A bolt of cold through him so strong it almost rooted him to his chair, but instead Jack forced himself to stand, eyes flying wide.

‘What? No. You don’t have to talk to him about anything! It’s private, Anton! It’s not even any of your business.’

‘I’m sorry, Jack,’ Anton said, his gaze fierce. ‘I can’t let this stand.’

‘Can’t let what stand? Anton—’

Anton was already walking towards the door, and coldness became a stark terror, bright and furious. He didn’t want Pitch thinking Jack had complained about it, he didn’t want Pitch thinking he was doing anything inadequate, and he didn’t want Anton thinking Jack wasn’t strong enough to fight his own battles. It was like he was watching something good crumbling down around him, and his breathing came faster. Would Pitch even let him in the room after this? Would he look down his nose at Jack in disappointment, that Jack needed someone else to complain on his behalf?

Because that was the worst part, wasn’t it? That he secretly wanted Anton to be right, even as the nausea told him that he wasn’t.

He ran around the table and blocked Anton’s path, trying to grab his wrist, even as Anton swung it back out of the way. Anton stared down at him, his expression was grim.

‘No,’ Jack said. ‘Don’t do this, Anton. Seriously. This isn’t a joke.’

‘It’s not,’ Anton said, his face twisting. ‘It’s not. He should be giving you aftercare, and it’s wrong of him not to.’

‘If he doesn’t want to— You can’t make him. I can deal with this, Anton. You don’t—’

‘You don’t know how to deal with this, because you don’t know what this is about,’ Anton said.

Jack took the deepest, slowest breath he could, but his voice was still shaking with anger when he said:

‘Seriously, you’re condescending to me now?’

Anton looked down at Jack, his shoulders square, his forehead furrowed, and for a moment it seemed like he’d apologise, but then he said nothing at all. He looked past Jack and went to step around him.

Jack hooked his staff around Anton’s ankle and pulled.

‘Jack!’ Anton said, some combination of shock and something else. Jack stared at him, not understanding why he couldn’t get Anton to change his mind.

‘I won’t talk to you,’ Jack said. ‘Ever again. About anything.’

Anton’s skin blanched, went as pale as it had before. His chest was heaving now, like Jack’s was. He had his hand out—he’d made to grab at Jack’s staff, even as Jack had drawn it back.
‘I know you don’t understand,’ Anton said, his voice rough. ‘I know. And maybe you won’t talk to me again. But you’re not having the kind of sex or intimacy where Pitch can afford to do one thing and not the other, especially with you. Hate me, then. Maybe you think I’m nosey, maybe you think I’m betraying you, but I don’t want you to step another foot in that room until someone brings him into line, and Jack, how can you bring him into line if you don’t know there is one?’

Anton looked at the door, and then looked towards Jack again. He squeezed his eyes shut for a second, and then straightened.

‘Please, Anton,’ Jack said, even though he could tell it was futile.

‘I’m sorry, Jack,’ Anton said, and he cast one long look at Jack, then shook his head and walked towards the door, closing it behind him.

Jack sagged against his staff, humiliated, feeling so small in that moment, so much like a child, that he almost wanted to cry. On its heels, like a slithering creature, the darkness snuck in so gently it was almost a comfort. It wrapped around him, promised him that he could make Anton pay, and that he didn’t need Pitch at all, for anything. He had all the ice he wanted, in his body, at the end of his staff, and he could pour it into the world and freeze anything that tried to touch him. That tried to make him feel like that again.

A sinking sensation, like falling into something – a blanket maybe, and Jack gasped as vertigo stole over him and he planted his staff firmly into the ground and forced himself to look around the room. To take stock.

Still, the darkness whispered to him, not in words, but offering succour. If he stopped depending on other people, stopped expecting them to treat him with respect, he wouldn’t feel so bad about hurting them anymore. Because it wasn’t a bad thing to hurt people he didn’t respect, was it?

He blinked hard, biting his lower lip. Anton was probably out there right now. Pitch was in his rooms today, working in the office probably.

Jack didn’t want to stick around to see Pitch marching in and yelling at him for not keeping things private, and he didn’t want to run through the Palace either, imagining Sharpwood lurking around every corner, waiting with that dispassionate look on his face.

The door opened at Jack’s fingers without even creaking, and he peeked beyond it, seeing no one. There were only a few rooms that had windows that opened out of the Palace. That’s what Pitch had said. Jack already knew where one of them was. Further down the corridor, a tiny window that opened to his touch, the curtains billowing. He’d tried it a couple of days before, staring down, the wind whistling around him.

Now, when he slid the window free of its lock and pushed it up, the wind was still. He called it and it responded viciously, tearing at him. Shoving him towards the open space.

Jack knew then, how badly he needed to get away. He couldn’t be here for this part. He didn’t have to be. Maybe it was cowardly, to keep running away, but he knew if they came for him in his room while the darkness whispered to him, he’d do something dangerous.

Fingers brushing the edges of the window frame, knees scraping on the sill, he crouched, staff in one hand. He took a breath, and a cold, invigorating wind rushed into his lungs. So it was easy in the end, to drop, to swoop up towards the sky and the clouds, flying letting him burn through some of that excess energy, turning visceral rage to something he didn’t understand, but wanted more of.
He wanted to fly through the town, he wanted to show others what he could do, but if he was being tailed the smartest thing to do would be to soar high.

Speed wasn’t a problem, controlling how he moved wasn’t a problem. Things he thought he’d need to spend weeks learning seemed to come to him. As though he was an extension of the wind, as though winter had burrowed into him and whispered all its secrets.

Snow built in clouds behind him, began falling, and he raced onwards, thinking of where to go. Toothiana? No, he hardly knew her, and he didn’t know if he could trust her. She was the one who had cared for Flitmouse, but she’d still not intervened when he’d been sent to an Asylum. Bunnymund? Jack laughed, the wind snatching his voice away. Cupcake would be in the Golden Warrior barracks, and Jack didn’t feel comfortable going there. North? That could work. Maybe.

Instead, Jack ducked down beneath the clouds and realised he was far beyond the City of Lune, and into the outskirts where the lower classes lived. He saw forest in the horizon and raced towards it, feeling like a dart launched towards its target.

He tried to make his landing through the canopy graceful, but the branches rushed up at him too fast, and he hadn’t realised how densely the pines grew. He gasped and dodged, tumbling out of the way of the worst of it, thin branches and pine needles whipping against him, before he landed, staggering, brushing pine needles off himself and frustrated at the stings of it against his skin.

It took only the thought of Anton confronting Pitch – against Jack’s express wishes, ignoring Jack begging – for Jack to raise his staff and close his eyes, letting the cold build inside of him and pour through his staff. It rose in the forest around him, it coated the trees with snow and turned the ground to permafrost. It was diamond dust in his mouth and nose, and slick ice crawling along his forearms and hands, inching along the back of his neck.

Jack stood still through it all, legs braced, eyes closed, the darkness inside of him somehow content when he just let himself go like this. He thought he’d feel angry or vicious, but instead he felt hollow, his mind adrift. It was welcome. He wanted clarity, not some mess of feelings, or the sense that he should be hurting people he cared about.

The world turned still, the winds died down, and Jack lowered his staff and opened his eyes. The pine trees closest to him probably wouldn’t survive the shocking onslaught of ice, but Jack thought it was pretty somehow.

Overkill, sure. But still pretty.

He forced himself to take a breath, called the winds back, and decided to visit North.

*  

Jack hovered around the tower attached to North’s Workshop. Then he flew to the windowsill he’d gone to before, the toes of his boots skimming the sill until he got his footing. He peered into the window, saw no one. But he saw the table that Bunnymund had been standing at last time. He saw a mug and a plate with crumbs on it resting there. Jack fogged up the glass, then turned to check if he’d been followed or seen.

No one had seen him, no one was even on the ground, but he knew he had to be careful.

He sent a thin stream of cold air beneath the window frame. It crept up, froze the lock, and Jack pushed hard to break it. The metal, brittle, gave way under the onslaught of ice, and Jack slipped into the room and pushed the window shut, looking around. The tower must be where North lived
his personal life, but this wasn’t a bedroom. It was more like an office. Jack had been too scared to pay much attention last time, having spent a lot of his time in a ball of ice, huddled away and frightened.

Jack hated that they’d seen him like that. Was he destined to have everyone see him at his worst? Anton and Pitch, the Tsar, the Guardians, even Cupcake in the mountain. By the Light, he missed her.

He dragged his staff along the ground, leaving a trail of jagged ice, unable to stop himself. Anger pulsed inside of him, and he looked in cabinets, opened drawers, saw bits of half-finished contraptions, old tools, new ones, a veritable bric-a-brac of discarded invention. In one cabinet, a huge ream of glossy poster paper, like the kind the resistance posters were printed on.

North was seditious, and yet he was the Engineer, and everyone loved him.

Jack’s explorations led him to a large metal stork that stood on one leg by the entrance to the door. Jack reached out to touch it, and its glass eyes glowed a sudden red. It let out an unearthly shriek, and then kept screaming. Jack flinched, backed up into the table, then made for the window. It was obviously an alarm.

The door behind him flew open, banged against the wall, and Jack already had one foot out of the window, the wind whipping around him, when he heard:

‘Jack! Do not be leaving, please!’

Jack turned to see North with his sabres out, his startling blue eyes wide. The stork had stopped shrieking, and Jack pressed back against the windowsill.

‘Maybe you should get an alarm for your window,’ Jack rasped, heart hammering.

‘The only one who comes in through the window is being you,’ North said with a gentle smile, closing the door behind him and petting the stork gently on the head. The red eyes stopped glowing, the sound of gears turning clicking to a halt.

‘Sorry,’ Jack said, coming back into the room, pulling the window shut again. He didn’t want anyone to know he was here. Pitch had made it clear that wherever Jack went, whoever he went to – if the Tsar knew about it, Jack would be putting those people in danger.

‘Why are you here?’ North said, sheathing his sabres and picking up the mug and plate, taking them over to a large sink that held other dishes.

‘Why do you have that alarm?’ Jack said, pointing at the stork.

‘I am thinking you know why,’ North said, eyes flicking up to Jack, before moving back to the items in the sink. He was running water over them. Rinsing plates and cutlery. He seemed non-threatening, and Jack didn’t even know that was possible. When North held his sabres, he looked like he could cut down the entire world. Now, he looked like someone who did dishes and tinkered away at metal storks. ‘But I am not knowing why you are here.’

‘Do you worry that the Tsar sent me?’ Jack said. ‘I mean that’s probably something you’ve heard, right?’

‘It is,’ North said, his hands stopping amongst the plates, his shoulders stiffening. Then they relaxed. ‘But I know you are no man of his.’
‘You can’t know that,’ Jack said.

‘I am knowing this,’ North said, almost to himself, and began washing dishes. Jack walked to him and looked into the sink, wondering if that’s all he was doing. But it really was. North was just doing the dishes. Jack looked up at him, and North stayed focused on what he was doing, and Jack’s staff stopped streaming its ground-spreading jagged ice. The cold in him muted a little, and he stepped back, and then walked across the room again, chewing at the inside of his lip.

‘I could be a double agent or something.’

‘Yes, Jack,’ North said. ‘You could be. But you are not. So why are you here? The Palace is not always being a fun place to stay, yes?’

‘Ha, yeah, the Palace,’ Jack said. He closed his eyes, thought of the look on Anton’s face, tears coming into his eyes before that expression had been wrenched away to something of firm resolve. Jack pressed his palm to his forehead, deciding that if he was here, he was going to make it count. ‘No. I want to know why the first attempt against the Tsar didn’t work.’

‘Ah then,’ North said. ‘That is being something I can talk to you about, yes?’

‘You’ll tell me?’ Jack said, surprised. ‘Isn’t it a secret?’

‘You are one of us,’ North said, turning and grinning fiercely at him. ‘Epiphanes has his own thoughts on the matter, but Epiphanes has walked a tormented path for so long I am not sure… Ah, no, it is more than that, too. You are one of us. The mountain gave you more than the Light, and I do not know why the alchemy turns us into what we are, but it does. It has been a long time since we’ve been given a new Guardian. I think it means we’re meant to try again. Fight him again.’

‘The Tsar,’ Jack said.

‘The first time,’ North said, placing a plate in a wire rack and contemplating the water dripping from it. ‘The first time, the plan was very good. Epiphanes, Kozmotis and I were at its helm, and we are all being strategists. I was the Engineer, the master of weapons. Kozmotis covered our military resistance – those Golden Warriors are being his, you see – and Bunnymund had his magical alchemy, and the refugees. Bunnymund, for all that he is good at holding his friends away, is good at drawing strangers in. I know not how he has this magic, but he brings hope to people, even when he has lost it.’

Another plate into the rack, and another, and Jack stared in fascination, trying to imagine the three of them at the head of the resistance. Why had the Tsar kept them all alive? Bunnymund was clearly being punished as Disciplinarian, but the Engineer was beloved, and the Royal Admiral was…the hero of Lune, its martial protector. Why would the Tsar do that?

‘But the Tsar is very smart,’ North said, ‘and we underestimated him, even as we were telling ourselves not to. He is having his coterie, he is having his own people who fight for him, and he has the people of Lune. Most of them. And he is having his own weapons, his own inventions, his own magical alchemy. He is not being magical like Bunnymund, but he has those in his employ who can summon death. And like all of us who went into the mountain, he is having his own powers.’

‘What even happened? Did you just… What happened?’

North wiped off his forearms and hands with a dishrag, staring down at his ‘naughty’ and ‘nice’ tattoos, as though they held secrets within them. He leaned back against the counter and sighed.
'The Tsar was prepared for us,’ North said. ‘Not in all ways, but it was very messy. First we had two Asylums, but at the end of the coup, we are having forty. Generations of Lune, anyone who had a friend or family member in the resistance, they were killed, imprisoned, or they were being rewarded for giving information. Rewarded handsomely. Almost all of the nobility are now being in the palm of the Tsar’s hand, descended from those who would not resist the terror he brought to other planets… The terror he holds over Lune.’

North shook his head.

‘Bunnymund was to be publically executed, a punishment for all of us. Kozmotis pleaded clemency on his behalf, and as a result, was placed in an Asylum and was knowing not what happened to any of us. While there- It is changing him. And he came out to a changed world. I am not sure what the Tsar said or did to make Kozmotis remain his Royal Admiral. The newspapers told everyone that Kozmotis had suffered grave wounds during the rebellion, and painted him a hero of the nation. Those who still lived and knew him as leader of the resistance, believed he was secretly in the pocket of the Tsar all along, to be returned to such an esteemed position. The Tsar’s guard dog, cold and so capable, but not an ally. I am knowing different. But even Bunnymund came to believe it.’

North stroked at his moustache, at his beard, and smiled grimly at Jack.

‘The Tsar is needing me. I make his ships. I make his weapons. I make all these war machines that allow him to do what he does. Perhaps you are thinking that I should have stopped, or that I should have refused to work for him, but instead, I looked ahead to a time where we could try again, and have been making my own inventions. But I know now, that he is preparing for this too, and he waits for us. I am believing he likes the game of it. That he is wanting us to try again. Bunnymund says we should wait until his guard is down, but the Tsar?’

‘His guard isn’t ever down,’ Jack said.

‘Never,’ North said firmly. ‘He will always expect us. And we cannot move against him without Kozmotis or the support of the Golden Warriors. And Kozmotis has been broken.’

The Tsar saying that Pitch’s wing was broken, and saying it with that look on his face, amusement and cruelty both.

‘But I am thinking,’ North said, ‘that anything that has been broken can be rebuilt. In time. With patience.’

‘Even if he joined the resistance again, you lost the first time. The Tsar is stronger now.’

‘This is Bunnymund’s thought.’

‘But he makes those posters,’ Jack said, confused, annoyed. ‘So why-’

‘Because that is his way. He sways the people. He brings colour into the alleyways, with posters that don’t belong to Lune. He is the only one to do it, and he is understanding how important it is that people see something different. Jack, are you knowing already that it is possible to want to give up and want to go on, both at the same time? I am thinking you have learned this.’

Jack spun the staff, his head hurting. If the Tsar called him disloyal, then he was disloyal, and nothing he did could change that. The Tsar’s word was absolute. So Jack was stupid, treasonous, disloyal, and…he was not the Tsar’s friend.

‘And we are having you now,’ North said, like he was revealing a secret.
'Me,' Jack said, laughing.

‘Jack, you command winter. Tell me you cannot bring the Palace or the town to a halt with your powers, if you were willing it? Tell me that you do not know the weapon you can be.’

North’s gaze was so intense it was almost a glare, but one fuelled by the fire of passion instead of fury. Jack’s breath came colder in his mouth and he thought of the times he’d let his ice go, the attacks he’d unleashed. He saw Crossholt, and then the look of fear and rage on Pitch’s face when he’d gone to attack him on Endan. He thought of how easily he flew on the winds and how he could get away from anyone if he wanted to.

Anyone except the Tsar.

‘You do not realise?’ North said softly. ‘That you are the strongest of all of us? The mountain wants us to try again.’

‘It’s a mountain,’ Jack said. ‘There’s no prophecy. I went in, I nearly died, and someone who barely liked me dragged me out again. It went wrong. I have too much darkness in me, I can barely make the Light. I had to escape the Palace today to stop myself from doing something stupid. And then I came here, which may be even stupider!’

‘Jack, you are being-’

‘The Tsar already knows how to kill my powers off,’ Jack said, his voice rising. ‘He already knows! And it’s ridiculously easy to do. Know how? Shove me by a fireplace for a few hours, and I’m done. For days.’

North stepped forwards, his hands clenched into fists.

‘How do you know this?’

‘How do you think?’ Jack exclaimed. ‘How do you think I know? He-’

Jack placed his hand over his mouth, and stared at North, even as North stared at him like he couldn’t believe what he was hearing.

‘Then he already knows,’ North said decisively. ‘He is preparing for you to be against him in what is coming. Any fireplace?’

‘No,’ Jack said, dropping his hand away, short of breath. ‘It was huge. Like… But if he had a furnace or something. It would be easy. Even… maybe even if he shoved me in a hot shower for a long time. I don’t know.’

‘Can we bring them back?’

‘We?’

‘If you were disarmed, could we bring them back? Exposure to ice or snow?’

‘I- No, I… Pitch used a cloth with ice in it, but…’

‘That is not what I am thinking,’ North said quickly. ‘I am thinking something more extreme than this. But I do not want to test it. It would be dangerous for you. But you are a tremendous weapon.’

‘Person,’ Jack said.
North nodded, but his gaze had gone inward, inventing things in his mind, problem-solving, clearly not thinking of Jack as anything other than a tool to be used in whatever might be coming. Jack had known a conversation like this was coming. He’d known that at some point, he would need to ask questions that would get him killed, and he would hear things that he never wanted to hear.

It was better than hearing them anyway, and having no control over it.

‘Pitch thinks the Tsar was trying to force me to make a decision,’ Jack said. ‘Turn to someone. Imply someone or…something. Something. And you think he knows that you guys could use me as a weapon.’

North looked up, eyes wide, expression almost hurt. But Jack stared at him levelly.

‘Not use you,’ North said.

‘Uh huh,’ Jack said, staring at him. ‘I’m sure that’s the long discussions you and Bunnymund and whoever have had about me behind my back. Long conversations about how much I matter to you as a person.’

Would Pitch be proud of him? That he was almost starting to look like he had some autonomy? Jack hated it. He wanted to claw it out of himself. He could feel himself blistering apart beneath its venom. The hideousness of wanting something good for himself, ahead of Lune. It didn’t even have to be good, really. It just had to be better than what he felt now.

‘So,’ Jack continued, pacing a little, and then walking over to the stork and staring at it. ‘If the Tsar wants me to implicate people now, then he expects something soon, right? He wants me to pick a side. He knows I won’t pick his. I mean—With what I am.’ Jack laughed, the sound hurt his throat. Somewhere, in the distance, Anton was asking Pitch why he hadn’t been nicer to Jack. It made him sick to think about. Why would anyone want to be nicer to him? He’d been getting into trouble since the day he entered the Overland creche. Just about everyone he’d ever loved had been taken from him somehow. Or left.

‘Jack… I am thinking that this is not the time—’

‘Why?’ Jack said sharply, turning and smiling at North. ‘Because you think I can’t handle it? Because I’m not strong enough for the truth yet? The Tsar knows how weak I am, so I don’t need to hear it from you, thanks. I’m trying to figure something out. Let me think.’

North held up his hands in surrender, and then dropped them by his sides. Jack watched North for another second, surprised that it had actually worked. Then he continued to pace, because there was something—something—and he wasn’t good at thinking like this, he wasn’t good at thinking about these things at all. He wanted to let his ice loose again. He wanted to break something.

‘What if…’ Jack said, tilting his head and staring off into space. ‘What if he wants me to pick your side— he suspects Bunnymund, right? And you, probably. And he knows that you’ve come to visit me personally, and he knows that you’re all buying into this thing that if the mountain gives you special powers, it makes you a Guardian. So, okay. I pick your side. And then what? Does he think we’ll attack without Pitch or the Warriors or whatever? What is he trying to do? I mean if he’s…’

Jack squeezed his eyes shut. To talk about him so casually. The Tsar. To talk about the Tsar being treacherous to his people, for the sake of Lune. Because the Tsar thought that the thing that mattered most about Lune was its standing when compared to other planets, and the gold it held in its coffers, and not its people.
A rebellion had happened once and it had failed. It had been helmed by the best, and it had been strong, and the Tsar had expected it then, and he absolutely expected it now.

Maybe he even courted it.

‘Why does he want Pitch out of the position of Royal Admiral? Why is he making me so… important to the people of Lune? Why does he keep putting Guardians in really important positions? Who does that? If I was- I don’t know… Wouldn’t it just make more sense to get rid of all of us? He got rid of Fyodor!’

‘So you are knowing about this,’ North said heavily.

‘Yeah, thanks, I figured some shit out and I asked some people the right questions. Not that you guys have been much help or anything. Why Fyodor? I mean I know he was a member of the resistance, but—’

‘Fyodor had Kozmotis agreeing to rebel,’ North said, his voice clipped, like he was annoyed at the whole subject, which didn’t even make sense. Why was it that every time he found out something, there was another thing he didn’t know? How many secrets did these people carry? ‘Kozmotis had even met with us to tentatively discuss a new plan. I am not knowing how, but the Tsar- within a week of that meeting, Fyodor was dead. Then, and I am not knowing… This is- Jack, a lock of Seraphina’s hair was sent to Kozmotis.’

‘What?’

‘I am thinking whoever cuts her hair is in the pocket of the Tsar, or was,’ North said, shaking his head. ‘We wouldn’t have been knowing, except he is sending the same thing to me, to Bunnymund. We are panicking, of course, thinking she has been… We found Kozmotis in his rooms, and he let us know in no small way that he did not want another thing to do with us. Seraphina was safe, but I am thinking… That was the end for Kozmotis. He was already very broken.’

Jack thought he was frightened, the emotion zinging through him was so unfamiliar. It skittered with claws along the underside of his skin and it was a loud voice in the back of his head telling him to act and it was in the curling of his toes and the quickening of his breath and the way he lifted his staff with a shaking arm. North said something to him, alarmed, and Jack realised belatedly that it wasn’t fear at all. Darkness and fury combining together, too thick, not exorcised at all when he’d let his ice free.

There was an explosion of blue lightning in all directions. The sound of glass smashing and then falling to the tiles. The sound of his breath rasping in his lungs and the feeling that he’d grown ice through the very core of himself. He could feel his hair standing up as the wind raced around him, and he could feel snow, and he could smell storms. When he’d been a child, the snow falling had been so silent, it softened the whole world. But inside of him, it was a morass of icy violence.

He lowered his arm, feeling weak, feeling relieved. Then, a dull numbness, and he refused to look in North’s direction, in case he’d done the same thing to him that he’d done to Crossholt.

In that moment, he knew he should care more, but he couldn’t bring himself to care beyond that vague ache. The knowledge that he shouldn’t have been turned into this, and that maybe he really was just a weapon to be used by one side or another.

‘I am thinking that this is so beautiful,’ North said.
Jack’s head jerked up, staring first at North, at the tone of his voice, as though North hadn’t even been addressing Jack.

Then he saw the icicles frosting the entire room. Growing up from the floor, down from the ceiling, fringing the counter and the table. The window was iced shut. The room’s temperature had plunged.

‘Shit,’ Jack whispered.

North was covered in a rime of frost – which he’d already wiped off his face – but he looked otherwise unharmed.

‘I have to stop doing this,’ Jack said. ‘I really just… I don’t even know what Anton thinks he’s doing. Like, what is he going to do? Wave a magic wand and make Pitch care again? Make him who he was? I don’t know. And it’s not like he’d care about me anyway? He’d probably throw me before a carriage in a second if it meant saving Seraphina and I wouldn’t blame him.’

It would have been the perfect moment for North to ask what Jack was talking about, and Jack was grateful when North said nothing at all.

‘You can’t stay in here,’ Jack said. ‘It’s too cold.’

‘You are forgetting where I came from,’ North said, laughing. ‘This is- Like ice caves. Although cleaning it will be… Perhaps I am just letting it drain out of the room and down the stairs of the tower and pretending I am knowing not where it came from.’

‘Big plumbing leak?’ Jack said innocently.

‘Huge,’ North said, looking around with awed eyes.

‘I could’ve hurt you.’

‘You could,’ North said.

Jack almost heard the ‘you wouldn’t’ afterwards. He scowled even though North didn’t say it. Because North had no idea what Jack was capable of when he just let loose like that. When he didn’t think. Jack rubbed his hand through his hair, and bits of ice fell out of it and scattered on his shoulders, the ground, even the tops of his boots.

His body temperature was slowly rising again, and he felt a bit more himself. Apparently that meant feeling really tired, and really over everything. For some reason, out of everything that had happened, the idea of the Tsar collecting those locks of hair – at any point during Seraphina’s lifetime – just to make threats like that, filled him with something so bright and awful it almost blinded him. What else had the Tsar done? What else had he prepared for?

_Probably everything. More than you could ever imagine. Everyone knows more than you do, and they still don’t know enough, they don’t know what to do. Or they’d have done it by now._

‘He pushed me away on purpose,’ Jack said, the crook of his staff tipping until it touched the ground. Jack easily brushed the ice away, like it was nothing at all. It dissolved into snow, it did whatever he wanted it to do. ‘He wanted me to feel this. Or something like it. And then…what? Pitch told me that the Tsar wouldn’t want me to open up to anyone, but what if he did? What would he gain from it? He keeps all these enemies close, but they’re all beloved by the people of Lune. So- Why? If he had to kill you all, if you all forced his hand, he’d lose so much.’
‘Ah, Jack,’ North said sadly. ‘No. If he had to kill us all at once, they’d cluster closer to him, grateful that he saw the evil before they ever did. Just as you suspected us, just as anyone would love him and want him to keep them safe. They would grieve as though they’d been betrayed, and they would look towards the one who had saved them from that betrayal.’

Jack thought that if everyone was that blind, then how would anyone ever win against the Tsar? Wasn’t the whole point to get some of the citizens to rally? To realise the truth?

That was when Jack realised that he’d well and truly picked a side.

‘I want to get Flitmouse out of whatever Asylum he’s in,’ Jack said.

North flinched, and then shook his head soberly. ‘It cannot be done.’

‘I can fly. I can get anywhere. No one can stop me, and above cloud cover, no one can use a cannon to shoot me out of the sky. If you tell me where to go, I’ll just-’

‘NO!’

Jack went still, and North’s broad shoulders rose and fell, over and over, and he stared at Jack with something wild and forbidding in his gaze.

‘You will die,’ North said thickly. ‘You will die.’

‘Pitch came back from one.’

‘You will die,’ North said, his voice firm, ‘and I will not help you, until I know that we will not die, going into the Asylums. We are not ready. None of us are ready for that. Jack- Why do you think we try and save deserters before they ever make it into an Asylum? Why do you think we are trying to do things like save your friend before they have to make it into the mountain? Why would we do something so dangerous, if it was as easy as going to an Asylum afterwards, and breaking them out?’

‘Yeah? Well I’d like to know if I have one more person to grieve or not, and it’s kind of messing me up to not know.’

‘He is likely still alive.’

‘Likely,’ Jack said, trembling with anger. It turned out he could talk back to North all he wanted. He remembered telling Pitch that he couldn’t talk to anyone else except Pitch, but here he was, being annoyed, shaking from it, and North was an implacable force before it. Maybe that’s why he’d come here. ‘What am I supposed to do with that?’

‘Keep it safe,’ North said, eyebrows drawing together, expression heavy. ‘Be someone who is holding on, not letting go.’

‘And when I find out he’s dead after all?’

‘Then you are letting him go,’ North said calmly. ‘And only then.’

‘That’s not good enough.’

‘Of course it isn’t,’ North said, smiling gently. ‘And that is why we are hoping for a different world one day. That is what we are holding out for. Are you not seeing how you are one of us yet?’

‘I’m not saving deserters,’ Jack said. ‘I wouldn’t even know how.’
‘No,’ North said. ‘Everyone’s role is different. You will find out what you are meant to be.’

‘A weapon,’ Jack said.

‘A person,’ North said, face twisting in apology. ‘A person.’

‘So…’ Jack said, sighing. ‘Can I stay a bit longer before I fly back? Just an hour? And maybe…a different room? Is that safe?’

‘The tower is safe,’ North said softly. ‘I am thinking you could do with a sandwich. And maybe some cookies. Before you think I am treating you like child, it is mostly for me. I feel like some cookies.’

‘Okay,’ Jack said, following North towards the door, noticing the way he tapped the stork, as though that deactivated the alarm somehow. ‘Cookies sound good.‘

*

In the evening, he flew back to the Palace under the cloak of darkness, full of cookies and not a single sandwich. He ducked down towards the window, which was somehow still open, and hovered before it, looking inside.

No Pitch. No Anton.

Jack exhaled heavily in relief and flew inside, landing lightly on his feet and carefully closing the window behind him.

With any luck, it would be late enough that everyone would have given up and gone to bed.

He crept down the corridor towards his room. He wouldn’t even have to pass the lounge. So if anyone was waiting up for him, he could just-

They were in his room. Both of them. Anton was pacing back and forth, chewing on his thumbnail and not even noticing that Jack was back.

Pitch was staring at him steadily, sitting at the table, in the same place Anton had occupied before he’d stormed off.

Jack turned around to walk back towards the open window, and heard:

‘No, Jack.’

That was Pitch, and Jack halted before that command. It was too quietly given, and he knew it meant some kind of conversation was coming and he was so tired of talking.

‘By the Light, you’re okay,’ Anton said, as Jack turned around. Anton rushed towards him, and Jack held out his staff stiffly, staring at him, daring him to come closer. Anton halted, opened his mouth to speak, and Pitch cut him off.

‘Where were you?’

‘Training,’ Jack said. ‘Letting my ice loose in the middle of nowhere. Visiting people. Whatever I wanted. It was great.’

‘Don’t talk to me that way,’ Pitch said.
‘What, that’s the way you talk to him, after he’s vanished for hours?’ Anton said, turning back towards Pitch, outrage on his face. Pitch flicked a disinterested glance towards Anton, before focusing on Jack, all that concentration making Jack quail a little.

‘How should he talk to me, Anton?’ Jack said coolly, ignoring the way Pitch’s expression shifted. ‘Kid gloves? Because I’m a kid?’

‘Now, wait a minute,’ Anton said slowly, looking at Jack as though he hadn’t expected that either. ‘That isn’t at all-’

‘You’re dismissed, Anton,’ Pitch said smoothly. ‘You and Jack can work through whatever considerable things you need to work through later. But right now, I have some things I need to talk to him about.’

Jack expected Anton to look offended, but instead Anton only turned to look back at Pitch, something silent passing between them. Pitch only nodded to him once, some kind of acknowledgement, and Anton nodded back, then walked out of the room. He didn’t look at Jack as he left, but Jack got the impression it wasn’t because he was ignoring him. In fact, he kind of felt that if Anton could hold Jack’s hands and try and reassure him, he would. But Jack didn’t want it. Pitch was right, whatever things he had to sort out with Anton, he could sort out later.

But he didn’t want to deal with this, either.

‘I need you to get out of my room,’ Jack said, after the door had closed behind Anton. ‘I don’t want to speak to you.’

‘You don’t have to,’ Pitch said, leaning forwards, expression flashing with something Jack wasn’t quite familiar with. ‘I want to talk. If you’ll let me.’

‘Like I can stop you,’ Jack scoffed.

‘If you want me to leave, so we can have this discussion later, I will leave. But I’d prefer we discuss this now. It’s important.’

One day I will have a conversation with him about something really unimportant. Like the weather. Or what his favourite fruit is. Or something that isn’t always about all this crazy, stupid crap.

‘Fine,’ Jack said, looking away. ‘Talk.’

‘I owe you an apology,’ Pitch said, ‘for treating you callously. I have been-’

‘I get it,’ Jack said, looking up in defiance. ‘We’ve both needed to let off some steam, and Anton wants to blow it out of proportion.’

Pitch’s eyebrows lifted, and then he looked down at the table, something sad and bemused on his face.

‘No,’ Pitch said, ‘and I’ve misled you into thinking this.’

‘I don’t want you to console me over something I don’t actually want to be consoled over,’ Jack said, his voice as frosty as it had been when he’d spoken to Anton. ‘I knew what I was getting myself into, and I know you don’t care about me in that kind of way – the Tsar said you couldn’t care at all, that I was nothing to you. Really, you’ve been pretty good to me.’
‘No,’ Pitch said again, his voice thin. ‘No, Jack. I’ve been rather terrible to you, given the feelings I believe I have for you.’

‘The… The what? But- What?’

Jack stared at him, and Pitch watched him, and then stood up. Jack wondered if he was in some kind of practical joke, or about to be ambushed, but instead Pitch just pushed the chair back into place and placed a hand on the top of it.

‘I don’t think we should have this discussion here. Would you come into the room with me?’

‘I am so not in the mood,’ Jack said, even as his mind kept stumbling over the other part. What feelings? Feelings? By the Light, what did feelings mean? What kind of feelings could Pitch have for him? Fatherly feelings? Pound Jack against a wall feelings? What?

‘Nor am I,’ Pitch said. ‘I don’t want to go there for that. Would you prefer to stay here?’

Jack just stared at him.

Pitch tipped his head towards the door.

‘Come along, Jack. Anton will be long gone, I assure you.’

Jack followed, hand tight on his staff, biting the inside of his lip and somehow not exhausted at all, even after the day he’d had.
...Pitch and Jack have ruined me.

...Enjoy! :D

Jack stood in the room, nervous. Pitch did something to the lights that dimmed them, and Jack almost exclaimed, ‘You mean they could have been dimmed the whole time?’ But he held his tongue. He slowly spun his staff, so that the crook twirled in uneven circles. He felt like he’d walked into a trap. At least in the past, it would be a trap that would end with him coming and feeling sated. This time, he didn’t think he’d be so lucky.

Pitch turned and watched him, and Jack returned the gaze. He felt like they were in some new place already, a place where Jack was shamed and exposed at Anton’s insistence, a place where Jack didn’t know what Pitch would do to find equilibrium again.

‘For the record,’ Jack said, ‘I’d be just as happy going to bed.’

‘Is that what you want?’ Pitch said, the question honest. Like he genuinely wanted to know.

‘No,’ Jack said, looking away.

Pitch sighed, but it didn’t sound exasperated. It sounded tired. Jack supposed that Pitch had needed to deal with whatever Anton had thrown at him, and then they’d waited for Jack to return. He’d been gone at least a few hours. That had been the point, to tire them out so he didn’t have to deal with them.

He watched as Pitch walked over to the other side of the room, to the door leading to his bedroom. Pitch opened it, and Jack tried to make out details in the darkness. Pitch stared into the space as though considering, but after a moment, he closed it again, and looked around the room.

_He doesn’t know what to do_, Jack realised, shocked.

‘You know,’ Jack said, ‘we can just pretend this never happened.’

Except for that ‘feelings’ part, but…whatever. _Whatever._

Pitch’s gaze was filled with amusement. He looked at Jack like he was hopeless, which was absurd, _Jack_ wasn’t the one who had just stared into a bedroom looking lost. He was just fidgeting a little. And he _always_ did that. He was behaving normally. Pitch was the one who seemed off course.

‘First,’ Pitch said, ‘where did you go?’

‘A forest, and then North’s. I did let my ice free in the forest. I was… I mean at least I don’t blackout anymore, right?’ Jack forced himself to laugh, but he still hated how much the sensation
of the darkness could swamp him, how he had to find ways to set it free. It was the only thing in his body he couldn’t get under his own control somehow. His fear, his anger, everything else could be squashed down, pushed away, made small. The darkness only grew until he let it out.

‘Anton upset you,’ Pitch said.

‘Yeah, at least he’s passing it around though, right? I mean you look super pleased. Guess he’s just generous that way.’

Pitch smiled a little, the expression almost private, but then the expression slid away.

‘Don’t be so aggrieved with him. He truly did what he thought was best. He wasn’t wrong to do it. Though sometimes Anton can be as graceful as a stampeding herd of deer, and I suspect you saw that end of him today.’

Jack wanted to laugh, except that nothing about the day had been easy, and even this felt deceitful somehow. As though Pitch was trying to settle him, before saying something difficult. Jack didn’t want it. So he folded his arms, staff crossing his chest, and he stared, and he waited. Pitch wanted to talk. So Pitch could talk.

Pitch’s eyebrows knitted together, and then he seemed to come to some sort of decision.

‘What do you wish to speak of first?’

‘I’m not the one here to talk,’ Jack said coolly.

‘What do you wish me to speak of first, then? Anton’s reason for turning my entire afternoon and evening upside down? Or that I have admitted I have feelings for you?’

For some reason, Jack hadn’t thought that Pitch would be so bold about it. He’d thought maybe Pitch would pretend he hadn’t said anything at all – after all, that’s probably how Jack would have dealt with it. Instead, Jack felt disarmed by the openness. From Pitch, of all people. Except that Pitch talked about it in that almost detached way, like it was a business transaction, and Jack felt oddly bereft. He didn’t really want to talk about either thing. He wasn’t sure he wanted to listen to Pitch talk about it either.

‘Come here,’ Pitch said quietly, beckoning.

Jack approached. Pitch was standing beside that huge bed, and as Jack passed it, he could almost imagine himself crawling into it and falling asleep. He had grown used to being passed around to beds he wasn’t familiar with, all of them opulent, and none of them quite feeling like his yet. By the time he stood a couple of feet away from Pitch, he felt strangely melancholy, and he didn’t like that either. He didn’t look up to meet Pitch’s eyes.

A finger under his chin, and Jack looked up. Pitch’s other hand went to Jack’s staff and drew it away, as he had the first time. Jack swallowed, but Pitch didn’t look away from him, even as he leaned the staff against the wall.

‘We, all of us, are quite happy to walk around without our weapons,’ Pitch said quietly, ‘but you carry yours with you everywhere.’

‘It’s not a sword.’

‘And you are not an idiot, so don’t pretend to be one now,’ Pitch said, as Jack’s hand clenched where he would have held the cool metal-covered wood of it in his grasp. ‘Are you not too old to
need a security blanket?’

‘Yeah,’ Jack said, closing his eyes. He stepped back. ‘I’m not really in the mood for this part tonight.’

He stepped past Pitch to get his staff, and fingers curled around his upper arm. Not a strong grip, but it was paralysing all the same. Jack faced one way, Pitch the other. He expected Pitch to say something. To have some quip ready. But he said nothing at all. At least, not until Jack turned his head back to look up at him.

‘Will you forgive me?’ Pitch said. ‘I have no map to follow in this. And it is far easier for me to poke at you than it is to reveal anything of myself.’

Jack paused, then nodded. He was curious.

Pitch led him to the bed, and he sat down, then gestured for Jack to sit next to him.

_Awkward._

‘I don’t want to feel anything at all for you,’ Pitch said, sounding almost apologetic. ‘I didn’t when I first realised, and I haven’t since. I’ve taken some pains to try and stave the feelings off, and by necessity, you’ve been hurt by some of the actions I’ve taken. But I suppose that I didn’t realise how useless my attempts were, or how hurt you were getting.’

Jack only nodded. He closed his eyes. So Pitch had feelings and he didn’t _want_ to have them. Great. Jack let himself tip back until his shoulders hit the bedspread. He was surprised when Pitch did the same thing a moment later. Both of their legs hanging off the mattress.

‘After Fyodor, I was done,’ Pitch said, and Jack turned to look at him. He was staring up at the canopy of the four poster. ‘I don’t say that lightly. I swore I had engraved the truth of it into my heart, my bones. I was _done_. I did not nurture some tiny hope that someone might derail me from my path, I did not secretly wish to feel affection for someone again – outside of those who are already in my heart, like Seraphina. I was not quietly waiting for someone to spark an interest in me.’

‘Seraphina said your heart was locked in a tower.’

‘I _wanted_ it there,’ Pitch said, laughing, the sound bleak. ‘I _still_ do. And so I have watched Anton and Eva fussing around me for years now, trying to convince me that I should be doing things a different way, and they are so desperately naïve. Seraphina I can forgive, because she is a child, and she has a child’s sense of romance and hope, and Darkness curse anyone that takes those things from her, before I kill them myself. But Anton and Eva are meddling. To live in this Palace, to serve at his feet, to be what he requires… they do not pay that price. They think they do. But they don’t.’

‘Yeah, okay,’ Jack said, because he _did_ understand that. He _did_. ‘Look it seems pretty easy to just withdraw your ‘affections’ or whatever, I mean you’ve met me. So-’

Pitch turned to his side, facing Jack, drawing his legs onto the bed. His eyes avid.

‘If it were easy, I would have done it before now,’ Pitch said.

‘Well I’ve not seen like _heaps_ of signs of it, so-’

‘Because I haven’t _wanted_ you to,’ Pitch explained, like Jack was five.
‘I don’t even know if I want your affection,’ Jack said, even as his heart raced. What the hell did affection mean anyway? Was that like having a crush on someone?

‘Trust me, you don’t,’ Pitch said, in all seriousness.

Jack burst out laughing, and Pitch jerked back. Jack almost wanted to invite him to see the hilariousness of it, the melodrama, but then belatedly, like a whisper, he remembered:

_Fyodor._

The laughter died in his throat.

‘Shit,’ he murmured.

‘Since you’re tired, how about I talk for a bit?’ Pitch said. ‘You can let me meander my way through this part.’

‘And then you can deal with the next part?’

‘Actually, I’m quite certain I know how to deal with the part that Anton spoke to me about.’

‘By not dealing with it?’ Jack said hopefully. ‘By never speaking of it again? By not looking me in the eyes and saying: ‘Jack, you’re strong enough to fight your own battles, also suck it up?’ Because trust me, I can tell myself that, and—’

Pitch’s hand rested on his wrist, and Jack looked at him.

‘Sometimes,’ Pitch said, ‘I look at you and see every single thing that’s wrong with Lune, that has always been wrong with Lune, and that has only gotten worse with time. I find myself thinking that I can never possibly dig beneath that, or move through it, until I remind myself that I’ve caused some of it, and that gives me leave to at least _try_. So later, you are going to let me _try_.’

‘You’re so romantic,’ Jack said, and Pitch’s nostrils flared on something that Jack swore – _swore_ – would have been a laugh under any other circumstance. As it was, Jack felt a bit close to hysterical laughter himself. This came out of nowhere. Pitch _liking_ him. This was Pitch! Pitch didn’t _like_ anyone except Eva, Anton and Seraphina.

_Yeah, he did kind of invite you to live with him. But that was to save your life. Or something. But Eva said that whole thing about family. But then you haven’t really seen her again because everyone’s been really busy._

‘You’re so lucky I vented all my ice on a forest,’ Jack said. ‘Also North’s tower room.’

‘Did you?’

‘I just _said_ I did,’ Jack snapped.

‘Poor Jack, what an overwhelming day you’ve had.’

‘If this is you poking at me again because you can’t handle the fact that you’ve got _feelings_, I’m just saying – I don’t like it. What does ‘feelings’ even mean, anyway?’

‘Perhaps if you’d let me explain myself, you’d know.’

‘Every time I let you talk, you basically bait me,’ Jack said.
The snark settled when Pitch dragged his thumb along Jack’s wrist. Then he was doing it over and over again, slow and firm, and Jack’s shoulders relaxed, his spine in a weird arch because of the way his legs hung from the bed. If he was smart, he’d just pull his legs up like Pitch did.

‘Loving Fyodor was like looking into the sun,’ Pitch said, his voice so different to before, that Jack had to turn to look at him. Pitch was staring down at the mattress, but his thumb still moved rhythmically on Jack’s wrist. Jack’s breath caught in his chest. Knotted there. ‘It was blinding. He demanded my time, my space, eventually, my love. He was the first person to make me think that perhaps, perhaps I am meant to have some kind of primary partner. Instead of many attachments, there would be one main one, and occasionally, I might be with others. That isn’t common for Golden Warriors, and I had gone my entire life – a not insignificant amount of time before you point out how ancient I am – not knowing that about myself. I also didn’t quite like learning that about myself. It’s a dangerous thing to learn.

‘But he was reckless, and he was unsafe. He didn’t come in this room all that often, actually. One of the first lovers I’ve ever had that actually isn’t so interested in…this.’

Jack blinked, because this seemed so much a part of Pitch. It was integral to him. It was how he managed his darkness, and he turned it into something amazing. Jack grimaced and kept his thoughts to himself, but after Anton’s description of Fyodor, and now Pitch’s, Jack wasn’t really sure how he felt about him. Pitch had obviously loved him.

‘He antagonised the Tsar,’ Pitch said. ‘Almost constantly. Before he was a Golden Warrior, he was doing it. It didn’t matter what I said, it didn’t matter if he was formally disciplined for it. Fyodor’s family were nobles and deeply loyal to Lune, and I’d always wondered if rebelling against the Tsar was – in part – something that sprung from a difficult adolescence, and then perhaps he could never let it go once he discovered the truth in some of it. The Tsar wouldn’t sacrifice Fyodor’s family, and his status afforded more leniency than someone of lower class would get. Gavril hated him. He hates impudence.’

Jack wondered if the Tsar had ever looked really long and hard in a mirror, because the Tsar was pretty good at being impudent.

‘So he was already kind of in the line of fire,’ Jack said.

The thumb at Jack’s wrist moved to the back of his hand, gently playing over Jack’s knuckles.

‘But he was always half-cocked. He never had good plans. He never had anything except an inner fire, and it’s not enough. I attempted to be someone grounding, even though that’s not my way. When I was younger- But, no, I’m not that person anymore. I’m not even the person I was when I knew Fyodor anymore. I think what I’m trying to say is that when he was killed, I came to realise how vulnerable it made me, to feel things for people. It was safe to love Eva and Anton, and Seraphina – barely, but enough that I would keep doing it.’

‘And then I came along,’ Jack said, the words sounding unreal in his mouth, because that wasn’t how the story went at all.

‘I don’t love you,’ Pitch said.

There, that’s how the story is meant to go. It was weird that it hurt so much to hear.

‘But I could,’ Pitch said.

Jack’s fingers curled into a fist, and Pitch covered it with his whole hand. The warmth sank into his
bones, began to run down his forearm.

‘And I’d very much like not to.’

‘Right,’ Jack said, mouth dry. ‘So you want some help with that? Should I be trying to help you with that? I could tell you tons of reasons why you shouldn’t.’

‘I know,’ Pitch said. ‘I know you could.’

‘So how about I just do that and then you can go on your way-’

‘Your determination to hurt yourself when you’re already hurting, would be admirable, were it not for the fact that it’s been painstakingly taught to you,’ Pitch said, his voice strained.

‘Do I remind you of him?’

‘That first day, on the platform, I could have killed you for how much you reminded me of him. That move was the kind of idiotic thing he would have done, it was the reason we were constantly having to heal him out in the field. It’s the reason I have such a low tolerance for Anton’s misbehaviours, and what he does is almost reasonable at times.’

Pitch slid his hand beneath Jack’s fist, and wriggled his fingers between the space where Jack was digging half-moons into his own palm. And then Pitch’s hand pressed flat to his own, and Jack stared at it, kind of amazed at how much Pitch was touching him during this conversation.

‘I put you on the bottom of the callout sheet partly because someone had to go there, partly because Crossholt recommended it, and partly because I thought it might be a mercy. That if you were anything like him, you’d best not pass the initiation and find your way into the truths of what it is to be a Golden Warrior. I read your report. You seemed like a worse version of him. The idea of having someone like that back in the ranks again was not…appealing to me on many levels. Foolhardy acts of heroism are not what’s best for the team, in most cases.’

Jack nodded slowly.

‘But then it turned out that you’re – in many ways – nothing like him at all,’ Pitch said in wonder. ‘It surprised me at first. I kept waiting for you to show your true colours. Certainly there are similarities, but you share similarities with Anton, and myself, and Eva. That is to say – all soldiers have similarities if they are to become Golden Warriors. We are each of us designed for a purpose, and we need certain qualities of spirit to achieve that.’

Hips aching, Jack drew himself onto his side and pulled his legs up, and stretched out his other arm and rested his head on it. Pitch hadn’t made eye contact once, but he’d not stopped touching Jack’s hand, either. It was almost dreamlike.

‘Then, I became convinced that I could reveal some fundamental weakness in you,’ Pitch said, laughing to himself. ‘Perhaps you’ll despise me, but I was never entirely whole in my mind after I came out of the mountain, and sometimes I determine to do things that harm others. Especially if I think I’m doing it for the right reasons. But you had been cut deeply by the darkness too, yet you held up beneath it.’

‘I killed Crossholt.’

‘Trust me, if the others had known how he had been treating you, they would have lined up to kill him too. If Eva ever sees the scars on your back, she will undertake the responsibility of becoming a necromancer just to make sure it can happen, and the darkness never cut her too deep at all.’
Pitch moved closer, knees bumping into Jack’s, and Jack still didn’t look at him. Now it was really obvious that Jack wasn’t looking at him. Honestly, the whole conversation was kind of freaking him out.

‘So,’ Pitch said, ‘in trying to find a way to teach you how to control your darkness – I also found myself placing you in untenable situations to see what you might do. Though it wasn’t as straightforward as that. I was also being encouraged to place you in some of those situations. The Tsar had commanded me to bring you to heel sooner than anyone reasonably could. After the attack at the Palace, he and I had a rather unpleasant discussion about how poor a leader I was, that I could not contain you. When I pointed out it had taken me a rather long time to get the same thing under control myself, he only said that I didn’t have the benefit of guidance. That was when he gave me the vial of golden oil.’

The day of the induction. Jack remembered that all too well. He’d hated it, and yet…he still remembered the sound of Pitch praising him, soothing him. The reassurances he’d offered while pulling all those truths and sharp things out of Jack’s chest. Jack remembered his shoes echoing on tiles when he’d stormed away, outraged that anyone would do that to him.

But Pitch hadn’t made him take the oil.

A disloyal pair...

‘I also had to know if you’d ever hurt Seraphina,’ Pitch said, to himself. ‘So I was selfish, that day. Except the more I spoke with you, the more I realised that you had far more control over the darkness than I ever did, initially. We had unwittingly pushed you towards blackouts, and you embraced that, because you don’t want to know what you carry in you. Understandable. But harder then, to draw you back from it. Your determination is formidable when you choose to apply it.’

‘So…Bunnymund,’ Jack said tiredly. ‘That day in the training arena.’

‘It worked,’ Pitch said. ‘Then, afterwards…I had already imagined taking you over my knee, when you taunted me about spanking.’ A quiet breath of laughter. ‘It wasn’t quite attraction then. But I would have welcomed the opportunity to turn that ass of yours red and see you chastened. Anton had also made suggestions, because he fancies himself a match maker. Still, once I started thinking about it, I couldn’t easily turn the images away.’

‘Gross,’ Jack said, but he laughed. Because he’d started thinking about it too. Repulsed and attracted at the same time.

‘I was concerned the Tsar would act against you while I was away on the mission to Endan. The mission itself was a punishment, seeing the brooch… I believed he had turned you, or was very close to it. So I took a risk. It was seeing you training with the other Warriors, that night when you made all that ice on the ship, that I realised I had a measure of affection for you that wasn’t quite like what I had for others. I buried it as deeply as I could, but perhaps not as deeply as I wanted, given I had you living in my home when we landed back on Lune.’

The hand at Jack’s hand, moved slowly up his forearm, his upper arm, and then it was grasping his shoulder and tipping Jack backwards so that he had no choice but to stop staring at a spot on the bedspread. He caught Pitch’s eyes right before lips pressed firmly against his, forcing Jack’s mouth open, licking gently inside. Jack was pretty sure he didn’t whimper, exactly, but…close enough.

Pitch withdrew so that their breaths were brushing against each other’s lips.

‘I tried to bury it down, but you kept bringing it back up again. When we were on Endan, and you
told me it was too soon to be there, and it was the antithesis of what Fyodor would have said, and such a relief to hear it. Because until someone is truly tested, you don’t know how they’re going to react. You were honest with yourself, and therefore, with me. Then I realised those feelings again, when I saw how strong you are before the Darkness. You can hear it better than any of us, which means – I think it means it cut you deeper than it did me. You’ve kept so much softness, in spite of it. Even as it carves you into a harder shape.’

‘Are you sure that’s not you guys?’ Jack said, and then leaned forward when Pitch kissed him again. Every conversation he had with Pitch was so weird, but this was probably one of the better ones, even if it did scare him. ‘And I…’ Jack drew back again, even as lips chased his. ‘I almost let it get me. I wasn’t strong before it at all.’

‘It was your first time,’ Pitch said. ‘You said yourself that you weren’t ready. It wasn’t until it was bearing down on us directly, that you went towards it. Frightening, yes. In part because it hadn’t occurred to me until then – not completely – what it might look like if the Darkness took control of you and was able to use your ice against us too. But then, you remembered your sister, you turned and defeated it. Like some fabricated Hero’s tale from the headquarters of the Palace.’

Jack had no choice but to surrender to the lips moving across his. Pitch had painted his last sentence across Jack’s mouth, before pushing Jack onto his back, holding him down at the shoulder. Pitch’s mouth was warm, at times even tender. Jack hadn’t really been kissed like this before, and it was hard to remember himself during it, hard to remember his thoughts. It all disappeared into the nerves that lit up through his body, making him pliant beneath Pitch’s touch.

‘But I don’t want to love you, Jack,’ Pitch said when he drew back again, his mouth against Jack’s ear.

Jack was pretty sure if Pitch kept saying that to him, Jack would find a way to make Pitch stop having any feelings for him at all, because it hurt. It was a lance of pain that made him squeeze his eyes shut harder.

‘And you don’t want me to love you,’ Pitch said. ‘You’ll be killed for it. Perhaps it’s too late. Perhaps I’m already kissing a dead man.’

‘I hate you so much sometimes,’ Jack said, his voice breaking. He shoved Pitch away from him, his eyes stinging. ‘Stop it. Just stop it. You don’t know what he’s going to do.’

‘Don’t I?’ Pitch said. ‘Do you want to know what feelings I have, Jack? That I look at you sometimes and fleetingly imagine what it would have been like if we’d won the first rebellion? The heartache that follows because I know we didn’t? When I touch you, and I think that if things were different, I’d not need to hide whatever was growing between us from myself, from others. Every time I see you, I feel the wretchedness of living with the truth that it will never be different. Every time I look at you, Jack, I see all the things that are wrong with Lune. All the things we will never change. That I will never change. That – despite all of my experience and knowledge and power – will never, ever change. So I hate you too, sometimes.’

When Pitch moved over him, there was something vicious in his eyes, and Jack was frozen beneath it. Two hands pinning him, first at his shoulders, and then one of Pitch’s hands grabbed Jack’s wrist and dragged it over his head. Pitch’s mouth was fierce against his, even painful at times. Jack’s lips crushed against Pitch’s teeth, or bitten, or his tongue swooping so deep that Jack’s chest jerked as he nearly choked. He believed he could taste it then, the venom of it, the bitterness that lived inside of him.

Jack wanted to hate it. He wanted to find the strength to shove Pitch away. But instead he felt his
own bitterness inside of him, the heat that was Pitch stretched over him, and he couldn’t help but respond. Even so, he turned the kiss to something gentler, without knowing how. Perhaps in the way he didn’t fight Pitch’s movements, perhaps in the way he kept his mouth open, even when he needed to turn his head to the side and catch his breath. Even in the way he moaned, unable to help himself.

Pitch drew back minutes later, and Jack’s chest heaved as he caught his breath.

‘I see you with Seraphina,’ Pitch said, like they hadn’t stopped to kiss at all, like Pitch’s lips weren’t wet, ‘and it crushes me. She can’t afford to lose someone else, Jack. She can’t. She adores you. She asks me all the time about you. She tells me what you’re learning of the alphabet, she shows me in her books what you’re up to, she speaks wonderingly at the things you understand so quickly, and the things you don’t yet understand. And I see how well you fit with Eva and Anton. How well you fit here. Even as you try to live here like you’re already a ghost.’

Jack pulled the wrist out from underneath Pitch’s grasp, and covered his face with his palm. He knew Pitch was going to kill him in this room, he just didn’t know it would be like this, with words.

‘What do you want, Jack?’ Pitch said, pressing his lips to the fingers that covered Jack’s eyes. ‘Do you want me to tell you that I see the strength of you, and know that should you resist him, he will use your spine as nothing more than a stepping stone? One more among the thousands, so that he may lift himself higher? Or do you want me to tell you that I see how you fight, and then when you finally thought you’d broken, and you lay like a little child in that bed, I wanted nothing more than to lie down and hide from the world with you?’

‘Shut up,’ Jack whispered.

The Admiral was supposed to be a lot of things. He was even allowed to be everything Jack had discovered since – irascible, angry, bleak and almost unmoving at times. But Jack couldn’t let him be this.

‘Do you even want a relationship with me?’ Jack said. ‘What would that even mean? Is it just what we’re doing now?’

‘No,’ Pitch said. ‘I don’t want a relationship with you.’

‘I just-’

‘-But I don’t think it matters. Since I seem to be in one, regardless,’ Pitch said, sighing.

‘You can’t just decide we’re in a relationship and you have feelings and all this crap without actually letting me know a single thing about it.’ Jack grit his teeth together, and the hand at his face became a fist that thumped hard into Pitch’s chest. Once, and then again and again when he didn’t move. ‘What is wrong with you? Who does that? Maybe I don’t have feelings for you. Maybe I think you’re kind of awful! Maybe I don’t want to waste my time on someone who has given up on everything, even if he does give out like, the best orgasms of my entire life. I’m pretty sure anyone could have done that.’

‘Not anyone,’ Pitch said, and Jack glared at him.

‘If you want this to be a serious conversation, then stop making stupid jokes about how good you are at this. Everyone knows you’re good at it, because it’s obviously one of the only other things in your life that you care about, because Light only knows what you’d do with that darkness in you
Pitch’s eyes widened. Belatedly, he flinched backwards, his eyebrows pulled together, his mouth tense. Jack felt a tiny shred of vindication. Pitch could play him, sure, but if he was going to say all this stuff, he didn’t get to play games now. It wasn’t fair.

‘Besides,’ Jack said, pushing Pitch sideways and sitting up. ‘You’re terrible at this part. How did you even manage to have a relationship with Fyodor at all? Don’t- Don’t answer that. I don’t care. For the record? I don’t love you. I’m pretty sure I don’t even like you, sometimes. And I’ve already told you that I hate you every now and then, so I’ve got a lot of bases covered here. I spent like my entire childhood thinking you were the whole world, and then I met you.’

Jack felt something snap, a wire of frustration pinging apart inside of him. Because Anton had said that. Anton had said that right before they’d had that mess of a conversation that ended with Anton apparently caring so much about protecting Jack from Pitch, that he didn’t actually care about protecting Jack from Anton. That betrayal was still keen.

He hunched over and pushed his face into the bed and his muffled sound of frustration was still loud, still raw in his throat. A deep breath, another, and the mess in his head cleared a little.

‘I’m not done yet,’ Pitch said with some asperity. ‘You will stay here until I’m done talking.’

Jack felt something snap, a wire of frustration pinging apart inside of him. Because Anton had said that. Anton had said that right before they’d had that mess of a conversation that ended with Anton apparently caring so much about protecting Jack from Pitch, that he didn’t actually care about protecting Jack from Anton. That betrayal was still keen.

‘I have done wrong by you,’ Pitch said, his voice even. ‘You are correct to be upset with me, and I’m not going to try and defend myself. It seems that you want a fight, but I don’t want to give you one, because I have no argument that supports what I’ve done. I should never have left you in this room alone, unsupervised. I think- In the moment, I thought it would sever your attachment, or my attachment to you. It didn’t. Instead I’ve just wounded you, and hurt myself in the process.’
‘I handled it,’ Jack said tiredly.

‘Yes,’ Pitch said. ‘You did. You asked to come into this room again, which…shocked me. I’m not sure there’s something out there that you can’t handle, and I’m certain that’s not the point. So, before we talk about that in more detail. I am going to…be as clear as I possibly can. I don’t know what a relationship between the two of us would look like. We’re already living together and I don’t want you in my bedroom. Not yet. I think you do have feelings of affection towards me, but I can respect not wanting to act on them, I am not a whole person, and you have rather a lot going on right now. If you wish to cease any of this, I will cease. If you wish to continue, it will continue; with – ideally – me hurting you less.’

‘I need to think about it,’ Jack said.

‘Do,’ Pitch said. ‘Take as long as you need.’

Jack almost mocked that the Tsar would probably kill him before he made a decision, but he realised that wasn’t something he wanted to joke about. Not now. Sometimes he felt like all he had to withstand the force of Pitch, was his anger, his ability to talk back. When it fell away, he felt small. Even now, he didn’t quite understand why Pitch had feelings for him. The only thing he did understand was that Pitch didn’t want to.

‘I wish…’ Jack moved his head to the side so that he was looking at Pitch. ‘I wish I could’ve helped you. Like, not feel things for me. Or whatever. Seems like you’re just getting hurt.’

Pitch’s face did something, a pained expression, and then he moved forwards and said:

‘Come here.’

‘What?’

‘Come here.’

But Pitch didn’t wait for Jack to come over. He gathered him up and then moved towards the headboard where all the pillows were, and leaned back against it. Jack found himself on his back, leaning against Pitch’s chest, and Pitch’s arms were around him. Pitch was sitting back against the cushions and pillows and the headboard, Jack’s back was against Pitch’s chest, his legs rested between Pitch’s legs.

Alarm bells were going off in his mind. He bent his knees, staring ahead with wide eyes. He was pretty sure that he was being held. By the Admiral.

‘Um,’ Jack said, voice thin.

‘I want to try something,’ Pitch said.

‘Is this it?’ Jack said.

‘No,’ Pitch said, and then he rested his chin on the top of Jack’s head. ‘Is this a problem?’

‘This is weird.’

‘Mm. I thought about explaining aftercare to you, but I actually think I’d best show you. Perhaps then you’ll realise how neglected you’ve been.’

‘Look, if you just didn’t want to, I-’
‘I did,’ Pitch said. ‘You can’t know how much. I walked away because of it. I like having you here. Like this. Even if you are wound up and tense. So, I wish to try something. I want to try and calm you, through induction, and then see if I can’t…show you aftercare.’

‘Will I like it?’

‘I don’t know,’ Pitch said. Jack blinked, not expecting that answer. ‘Could we try? Are you comfortable?’

Jack nodded, frowning. He was. But it was strange. If he rested his hands by his sides, instead of folded together against his belly, they’d be resting on Pitch’s legs. His hair caught on Pitch’s clothing. One of Pitch’s arms was casually around his chest, heavy and warm. There was body heat all around him. He wanted to straighten out his legs and relax a bit more, he thought he could like this, except he didn’t know if it was safe to.

It reminded him of when Pitch had placed his hand on Jack’s wrist, during that hypnosis session the first time. Jack had wanted the touch so much, but Pitch had just been working him for information the entire time.

‘Not that comfortable,’ Jack said. ‘I mean physically, sure.’

‘Would you like to get an idea of what Anton was talking about before? I got the impression he didn’t actually explain much to you before he stormed out.’

‘He just said something about obligation and how you were meant to be nice to me afterwards. I told him it’s not your job to be nice to me.’

Pitch sighed. His palm rested flat on Jack’s chest, fingers idly stroking.

‘I’ve felt out of sorts since I walked away from you,’ Pitch said, like he was revealing a secret. ‘It wouldn’t surprise me if you’ve been the same. I left something half-done, and it bothers me. I thought it would fade, or that I would move on, but instead I’ve imagined having you in here, like this, feeling the way your body slowly warms against mine. Is that a problem? Are you too warm?’

Jack shook his head. He liked it.

Pitch’s other hand drifted down Jack’s arm and rested where Jack’s fingers were knotted together. Slowly, Pitch nudged at each of Jack’s fingers, coaxing them apart, and Jack reluctantly unlocked them, even as his shoulders tensed more.

‘I’ve wanted you like this,’ Pitch said, ‘but you don’t like it, do you?’

‘I don’t know what you want from me.’

‘I want you to close your eyes,’ Pitch said, ‘and imagine a circle, and in the centre, is a golden dot.’

*Induction.*

Jack bit at the inside of his cheek, and then figured he either had to walk away, or try this, and there wasn’t much of a middle ground. He didn’t want to stay this tense against Pitch’s chest – between Pitch’s legs – forever. He forced himself to take a breath, then closed his eyes, then saw the black circle above him, the circle of golden light in the centre.

It happened so fast. He almost didn’t need Pitch to talk him through it, taking him deeper, imagining that he was a weight falling down, the circle staying steady above him, the light holding
his focus. Years of the creche using induction and hypnosis on them as children, and then it happening in the Barracks – just imagining the circle made the breath shudder hard out of his lungs as he stopped holding it so high in his chest. His shoulders relaxed in increments, and Pitch trailed his fingers along Jack’s collarbones, his own breathing so steady and deep at Jack’s back.

‘Good,’ Pitch said. ‘It’s second nature for you, isn’t it?’

‘Mmhm,’ Jack hummed. He wasn’t deep in it yet, but his body knew how this worked. *There is a circle, with a golden dot in the middle.* For Jack, the circle was always black, the dot was always a small, focused light. The circle contained him, the light gave him something to focus on. Pitch didn’t take him as far into himself as last time, so that Jack was more aware.

A hand in his hair, slowly smoothing it back instead of forward, over and over again. Jack’s eyelids fluttered. He shifted a little, because it was nice, because he wasn’t sure what to do with it.

‘Jack,’ Pitch said, distracting him, ‘I want you to time your breathing to mine. Slow and easy now. Focus on the circle above you, and your body will do the rest.’

So Jack concentrated, matched his breathing to Pitch’s, which was slower than his regular meditative pace. Pitch must have slowed his breathing down further. Jack felt himself mirror the slow inhale, the pause, the long exhale. He resisted relaxing, even as his body fought for it. Eventually, his eyelids settled heavily, properly, almost like he was sleeping. The middle of his back loosened, and his whole weight rested against Pitch. One of his legs straightened.

‘That’s very good,’ Pitch whispered, his voice so close. One hand stayed in his hair, and the other slid over Jack’s forearm and scooped up Jack’s hand, holding it close. ‘I want you to squeeze my hand if you start to feel afraid at any point. Can you squeeze my hand now?’

‘I’m not afraid,’ Jack said, his voice deeper, more even than before.

‘Can you squeeze my hand anyway?’

So Jack did, and he turned his head towards Pitch’s chest when Pitch praised him for it. He could feel Pitch’s voice and wanted it to vibrate straight into his ear. He could hear Pitch’s heart beating. Distantly, he thought he could curl up and fall asleep right here. It felt like breaking all the rules. Had he had this before the creche? Before his parents had given him and his sister up to Lune?

‘I want you to think back to the first time you were in this room, and how full of tension you were, and then how that tension was spent. Afterwards, I asked you if you were able to stand, and then I walked away from you.’

It fell into Jack’s minds in images and sensations. The way the room had seemed so huge and filled with so many things, all of it new. The whips that he’d pulled to the ground. The thrill and terror of Pitch finding him and that dread and apprehension twisting into anticipation and lust. There had been pain searing into him, and the sense that it would go on forever, but right as Jack had plummeted through something inside of himself, Pitch had stopped. Instead of crashing hard into nothing at all, he’d had all of that turned into coming so hard he saw stars. He remembered being a dead weight against Pitch, and stepping away from him, and feeling cold, lost.

Jack shifted, uncomfortable. Pitch hadn’t told him the feelings were far away like clouds this time, which meant they were close. They were *there.*

He’d felt cold, and confused.

‘What was it like, when I walked away?’
Jack’s breathing hitched, and though he didn’t squeeze Pitch’s hand – he wasn’t exactly afraid – Pitch responded anyway.

‘Keep your breathing matched to mine,’ Pitch said calmly. ‘Take some moments to focus on that again, before answering.’

The hand at his hair slid down and became fingers resting on his cheek. Jack slowed his breathing and still didn’t really want to talk about it. If Pitch had taken him really deeply into himself, made it a proper hypnosis session, he’d be talking already. He was vaguely aware that maybe Pitch didn’t want to do that to him this time, wanted Jack to have more choice in the matter.

But it also made this part really unpleasant.

‘I don’t like this,’ Jack said.

‘I know,’ Pitch said, the words not clinical or empty, but full of some knowing that was almost regretful.

‘I don’t want you to know this about me,’ Jack said.

‘Know what?’ Pitch said, responding to Jack’s slowed voice with his own measured words. Jack thought of how Pitch had just handed him the salve. Pitch had called it a ‘pleasing diversion.’ He’d talked about needing a lock on the door to stop Jack from walking in others. He’d walked away and left.

There was a voice inside of him reminding him that it was fine, that’s the way it was supposed to be. Jack was needy.

‘You didn’t want me to know what about you, Jack?’ Pitch said, cutting through the tumult, but pressing on it at the same time.

‘I’m not supposed to want things like this.’

‘Like what?’

Jack didn’t realise how hard he’d squeezed Pitch’s hand, until halfway through Pitch leading him through the initial stages of induction all over again. The circle, the light, following Pitch’s breath, and only then did his hand finally relax.

‘Oh, Jack,’ Pitch said, the same thing in his voice now that had been there when he’d seen Jack’s scars.

‘You’re not being fair,’ Jack said.

‘I know,’ Pitch replied. ‘Then, I introduced you to something you were afraid of, I hurt you, I showed you all of that intensity, and then I walked away.’

‘No,’ Jack said. ‘Yes, but- After… I didn’t know it was meant to end that fast.’

‘It wasn’t meant to,’ Pitch said, ‘and you were craving more, weren’t you?’

‘I’m sorry,’ Jack whispered.

Pitch curled into Jack, his legs moving up and anchoring Jack’s hips. The hand that had been at his cheek now moving to Jack’s chest and just holding him down flat. Jack couldn’t think to protest at it. The warmth was good, and he almost thought he could disappear into Pitch then. He was
everywhere.

Belatedly, he thought this was what he’d wanted the first time. Maybe not this, because he had no basis to compare this to, no originating memory where he knew it could be like this. But he’d wanted Pitch’s arms around him, and he’d wanted to lean his weight against Pitch, and he’d wanted to just not think for a little while. To let his breathing return to normal. To vanish into warmth.

But he wanted it to be different, so he moved, seeking something more. His body wasn’t quite his to command, sluggish, and Pitch had tensed at first like Jack was leaving. But instead Jack turned around, knees going everywhere, until he was lying chest to chest, until his legs draped over either side of Pitch’s hips, until one of Pitch’s arms rested over Jack’s lower back, and his other hand cupped Jack’s neck. Jack pressed his face into the crook of Pitch’s neck and shoulder and shuddered.

‘You don’t need to be sorry for wanting this,’ Pitch said, lips so close to Jack’s ear now. ‘I am truly sorry for making you think you should be, for reinforcing what everyone else has ever taught you. But this, now, can you feel my heart beating?’

Jack nodded. Thought that if he could dig his way into Pitch’s chest and close the ribcage behind him, he’d stay there forever. It made no sense, and it made him weak to know that about himself. He hid from himself in Pitch’s embrace, and felt his breathing steadying anyway. He’d forgotten about the circle, the light. Pitch’s breathing was comforting and he felt so good.

‘This is only some of it,’ Pitch said. ‘You should have had this and more afterwards, especially the first time. Instead, I gave you nothing at all.’

Jack shook his head, his hair catching on Pitch’s. ‘And ever since, you convinced yourself that it was normal, didn’t you? After Crossholt, after everyone else, after the Tsar telling you whatever he told you about me, you made this one more thing to be strong about, didn’t you?’

Jack shook his head again, feeling horribly raw. Of course that was what he’d done. He didn’t know that this was meant to be a part of anything. But he did know that if Pitch had done it that first time, Jack would have been too wiped out to resist it, and he would have wanted it. But maybe he would have wanted it too much. Pitch smelled of the spices he sometimes added to his tea, faintly of sweat, of something that was secretly welcoming. His arms were protective, his hands firm, but still gentle. Maybe Jack would have wanted this way too much.

‘Look at how brave you’re being,’ Pitch said, his voice compelling, so close to Jack’s ear. ‘You are so conditioned to the hardness of people, how it must cut you to let yourself have this, even while I’m sure you’re trying to convince yourself that you shouldn’t. Letting me see you like this, letting me get close to you like this, it’s a gift, Jack. Not a burden.’

‘You do it for everyone,’ Jack said. ‘Except me.’

‘Because I knew it would mean more,’ Pitch said, sighing. ‘Last time, I wish I’d seen… I should never have let you leave. I’d already decided I needed to do things differently. You left because you were being brave for me, weren’t you?’

‘It wasn’t bravery,’ Jack said, his voice breaking. He’d stopped trying to match his breathing to Pitch’s a little while back. ‘It’s not bravery to run away before hearing you kick me out. To run away so I don’t have to hear you call me a ‘pleasing diversion.’”
Pitch’s breath caught, and Jack hardly cared. He’d squeezed his eyes shut, until they hurt. He didn’t want to cry, even as the hand rubbing circles into this lower back – avoiding the worst of his scars – threatened to crack through the walls he’d put around all of this.

‘I didn’t want to push you away,’ Jack said. ‘I think I need it too much. I don’t want to leave.’

‘You don’t have to,’ Pitch said.

‘But in five minutes, you’re going to stop and-’

‘No,’ Pitch said. ‘Not in five minutes. Not in thirty. Not in an hour. We can stay here. As long as you need.’

‘What about you?’

Pitch said nothing, and Jack wondered if Pitch was realising that he didn’t want to put himself through this for thirty minutes, or an hour, or longer. He braced himself, and was surprised when Pitch’s arms moved and became heavy around his back. It drew Jack’s attention – Pitch had been concertedly avoiding the worst of the scars since they’d entered the room. Now, bands of warmth secured over them, pinning Jack in place.

‘There’s no shame in admitting I need this too,’ Pitch said. ‘Is there? Would you hold that against me?’

It wasn’t supposed to be like this. Pitch wasn’t supposed to need these things, or be vulnerable in this way, and yet it fractured Jack’s idea that Pitch was forcing himself to do it. He wasn’t making himself perform an obligation that he didn’t really care to perform, if he needed it too. It was like glimpsing a secret, one that Jack wanted to hide from others, even – a little – from himself.

‘Would you?’ Pitch said again, and Jack could hear the smile in his voice, though it sounded sad. ‘Are you currently holding me up to your standards, and finding me lacking? I know it’s already happened quite a lot. Here, should I tell you all the ways that I am lacking, so that you might feel nothing at all for me?’

‘No, it’s cool,’ Jack said, his voice soft, a sigh between them. ‘I already know a lot of the ways you’re kind of an asshole. You’re really sharing that way.’

Pitch laughed into Jack’s hair, and Jack closed his eyes.

It wasn’t working though. He didn’t feel nothing at all for Pitch. There had never been a moment in his life where he hadn’t felt something, whether it was hero-worship as a child or lust as a teenager, annoyance or sympathy, rage or this gentleness curling in him as Pitch’s laughter ruffled Jack’s hair, as his arms wrapped so tightly around Jack that he was torn between telling him to get his arms off Jack’s scars, and telling him to hold tighter.

He didn’t love Pitch.

But maybe, one day, he could.
An Early Morning Interlude

Chapter Notes

Thanks all for reading / commenting / kudosing! It means a lot <3 Hope you're all having a good week.

Jack woke to fingers in his hair, another hand resting on his upper arm. At some point in the night he’d been draped in half a blanket, and he still rested on top of the world’s least comfortable body pillow. He kept his eyes closed, feeling warm but not overheated, aware that it wasn’t time to wake up yet. Maybe he’d only napped. He knew it was the Royal Admiral touching him though, was beginning to think he could pick that touch anywhere, even though he’d never had much touch in his life.

He’d never woken up with someone before. Well, not since Pippa used to have nightmares and crawl into his bed. He’d never spent the night. A part of him was a little annoyed to not just have his own space, and a part of him never wanted to sleep another way. Ever.

‘What time is it?’ Jack said, his voice sleep scratched.

‘Only about two or three,’ Pitch said, his voice deep, relaxed. It vibrated through Jack’s body.

‘Did you sleep?’

‘I did,’ Pitch said.

Jack pressed his forehead down into Pitch’s shoulder, into his clothing. They’d not even gotten undressed. That was probably half of why he was so uncomfortable in the first place. But he felt oddly settled all the same. After everything that had happened yesterday, everything Pitch had said…

Looking back, he wondered if he could almost see glimpses of it, flashes where Pitch made a decision based on wanting to avoid affection. He still wasn’t sure how he felt about it. But he knew that Pitch didn’t expect him to feel happy or delighted. He could tell that Pitch thought it was a devastating thing, for Jack to be the object of his affections. Everything Pitch had said, with a few hours of sleep behind him, looked like the kind of things Jack might say to someone else he grew feelings for.

You really shouldn’t love me. I’m kind of a disaster. Like catastrophe just follows me. Look, I liked Jamie and he’s gone now. And Flimmouse is gone now.

‘Oh,’ Jack said, sighing.

‘Hm?’ Pitch sounded so sleepy. Jack reached up without thinking and touched his fingers to Pitch’s face, bumping against his cheek, smoothing over his eyebrow. He felt Pitch’s breathing turn uneven beneath his own chest.

‘You’ve been trying to drive me away,’ Jack said. ‘You think it’d be best if I didn’t have feelings for you at all.’
‘Yes,’ Pitch said, sounding like it hadn’t occurred to him to do anything else. ‘Of course.’

‘You’ve gotta stop telling me that you don’t want to have feelings for me,’ Jack said, his voice muffled. He lifted up just enough, to make his voice clearer. He didn’t want to have to repeat this, not when it already felt weird enough to be this bared, to feel this open. ‘I get it. It’s in everyone’s best interests if you don’t. But you do. I’m sure you’ll quit it at some point, but until then, it just makes me feel like…’

Oh, there it was, Jack couldn’t finish that sentence after all. He closed up, and shook his head into Pitch’s shoulder.

‘Makes you feel like what?’ Pitch said, rubbing Jack’s arm.

‘Is this still aftercare?’ Jack said.

‘Deft segue,’ Pitch remarked drily. ‘No. I think this is just… I wanted to touch you. You’re here, and I can, so I did. You seem to like it.’

‘Kinda do,’ Jack admitted. Understatement, he really liked it. Probably a good thing that Jack had practically soldered himself to Pitch’s body.

‘Back to what we were talking about, however. Makes you feel like-?’

‘No,’ Jack said softly, drawing out the syllable. ‘This is dumb.’

‘Do you want me to guess?’

‘Go on then,’ Jack said, his cheeks flushed, wriggling like he could press himself closer to Pitch’s torso. The younger teenaged version of himself would lose his mind to know that this was happening in the future. But now that it was happening, Jack felt less like he was fizzing apart with anticipation, he felt quiet, steadied. For the first time in a while, he didn’t feel like he was off balance.

Pitch didn’t lie to him. At least, not in his raw moments. Nothing about the night before had been a lie. It had hurt, it had been almost too honest. That, alone, was soothing. It wasn’t the platitudes the Tsar offered. It didn’t attempt to resemble anything that Jack was familiar with. It was naked and filled with spikes, a reminder that Pitch had been cut deep by the darkness and would never be the same. He’d admitted it himself. He wasn’t a whole person, he sometimes did things that harmed people.

He’d hinted at doing so much more for the Tsar, too, which made Jack sad and scared at the same time. If Pitch was too ashamed to say the things he’d done, when Jack already knew so much more about what the Tsar was capable of, then those things could only be monstrous.

‘I think…’ Pitch said, taking a slow breath in, ‘that when I keep telling you I don’t want to have feelings for you, it makes you feel like you’re not worth having feelings for.’

Shit.

‘That doesn’t sound like me,’ Jack said blandly.

Pitch laughed. A low rumble behind a closed mouth. Jack was stroking Pitch’s hair. It felt so weird. It was the strangest part of the whole thing so far, that he was touching Pitch. Normally, Pitch touched him, and Jack was immobilised, or not allowed, or didn’t think to. Pitch’s hair was wiry, strong, coarse. His scalp was warm, the skin of his ears so delicate that Jack felt like he’d
uncovered a secret.

‘Perhaps,’ Pitch said, ‘but in case my guess was close, I can categorically say that it’s not about worth. You charm far more people than you realise. It’s so easy to hold you in high regard. Once I started, I couldn’t stop. I feel as though when we met, you held me in this place of hero-worship-like esteem, and then as you say, you got to know me, and it changed. You don’t even know if you like me as a person. For me, it was the reverse. I didn’t like you. I thought, from your file, that you were a miscreant. Then, I got to know you, and even if I didn’t have these feelings for you, I’d still hold you in such high regard. There’s nothing you can do about it, I’m afraid. No secret you can tell me, to pollute that. The Tsar has tried. And Crossholt. All of the propaganda about the Overland creche. Even *you*.’

That was frightening. That was Jack’s heart beating harder and his fingers going still and feeling like Pitch was buying into a lie somehow. That he was believing something empty and without merit. He felt that he was cheating Pitch. That he’d somehow sold a gimmick, and Pitch had fallen for it.

‘The reason I’ve never said these things so plainly in the past,’ Pitch said, ‘that I talk with such prevarication or self-deprecation, that I frame it as ‘I don’t want to have feelings for you’ instead of ‘how could I not have feelings for you?’ is because you have no tools to help you understand what I’m trying to say. The truth in it. That I am so… I cannot even think about what the Tsar might do to you, but I cannot stop thinking about it. My sleep– I’ve never had so many nightmares about Fyodor, as I’ve had since realising I had feelings for you. And you, snow boy, would just tell me that it’s as simple as getting to know the real you, and then of course I wouldn’t like you anymore, and it would solve all my problems.’

‘How can you be so insightful with this crap, and like, so shit at interacting with people at the same time? How are you the Royal Admiral, when you’re like…’

Pitch, rather than getting offended, was laughing again.

Jack craved that. Laughter was such a rare thing, and he treasured it. He wanted Pitch’s amusement, to know he might be pleased, even if it was in this strange, self-recriminating way.

‘I don’t know how you can stand it,’ Jack said. ‘Living here. Seeing him all the time. He killed someone you loved. And you don’t even stay in the Barracks. Why here?’

‘He demanded it. He won’t let me stay with the Warriors.’

‘So that wasn’t…your choice?’

‘No,’ Pitch said quietly. ‘Of course I’m used to it now, it’s been a terribly long time since then. The trick of it is just convincing yourself you have no other desires in life, except to occasionally have sex, and spend time with people you’re close to. But not *too* close to, because he can’t abide that either. I learned a long time ago it’s best to not cultivate hopes or dreams for the future. But, ah, don’t the wisest say it’s best to live in the present anyway?’

‘Pretty sure that’s not what they meant,’ Jack said.

That Pitch was used to it, that explained a lot. Jack hated it though. He needed passion in his life, and he needed it to be more than just sex. He needed something to fight for, something to believe in. North had talked about Pitch being broken, and he knew that this was exactly what North meant.
Can I ask...something stupid?"

'I'm shocked you're not just asking,' Pitch said, squeezing Jack’s arm gently in reassurance.

'Why did you decide to have Seraphina?'

'That,' Pitch said, and then Jack felt his whole body move at the huge breath Pitch took, 'was the Tsar’s idea. Eva had been courting me – to make a child – for some time. It was strategic, too. Eva wanted someone in a position of power, who was genuinely strong-willed, to have a child with. I believe she courted one other, and then changed her mind. I assumed I’d be disinterested in the child, I didn’t want to feel anything for it, Eva was happy to take full responsibility for upbringing – she has an intimate, solid network of relationships, of which Anton and I are only a part. I also knew that if I had a child with Eva, the Tsar would stop pushing for it. He only wanted a bargaining chip, someone to use as leverage over me – which I was sure would never happen – and I planned to go on with my life and know he was wrong.'

'Oh man, that backfired, huh?'

'It wasn’t my plan,' Pitch said, as Jack looked up to see the expression on his face – resigned, accepting, 'so it didn’t backfire for anyone except me. I don’t think I’m the poorer for it.'

'So it wasn’t even your idea?'

'I maintained for centuries that I didn’t believe in bringing a child into a world that Darkness ruled. I was famous for it. I think I single-handedly managed to drop the overall reproduction rate of the Golden Warriors, because of my attitude.'

Jack’s hand curved underneath Pitch’s jaw, where the skin was velvety soft, and so warm. Jack could feel his pulse thumping. Then he slid his hand to the back of Pitch’s neck, wriggling his fingers beneath. Pitch hissed, and Jack took a moment to realise what had done it, and then bit his lower lip.

'Too cold?'

'You’re warming up,' Pitch said. 'I wanted to ask – the induction last night, how are you about it this morning?'

'Fine,' Jack said, shrugging. He knew Pitch would probably want more than that as an answer, so Jack thought about it, even though he’d not really given it a second thought after it had served its purpose. 'It was clever, actually? Like, I could tell I could come out of it whenever I wanted – it wasn’t as deep as normal, but I could sort of... I dunno, I get it. I didn’t like thinking about what happened the first time, but that was the point, right? I just didn’t understand. Not the induction, I get that. I mean I guess I didn’t understand...anything about this, really. What it was supposed to be.'

'You’d be within your rights to never forgive me.'

'Yeah, well, I sort of get why you walked away,' Jack said, listing absently into Pitch’s hand, where it curved around the side of his head. 'The induction was gone too, like, as soon as I changed position and lay on top of you, I was mostly out of the circle and the dot and stuff. And the first time, with you leaving, I just- I just didn’t like it, I guess. I’m kind of worried about what next time will even be like. I mean, maybe I’ll just walk away again, or…'

'We’ll talk about it,' Pitch said. 'We can talk about it now. I don’t plan to put you in a position like that after a scene ever again, for both of our sakes. If you wish to walk away and not receive
aftercare, we can make it a proviso that you must use the signal word to do so, otherwise I will make you stay.’

Jack shivered at the thought. For some reason, the idea of being made to stay and be looked after touched something inside of him. He swallowed, bit at the inside of his lip. Was that weird? That was probably weird.

‘If you decide you don’t want to do anything in this room again,’ Pitch said, ‘that’s also acceptable.’

‘To you maybe,’ Jack said, laughing a little.

‘What do you like about it?’

‘Oh, um. It’s not obvious?’

Pitch hummed, pleased, and his hands slipped over Jack’s shoulders, over his back, until they pressed down hard into Jack’s scars. Jack tensed, relaxed, tensed again, and then wriggled a little. He made a faint sound of exasperation, and went still. As soon as he did, Pitch moved his hands up to the top of Jack’s shoulders and left them there.

‘Tell me,’ Pitch said.

‘Nope,’ Jack said. ‘Even if you touch the scars again. Creep.’

Pitch made a sound of agreement, and Jack almost laughed. Almost. Did he like it when Pitch touched the scars? Even though it felt strange? Even though it was never quite comforting? Pitch hadn’t even done it to be comforting.

Pitch cleared his throat. ‘What if I ask questions and you say whether I’m correct or not?’

‘That could work,’ Jack said, moving the hand at the back of Pitch’s neck to Pitch’s side instead. He could feel through the thickness of Pitch’s robe, the strength of him, the muscles over his ribs, the tautness of his waist. He’d never seen Pitch naked. It had to be deliberate. A power thing, maybe.

‘Do you like that I take control of you?’

Jack made a scoffing noise, and then pursed his lips, because of course he liked that. So he nodded furtively, and wondered if he was supposed to feel vaguely guilty at this point. Except Pitch liked taking control, so…didn’t that kind of work out?

‘I know you like not being able to think,’ Pitch said. ‘Though, I suspect you enjoy being challenged more than you know.’

‘Maybe I know,’ Jack said.

‘I think you may like pain, in controlled circumstances, as long as it’s never the whip. But perhaps you believe it’s more confusing, than anything.’

‘No, I like it,’ Jack said, laughing. ‘I mean- It was confusing at first, but how long did you think that would stay confusing for? Anyway, you didn’t really hurt me much the second time, I liked that too. Except…’

‘Except?’
‘No, um, it’s kind of weird?’

‘I assure you that whatever it is, it’s not weird,’ Pitch said. Jack’s legs were still splayed over Pitch’s hips, and when Pitch bent his knees and moved them up, Jack swallowed at how suggestive everything was. Even though they were both fully clothed, there was something...

Jack’s heart beat faster. Beneath his hips, he thought maybe he could feel Pitch getting hard. Maybe.

‘When you tied me up,’ Jack said, feeling breathless, ‘I didn’t like- Even though you were touching me, I still sort of felt like you weren’t? I didn’t- I just…’

‘You didn’t like it,’ Pitch said. ‘I’m glad you’re telling me that. Though I also gathered it, as the scene went on. You like contact.’

Jack nodded, then held his breath when a finger touched his neck, the bottom of his jaw, and then his chin. A gentle pressure, and Jack looked up as Pitch leaned forward and pressed his lips to Jack’s. A light touch, and warm. Pitch’s breath was bitter, but somehow, not bad. Jack opened his eyes and looked into Pitch’s, searching for something, too close to see much of an expression at all until Pitch leaned back and Jack saw his eyebrows raised, questioning.

All Jack saw was someone who had been hurt so much, for so long, that he’d become whatever he was now. Dangerous, harmful, subtly rebelling but not really rebelling at all in other ways. He still went on that mission to Endan, even though he knew it was a punishment.

He was the Royal Admiral, he was supposed to be powerful and untouchable.

Jack lifted a hand and touched Pitch’s cheek and wished he didn’t care, because he could feel it on the horizon. A sense that maybe he was already a dead man, just for this. Just for how good it felt to have Pitch’s legs bent up between his, and how good Pitch’s skin felt against his fingers.

‘What are you thinking?’ Pitch said, staring at him.

‘I’ve never seen you naked,’ Jack said abruptly. ‘I’ve never even see you *come*. Let’s do that. Today. I think.’

The hand at his jaw wasn’t cruel or even harsh, but Jack faltered to a halt at the way the questioning gaze had turned commanding in an instant. Maybe someone else would be angry, but Jack fell still, even his thoughts stopped racing. But he wanted Pitch to come, and he wanted to see Pitch naked. There had to be a way he could get one or the other, or both.

But Pitch had been clear that he controlled everything in this room, and Jack…wanted that too.

The touch at his jaw turned into caresses, and Pitch looked pleased, and Jack wondered why. Maybe because he’d stopped talking? Because he’d yielded to Pitch? There were unspoken rules here, and Jack liked that he seemed to get them right more often than not. He thought back to Pitch calling him obedient, and almost shivered. Him? *Obedient*?

Jack risked leaning into Pitch’s touch, and didn’t look away. Pitch dragged his thumb behind Jack’s ear, along the line of his neck, down to his collarbone, slipping beneath clothing.

‘Is that what you really want?’ Pitch said.

‘Yeah,’ Jack said, heart hammering at the thought that he might get it. Pitch spread his bent knees under Jack’s legs, forcing his legs wider. Jack felt the material of his pants just about creak from
the stretch. Thought to the time before, when Jack had to wriggle and jump and look generally ridiculous to remove them. The same pants. Or maybe the other pair, the ones that looked identical.

‘We do it my way,’ Pitch said, ‘and you don’t get to come. So if you want something else, you’d best say so.’

*Oh, man, does he really think that’s going to stop me? Really?*

‘Then I won’t come,’ Jack said, and could have fist-bumped the air at the way Pitch’s eyes widened. Did he really have no idea how much Jack wanted to see Pitch get off? Jack was hanging out for it. He wanted to know. Not coming was a small price to pay, and if Jack had to follow some stupid rules to get that, he’d follow them.

‘Open your mouth,’ Pitch said, lips curling, gaze turning lidded in a moment. Jack realised Pitch was kind of hard beneath him, maybe had been for a little while, and he rocked his hips down. Pitch sighed in disappointment. ‘That wasn’t what I asked you to do, was it?’

Jack bit his bottom lip, and then opened his mouth, thinking that this wasn’t Pitch getting undressed or anything, and that was kind of unfair.

Then Pitch slid two fingers into Jack’s mouth and smiled up at him, pulling down on Jack’s lower jaw, until Jack made a faint, throaty sound and felt his jaw ache.

‘So cold though,’ Pitch said thoughtfully, and Jack realised exactly what Pitch wanted to do. Something that Jack actually knew how to do, except, yeah, that had been back when his body temperature had not been frigid. Pitch’s fingers felt searing in his mouth. They drummed on his tongue, and Jack’s breath stopped in his nose. It was getting harder to keep his eyes open.

Pitch’s fingers withdrew, came back with another finger, and Jack leaned into it, wanting it. He’d started imagining this years ago. When he knew it existed, when he knew how good he could make someone else feel. He wasn’t under any illusions that he was as good at blowing someone as some of the Warriors probably were, but he still wanted to try.

Pitch inhaled sharply, and then slowly withdrew his fingers. He waited until Jack opened his eyes.

‘I have a set of instructions I’d like you to follow to the letter,’ Pitch said, and Jack nodded. ‘Get off the bed and get undressed without saying a single word. You don’t have to make a show of it, but you do have to do it where I can see, and I want you to remove your shirt too.’

*Scars,* Jack thought, and then he just nodded again. Pitch had already seen them. Pitch touched them anyway, now that he knew where they were. It was good too, he didn’t have to worry about how Pitch was going to react anymore, because the reaction had already happened.

‘Then, you are to go into the bathroom. You’ll find a glass in the cabinet. Run the taps until you reach a temperature that you can hold in your mouth without scalding yourself, but I don’t want it to be entirely comfortable, either. I don’t think we have to warm your mouth up, but I think I want to. You’re welcome to practice holding the water in your mouth in the bathroom. Return with a glass of the water at a temperature you can tolerate, and you’ll get both of the things you’ve asked for. If you burn the inside of your mouth, you are to tell me, and if you don’t feel comfortable with what I’m asking, you will tell me that too.’

Jack’s mouth was already a little warmer, just from Pitch’s fingers resting there. And Pitch’s cock would do even more than that. But the idea of warming his mouth up for Pitch, the fact that he had
to bring the water back and what – do it here? In front of him?

His heart was beating so heavily that Jack felt like it was rocking his whole body.

‘Whenever you’re ready,’ Pitch said, tilting his head at Jack as though he wasn’t sure why Jack hadn’t started moving yet.

*Give a guy a moment to catch up to your crazy sex plans, by the Light, Pitch.*

Pitch didn’t help at all. Jack made a sound of frustration when he had to shift awkwardly to get his legs around Pitch’s bent knees – seriously, Pitch enjoyed making Jack’s life way harder than it had to be – but refused to say a single word. Pitch hadn’t said that Jack couldn’t make a sound.

Then, he stood at the side of the bed and took a few steps closer to the bathroom because he didn’t have to be super close, Pitch just had to be able to see him. It was disconcerting being watched. He bent down and pulled off his socks – at some point he’d kicked off his shoes, could see one of them right now, lying upside down. Then, his pants, refusing to look at Pitch directly, because he was just reclining in the bed like it was his right to ask for these things, like he could just expect Jack to do them.

It made Jack’s breathing come faster, that he would do them. That he liked this part, even if it made him nervous, even if it put him on the spot. He was careful with the rest of his clothing, and he hesitated on the buttons of his shirt, reminding himself that Pitch had seen them, he had seen them. He risked looking up, and Pitch’s gaze was steadying. It was like Pitch understood, though he didn’t say a word. It helped.

Jack clumsily undid the rest of the buttons and shrugged the shirt off, laying it on the ground carefully and turning, walking into the bathroom. Way weirder being in there completely naked, but at least he’d been in there before. He knew where the light switch was, he knew where the glasses were kept.

When he looked at himself in the mirror, his hair was spiked up from Pitch’s hands ruffling it so much. He kind of liked it. He leaned closer and stared at his eyes, the silvery-blue, the gold rim, thinking that maybe he didn’t recognise himself after the initiation, but he was starting to adjust to the idea of Jack Frost.

Jack swallowed, ran the taps and got a hand towel so that he could touch the metal once the hot tap reached its burning temperature. He couldn’t turn those taps off with his bare skin anymore.

It took trial and error to get it as warm as he could stand it. He tested it with his finger so he didn’t burn his mouth, but it turned out he could handle a slightly warmer temperature in his mouth than on the skin of his fingers anyway. He’d sipped at a whole lot of water – mouth already warming – and felt strangely exhilarated to be doing something that would make Pitch more comfortable. That would somehow be for *him*, even though Jack was on his own, just running different temperatures into the glass to get it right.

Eventually, he thought he had it, and walked back into the room, only to nearly spill the glass when he realised that Pitch had stripped while Jack was too busy listening to water running.

‘You can talk,’ Pitch said. ‘If you wish.’

‘Cool,’ Jack said, without thinking. ‘You’re so naked.’

How could Pitch be naked, and Jack still feel more bare and exposed than him? But Pitch was lying there, one hand under his head, the other resting casually in the dip below his ribs. Jack’s
eyes roved over his darker skin, the scars – some paler, some even darker, some that had healed well, others that hadn’t.

‘I thought- Why do you have so many?’ Jack said, and Pitch shrugged.

‘In the beginning, I couldn’t sustain the healing light for long, and when leading a team, I would often heal others first. Or I’d be on assignment for months and have no access to the Priesthood. I’ve truly had the vast majority of my wounds healed.’

Pitch’s hand trailed along a slash that ran from his lip, across into his abdomen casually. And then he let his hand rest again.

Jack’s eyes roved. Pitch had the build of someone who had spent all his life in the military. It wasn’t that he was made of muscle, but war hadn’t been forgiving, and he was lean and muscular and had very little fat on him. It was different to someone like North, who had gained some fat with retiring out of the military, a sign that he was doing very well for himself indeed. A sign he had started to experience luxury and comfort, instead of privation and loss.

But he was beautiful. Jack wanted to touch all of him. He wanted to curve his palm around Pitch’s calf to see how it fit in his hand. He wanted to touch the dips by the jut of his hips. He wanted to trace the collarbones until he found the shy space between.

‘Come here,’ Pitch said, beckoning. ‘Get onto the bed. Keep hold of the glass.’

Jack nodded, walked over, got onto the bed and pretended he wasn’t super clumsy holding the warm water – his whole hand heated through – and wished he had his staff because it would make just floating and landing lightly super easy. Whatever he was doing now probably counted as clambering.

‘Did you burn your mouth?’ Pitch said. Jack shook his head. Pitch moved the hand behind his head up and tapped his fingers on Jack’s lips until he opened up, and then those fingers slid inside, and Jack could already feel how much the temperature had changed. Pitch watched Jack’s face, and the smile that followed was dark, pleased.

‘Take a mouthful of the water,’ Pitch said, slipping his fingers free. ‘Hold it in your mouth, and don’t swallow until I say.’

Jack looked down at the glass. His hand was shaking. Okay, that was kind of embarrassing.

Without trying to think about it too much, he took a mouthful and his fingers clenched around the glass as he lowered it again. It wasn’t so big that his cheeks puffed out, but he could still feel it there, how it gagged him to have it moving around his mouth. How hot it was when he held it still, instead of just sipping at it.

Pitch’s hand traced down Jack’s chest, touched his belly, where the muscles jerked and then settled.

The temperature of his mouth was starting to match the water. The water must have been cooling, even as his whole mouth was warming up. His eyes darted to Pitch’s cock, half-hard and bigger than what he’d ever sucked off before.

Pitch’s hand dragged down the top of Jack’s thigh, and Jack’s head twitched so that he could watch that instead.

Then, fingers traced a pattern up between Jack’s legs and grasped his cock, and Jack made a sound
that was drowned beneath water, caught in the back of his nose. Pitch started moving his hand up and down slowly, and Jack wanted to open his mouth and gasp, and couldn’t. He made another sound, more distressed, and Pitch sighed like that had been all he’d wanted.

‘Swallow,’ Pitch said.

Jack did, then shuddered when he realised that all of this had become really…sexual. More than just Pitch’s hand on his cock. Swallowing that warm mouthful with Pitch’s eyes on his throat, and Jack couldn’t help but open his mouth, catch his breath, the air cold on his tongue.

‘The same as before,’ Pitch said, his hand slowing on Jack’s cock until he was just holding it. ‘More water. Hold it in place.’

‘My mouth is probably warm enough,’ Jack said.

‘Your mouth was warm enough before,’ Pitch said. ‘I don’t feel the cold like most. You’re not the one who will tell me when your mouth is warm enough, are you?’

Jack shook his head, reaching up to wick away the tiny bit of water at the corner of his mouth. ‘Then do as I say, please.’

Another mouthful of warm water, and Jack wanted to drop the glass when Pitch’s hand started moving again. His grip was slow but firm, and it was skilled. When Jack jerked himself off, he did it quickly, and he didn’t really think about anything like finesse. But Pitch had a way of applying pressure to the underside of his cock, just beneath the glans, rubbing or caressing that patch of skin like he knew exactly what it would do to Jack.

mostly, Jack could only focus on not accidentally swallowing the water, which he really wanted to do. Pleasure broke into him over and over again, but if he started to give into it, his fingers weakened, the glass started to slip, and he’d come back to himself and feel caught between what Pitch was doing, what Pitch had asked him to do.

‘You’re doing very well,’ Pitch said, his voice warm, and Jack moaned thinly, eyebrows pulling together as his throat worked to swallow the water and he fought it. ‘Swallow, and then drink some more. Hold it in place.’

Jack gasped as soon as he’d swallowed the water, leaned forwards without really thinking. His legs had spread where they were bent beneath him. Hadn’t he- wasn’t this meant to be about Pitch? He looked down between Pitch’s legs, but Pitch cleared his throat, and Jack made himself concentrate.

‘Again,’ Pitch said.

‘I’m just… Uh, when exactly…”

Pitch’s hand gripped his cock harder, squeezing almost mercilessly, so that Jack bent over himself and cried out. It didn’t hurt, but the threat of it was unmistakeable.

‘Did I say we were doing this your way? Or did I say we were doing this my way?’ Pitch said coolly.

‘Yours,’ Jack said, and then shuddered when Pitch’s hand started moving on his cock again, faster than before. The hand not holding the glass shot out so he could brace himself on the blankets.

‘Mmmh,’ Pitch said thoughtfully. ‘That’s what I thought too. Do you need to say either of the
signal words?'

‘No,’ Jack said, surprised he’d even asked that. Had Jack even indicated that he wanted to? He was pretty damned sure he hadn’t.

‘Then do stop trying to question what I’m doing. If you want to run the show, you’re welcome to go back to your room and bring yourself off with those cold little fingers of yours.’

Asshole.

Jack’s head rose just enough that he could scowl at Pitch, and in response, Pitch only smiled at him.

‘If you don’t hold more of that water in your mouth,’ Pitch said, ‘I’ll send you back to the bathroom, and you can get more, and we can do this all over again, can’t we? Honestly, the only person who’ll suffer for that is you.’

So Jack took another sip of water and found himself looking down at Pitch’s hand moving, his fingers shifting. It was dizzying. How was this his life again? How was this the person who had basically broken his heart only a few hours ago, and yet given him something almost like hope at the same time? He shook his head, looked at Pitch, saw some serious, sober expression in his eyes and wondered what Pitch was thinking.

Pitch moved his hand away from Jack’s cock and made a beckoning motion, and so Jack leaned forwards until Pitch could reach up and trace Jack’s throat. Then, his fingers came up and stroked at Jack’s lips, and Jack pressed them together to make sure he didn’t lose any water.

‘I think,’ Pitch said, ‘this is going to be messy. It’s good practice, don’t you think? Let me in.’

Fingers tapping at his mouth, and Jack whined – a mix of protest and arousal – but he relaxed his mouth and Pitch’s fingers slid *in*. Water spilled, and Jack tried to cup his hand beneath it, but it was useless, and it fell to the bed, dripping down his face, sliding down his jaw. There was nothing subtle about it either, not with that intent look in Pitch’s eyes or the smirk on his face as he thrust his fingers deep enough that Jack swallowed around them, not with the fact that Jack’s chin was warm from the water, and he felt wrecked already and they hadn’t done anything. They hadn’t even done anything!

‘You should see the expression on your face,’ Pitch said warmly, smirk widening. ‘It’s just water.’

Pitch’s fingers turned, rubbed at the roof of Jack’s mouth, which was the strangest sensation, almost ticklish. Then they shifted, until Pitch had Jack’s tongue in between his middle and index finger, holding onto it. The space underneath his tongue was filling with saliva as a result, and he felt utterly paralysed. His breathing unsteady, the glass in his hand forgotten.

Then, Pitch’s fingers withdrew, his arm shifting until it rested by its side.

‘Okay,’ Pitch said, sounding like this was just a regular thing for him. Like he got up all the time at about three in the morning and did this kind of stuff. ‘Put the glass down, and then you can touch me. Put that warm mouth to good use, will you?’

The glass thudded down on the counter, and Jack moved back as quickly as he could with how dazed he felt. He could still feel Pitch’s fingers in his mouth, holding his tongue. Could still feel that hand around his cock. There was water drying on his chin and throat, it had made a damp patch on the bed.
He placed one hand on Pitch’s hip, just to prove to himself that he could. And then he shifted so that he was straddling Pitch’s thigh, looking at all the skin he could touch, everything bared and Pitch just letting him. Jack wasn’t in ropes now, and he wasn’t being held in place, and he didn’t have to hold himself back.

His whole life, Pitch had been the Royal Admiral Kozmotis Pitchiner, he’d been on posters, in books, on stamps and coins. He’d been a silhouette of that strong nose and sharp hair and he’d always been in uniform and he’d been completely unreal. Someone that existed, but so far away from Jack’s reality that the constellations seemed closer.

Then, in the Palace, Pitch had become a lot of other things, but he’d still never been bared or exposed. Not really, not until the night before, when Jack felt like he’d finally seen something that wasn’t measured and censored. Pitch had opened a vein of rawness – Jack had felt embarrassed for him – but in turn, Jack needed to respond, to find out for himself how much truth there was in placing his hands on Pitch’s skin and watching the way a muscle over his hip twitched. He could drag his fingers through the black pubic hair at the base of Pitch’s cock. He could trace a scar, he could run the side of his hand through the centre of Pitch’s sternum, like he was bisecting him.

It was a greediness for something tangible, and having it in front of him like this, it made him tremble. He was hard, he wanted to come, but it was almost easy to put it all aside in favour of turning something so ephemeral into what his body could learn. Because Pitch hadn’t fucked him, and the time Pitch slid his fingers into Jack, they’d hardly touched, because Pitch liked to stand behind Jack, or keep himself separate, or make sure that he was always fully clothed and sure, that was hot, but this was…

Jack looked up at Pitch, and whatever Pitch saw in Jack’s gaze, caused his own eyes to widen.

‘What is it?’ Pitch said.

Jack shook his head and then bent down and pressed his lips to Pitch’s chest, and felt his heart beating through his skin. Instinctively, he shifted so that he could press his chest down, skin to skin, and then he just stayed there like that for a few minutes.

Pitch’s hands came up and touched Jack’s shoulders carefully, ran down his arms, his forearms. Jack almost thought Pitch would push him away, but instead, one hand fell back down to the bed, the other stayed on his arm. There was a hesitance there, as though Pitch wasn’t quite sure what Jack was doing, which was weird, because Pitch’s breathing was steady, because he seemed – in all other ways – perfectly calm, and completely relaxed.

He didn’t want Pitch perfectly calm, completely relaxed.

He trailed small kisses down Pitch’s torso, until he could settle properly between Pitch’s legs. He’d never bent over someone’s cock like this before. It’d always been him kneeling on concrete, and someone else standing against a wall – or vice versa, when it’d happened that way too. But he still enjoyed sliding his hands beneath Pitch’s thighs, and he loved that he wasn’t fumbling someone out of their pants, but that he had everything he wanted in front of him, and he could kiss expanses of skin easily, not hindered by fabric.

Everything he did was met with that same even breathing, and he worried that Pitch had maybe just done this too much, with too many people, to like it anymore. Or maybe it was Jack, and he was just bad at it?

He looked up to see if Pitch was judging him, and then paused, not expecting what he saw.
He had thought Pitch’s eyes would be open, watching him, that smirk on his face.

Instead, Pitch’s eyes were closed, his mouth was slack, open just a little. His breathing even, but there was something about it, like Jack wasn’t being watched for every little thing he was doing, like Pitch was just letting himself…have something nice.

Was that it? He wasn’t falling asleep, was he?

Jack scooted down and wrapped a hand around Pitch’s cock, still looking up, and he licked from the base to the tip, watching the way Pitch’s eyebrows drew together, the way his lips fell wider and then his mouth closed, like he was holding something back. With the taste of salt on his tongue, the smell of Pitch in his nose, Jack opened his mouth and took the head of him into his mouth, letting him rest in that artificial warmth, the girth of him stretching Jack’s jaw.

Pitch’s eyes opened then, he looked down in the same moment that his hands reached down. Jack thought he was going to be pulled off, but instead it was just one hand at his hair, the other falling down to rest upon the blankets, fingers curling.

‘Don’t stop,’ Pitch said, as though that was something he even needed to say. Jack wasn’t going to stop.

Jack sunk down further, still able to breathe through his nose, and then closed his eyes because he wanted to concentrate, he wanted to make it good. He pushed a hand against the soft skin of Pitch’s pelvis, the other holding Pitch’s cock in place, because no way would Jack be able to get all of that into his throat in this position. Or maybe ever.

Pitch tasted good, though there were no small bursts of precome on his tongue, nothing except that faint salt-bitterness being laved away with Jack’s saliva, until Jack mostly tasted that instead. The hand in his hair was still, a slight pressure, and Jack wanted to know what Pitch’s breathing was doing, but he couldn’t hear it.

Except when Jack sunk lower, cut off his own breathing and made a vice by pressing his tongue hard to the underside of Pitch’s cock, and then he heard something that might have been a groan, if Pitch hadn’t cut it off.

A minute after that, a shaky sigh, and Jack lifted up to take a couple of breaths, wishing that he could touch a whole lot more of Pitch’s skin at once.

‘You stopped,’ Pitch said.

‘I’m breathing,’ Jack said.

‘It seems you’re just staring at me now. You’ll have to work harder than that if you want to see me come.’

‘You think I’m done?’ Jack said, laughing.

‘No,’ Pitch said, something impish on his face, turning Jack’s concerns that he was screwing everything up into something softer, a kind of relief.

‘Do you want me to do anything different?’

‘No,’ Pitch said.

That helped a lot too.
So Jack ducked his head, took Pitch’s cock into his mouth again, liked the weight of it there, the heat. His mouth was still so warm from the water. It didn’t remind him of the fireplace at all, that had baked him to dryness. This was nothing like that.

He didn’t need coaxing to start moving his head up and down, to suck on the upstroke, to open wider on the downstroke and avoid teeth scraping on sensitive skin. He sometimes paused to suck hard at the head of Pitch’s cock, flicking his tongue over the very tip, which – when he did it the first time – brought a thick groan that Pitch didn’t bother trying to cut off at all. It felt so good to hear that, to listen to Pitch’s breathing change.

Pitch’s hips began to roll gently, thrusting upwards. It was less forceful than Jack expected – he’d been with lovers who’d lost complete control of themselves, pushing as hard as possible, and while Jack hadn’t always minded, it always seemed a little rude when it came out of nowhere.

Jack followed the motion of Pitch’s hips, saliva dripping down Pitch’s cock onto his own hand. He’d find it gross, except he’d already spilled a whole bunch of water from his mouth over Pitch’s fingers and onto the bed, except he kind of liked how messy it was. It made it easier for his hand to move at the base of Pitch’s cock, small up and down movements, alternating his grip, sometimes shifting his fingertips so that he could caress down over the soft skin of Pitch’s balls.

‘We should have done this some time ago,’ Pitch said, his voice deeper than before. Hearing how much he’d affected Pitch sent a shiver down Jack’s back. His own cock twitched between his legs. He wanted to get a hand on himself, but there were so few rules about what he was doing now, except that he didn’t get to come. He wanted to be good.

The hand on Jack’s head pushed harder, fingers scraping over his scalp, small stinging pains as a couple of hairs came loose. Pitch groaned soon after that, and then again, and Jack realised that Pitch was close.

He had to work for it though. His jaw ached, his mouth was even warmer now than it had been when he’d started – friction, Pitch’s body temperature never succumbing to Jack’s. He cut his breathing off regularly, staying low on the downstrokes, letting Pitch’s cock brush against the back of his throat. When he lifted his head to catch his breath, he’d flick his tongue over the tip of Pitch’s cock, open his wet eyes and gaze hungrily at Pitch’s face, because his expression wasn’t under perfect control anymore.

It was what Jack had wanted all along. Proof he could have some kind of part in this. Perhaps this was a strange way to prove it to himself, but it was a start, wasn’t it? Pitch wouldn’t let him into his bedroom, there was so much he kept back.

So this? This was something Jack would take.

He had his eyes open when Pitch started to come, and though Pitch tried to thrust deeply into Jack’s mouth, Jack pushed back at Pitch’s pelvis and kept just the head of him on his tongue, sucking in hard, rhythmic pulses. Because he wanted to see Pitch’s face, because he wanted to see the way his expression twisted – just like that – and the way his eyes screwed tight and how his mouth opened on huge, harsh exhales.

The seed that spilled on his tongue, into his mouth, was bitter, but Jack knew to expect it. He kept one hand moving on Pitch’s cock, the other pushing at Pitch’s belly to ride those instinctive thrusts, and he didn’t look away until Pitch’s head dropped back heavily to the pillows. Jack slowed his hand and then left it in place, he lapped at the head of Pitch’s cock with the soft flat of his tongue instead of the pointed tip.
Then he moved and pressed his mouth to Pitch’s pelvis, taking several deep breaths, because he was still so hard. Seeing Pitch lose control like that, and being the one to cause it? He hadn’t expected it to affect him that much. It was taking all his willpower not to just drop his hips to the bed and use some quick, dirty humping into friction to make himself come. It wouldn’t take much.

But he’d agreed he wouldn’t, and Pitch had given him both of the things he’d asked for.

‘Good,’ Pitch said quietly, above him. ‘That was so good, Jack.’

*Ah, shit. Not helping with the whole being turned on thing.*

‘Do you want to come?’ Pitch said. 

Jack looked up hopefully, jaw and neck aching, and could’ve stabbed Pitch for the faintly cruel, very pleased look on his face. That wasn’t the expression of someone about to cave on their own rule.

‘Come back up here,’ Pitch said, and Jack forced himself to move and trailed a hand from Pitch’s hip to his chest as he went, taking advantage of the nudity. He wasn’t sure when he’d see Pitch naked again, because he really did kind of dig when they did stuff and Pitch stayed clothed.

Jack slumped against Pitch’s side, and then unsubtly pressed his cock to Pitch’s skin.

‘Ah, no,’ Pitch said, brushing a finger against Jack’s lower lip. Pitch drew his finger away before Jack could capture it in his teeth. ‘Not this morning. I’ll make up for it later, I’m sure.’

‘Mm, it’s okay,’ Jack said, voice only a little scratchy. He could still taste Pitch in his mouth, flicking the tip of his tongue against the inside of his cheek and getting more of that bitterness. ‘It was worth it.’

‘Was it?’ Pitch said.

‘Are you- Is that something…I don’t know if it’s just something that’s like, a *me* thing or if it’s…’

‘It’s…?’

‘Do you let everyone do that? Am I just late to the party? Is that another thing everyone else gets to do?’

‘Ah,’ Pitch said, and then sighed. Pitch’s hand curled around the back of Jack’s neck and drew him closer, and Pitch didn’t say anything for some time. ‘Despite my reputation, these days I do not bring *that* many people into this room. And it’s been some time since I’ve done anything quite like this. I like control, I enjoy having power over my partners. It is not in my habit to fully undress for them, or – if I do – it is certainly not my habit to then allow them to… to see me as you just did.’

‘Oh,’ Jack said, feeling simultaneously pleased that he’d been allowed to have that, but also sad that Pitch didn’t really let himself have this often. Was that why he’d been so quiet? Jack traced spirals into Pitch’s side, and thought that if it had only been about two or three when they’d woken, he could steal a couple more hours in here, if he was allowed.

‘I feel it most when I’m vulnerable,’ Pitch said, his voice muted. ‘The darkness. I think yours may be connected to your anger – anger at being made vulnerable. Mine is… It’s different.’

‘You wanted to attack me?’ Jack said, opening his eyes, lifting up and looking at Pitch in shock.
'No,' Pitch said, smiling a little. 'Not like that. There’s two sides to it, at least for me. There’s the side that needs to go on the offensive. I use that in here to craft scenes, to decide what I shall do with someone, to evoke discomfort or pain or fear. On the other side, it reminds me that I am only ever a shade away from being one of the nightmare men myself. That there is so very little left of me to take, now, because it has already taken so much. Not just the day I learned to make the Light, but every day since. In the things that I have done, the ways in which I have let others make use of me.’

Pitch reached up and touched Jack’s hair, his eyebrow, rested fingers on the side of his neck.

'I hear it tell me that I am not worthy of you,’ Pitch said. ‘It’s loudest when I’m like this, when I know it as more than just the darkness whispering to me, but as a truth clearer than any other. When I strip down, receive pleasure, give little more than my responses, I hear it.’

‘Is that why you get so quiet?’ Jack said, wondering if Pitch had enjoyed himself at all.

Except that Pitch had said ‘don’t stop’ and Jack knew it wasn’t that simple.

‘Yes,’ Pitch said.

‘How do you know it’s the darkness and like…not just you? Not just something you say to yourself?’

Pitch frowned at him, like he’d never contemplated that before, and then closed his eyes like he was blocking out the world, or seeing something different.

‘Because it was never like this, before,’ Pitch said. ‘Because it is a recruitment drive, instead of simply disliking what I have been turned into. In those moments, before the pleasure peaks, when everything is still gentle and building; in those moments, the darkness promises that everything would be different if I gave in. It’s frightening. That after so long, all this time, it never quite fades. I wish I could tell you that in a hundred years, or two hundred – though surely we’ll not live that much longer, now – it would fade, but you will always hear how deeply the Darkness cut you, and—’

‘What do you mean, ‘we’ll not live that much longer?’’ Jack said, frowning. Jack had heard variations on the theme that he was going to be killed, because the Tsar liked to get at Pitch by doing that. But why did Pitch expect to die?

‘I misspoke,’ Pitch said quickly.

‘No you didn’t,’ Jack said, staring at him. ‘Is that why the Tsar is trying to oust you from being Royal Admiral? So he can do away with you?’

‘This is not the most romantic—’

‘You’ve lived for so long, so why do you think you’re going to die soon? Both of us? The Tsar didn’t kill you after Fyodor, and the way you said it—’

‘Jack,’ Pitch said, his voice turning as forbidding as Jack had ever heard.

‘If you’re on limited time, we should do something,’ Jack said. ‘The Guardians—’

Pitch pushed Jack away, sitting up abruptly. Then he stared at Jack in horror, dragging a hand through his hair, which was messed up from what they’d done, far spikier than usual.
‘Jack,’ Pitch said slowly, ‘I have established a rather terrible track record of aftercare and if you keep talking about this, it will continue. Table it for later. Not now.’

‘But-’

‘Please,’ Pitch said, pressing the heel of his other hand into his forehead.

It was still raw, Jack realised. Pitch looked desperate. Jack’s thoughts raced, but he swallowed down every other question and wondered if Pitch’s despair was more than just…apathy. He knew something. And North – talking to Jack about how Jack could be a weapon, like a rebellion was just around the corner. Bunnymund stepping up his campaign to make more of his propaganda posters despite the fact that it was so dangerous.

Maybe they all knew something.

‘I just want to help,’ Jack said, finally.

‘I know,’ Pitch said, reaching for Jack, taking his hand and pulling him gently forwards until Jack found himself at Pitch’s side again, both of them easing back down to the bed. Not that Jack thought he’d be able to sleep. Not now.

‘I wish you could trust me,’ Jack said.

‘If only that were the problem,’ Pitch said, his voice weak.

‘I can handle it,’ Jack said, wishing that people would stop underestimating him.

‘But maybe I cannot,’ Pitch said, pulling Jack closer. ‘Maybe there are things I do not yet want to see reflected back to me in your eyes. Not yet, Jack. Not yet. Give me that. Do I ask too much? Didn’t I tell you not to have feelings for me? That you shouldn’t?’

Jack said nothing at all. He believed that Pitch couldn’t speak about it, but he also believed that he needed to know whatever was being held back from him. If a rebellion was planned, he wanted to know about it. If the Tsar was going to kill Pitch, Jack wanted to know about that too. If something was coming, he needed to know.

Except he didn’t need to know right now. Not with the way Pitch’s fingers dug into his skin, or the way Pitch’s breaths were almost too even, like he was calming himself down.

*Who are you? How are you even like this?*

‘You were never supposed to be like this,’ Jack said, hoping it didn’t sound like an insult. Hoping the awe in his voice wasn’t disrespectful.

‘No,’ Pitch agreed, ‘I never was. Though I think it’s fair if I say that you were never supposed to be like this either.’

‘Like what?’

‘Strong enough,’ Pitch said.

Jack opened his mouth to shoot it down, to query it, but then bit down on his lower lip instead, and decided against it. He folded his arms around Pitch and stared across the room, arousal long forgotten, the woes of Lune simmering in his mind, and above it all, the knowledge that Pippa had died, Jamie had left, Flitmouse had been taken.
He wasn’t going to let Pitch go.
The Disagreement

Chapter Notes

Alternative title: 'Jack and Pitch lose their shit at each other.'

The next morning, Jack woke alone. He’d expected it, because he knew Pitch woke earlier than he did. When Jack got up in the mornings, Pitch had always been awake, dressed and working – and Jack knew that while his inner alarm screamed he had to be up at six every morning, Pitch’s likely started shrieking at four thirty or five.

A note next to a glass of water on the dresser. Jack flushed when he considered the glass. It was full, so Pitch must have refreshed the water, but still…

Oh no, did that asshole do it on purpose? Does he want me to think of this crap every time I look at water?

‘Evil,’ Jack muttered to himself, picking up the note and unfolding it.

Jack,

I have matters that must be attended to. However, if you wake up feeling unwell in any way, please let one of the servants know that you wish to pass a message on to me, or let me know later. I will be most displeased if you decide on the singularly stupid route of letting no one know.

K.

Post-Script: I doubt you’ll need hydration when you wake up, but just in case…

‘Just in case,’ he says,’ Jack exclaimed. ‘Uh huh. And who abbreviates their name to a single letter and then writes post-script instead of just PS? And what if I’m fine? What then? Just assuming I’m gonna be feeling like crap because I’ve been a mess lately. By the Light, let me have at least one day to feel like things aren’t terrible.’

Because he did sort of feel like things weren’t terrible. He stretched, slid out of bed and found his clothes folded on a chair near the bathroom door. He definitely hadn’t folded them that neatly, and he paused to think of Pitch doing it while Jack was still sleeping. Picking everything up and refolding it, placing Jack’s staff right beside them so that he would know everything was there.

Aftercare, was that part of what it looked like? This…niceness? Jack didn’t know.

There was no one in the corridor as he walked – fully dressed – through it. No one in the lounge, either. So Jack walked down the other corridor to his room, stripped down again, showered and let his mind empty of thoughts. It was strangely easy to do. Like what had happened the night before had given him an ability to just quieten himself. As though Pitch had shown him the volume dial on a phonograph, and Jack could turn it down himself.

Only one thought kept ringing clear in his mind, and he warily considered its shape, and wondered what he should do with it.
He was no longer loyal to the Tsar.

He had – at some point – abandoned the idea of even wanting to be loyal to him.

It wasn’t as though he wanted his life to be in danger, and he didn’t want to betray Lune, and he didn’t want to be treasonous. But he found himself thinking the very seditious thought that the Tsar had been betraying Lune for some time now, and while that was nauseating, it also had a strong sound of truth to it. One that he knew would be reflected in those who had always skirted around the subject while being as openly seditious as they dared: the Guardians, Flitmouse, Pitch, Anton…and probably Eva if she ever actually spoke up about it.

There was something happening around him that he couldn’t see clearly, because no one was letting him.

Jack was almost certain it was a new resistance movement. One that North wanted him to join. One that Bunnymund didn’t quite believe in, despite his propaganda posters. One that Toothiana would risk Flitmouse for. One that Pitch had given up on.

The Tsar almost certainly knew about it, and whatever he was doing now, was – in part – to either court that resistance movement, or prevent it.

‘Yeah, pretend you’re as smart as the Tsar,’ Jack muttered to himself. ‘You can’t even read the proper Lune alphabet. Idiot.’

*

Later, around ten, Seraphina came in with a stack of paper to write on, some fountain pens, two bottles of ink, and a bowl of fruit and shelled nuts. Her hair was braided neatly, green vines peeking out in gentle tendrils, and around her neck she wore a necklace of green stones. She was dressed immaculately, in a style not common to even noble children – the black trousers, the black shirt, the long green coat that was covered in gold embroidery. She looked so much then like a miniature version of her father.

Jack’s heart hurt to think that Pitch had never wanted her, until he’d met her. He didn’t hurt for Seraphina, because it was obvious she was loved, but he hurt for Pitch. He thought of the times he’d thrown those bitter words in Pitch’s face – that maybe Seraphina shouldn’t have been born. It ached to think back on them now, knowing that Pitch’s outrage at hearing those words was probably anchored in horror at Jack’s daring, but also a little in his own knowledge that he’d betrayed himself by agreeing to the Tsar’s wish that he have a child.

The lesson with Seraphina went well. Now that Jack knew some of the basics, Seraphina’s patchy way of teaching him was easier to cope with, and Jack often had an idea of what he had to research afterwards.

When Seraphina was done, she walked across to where Jack kept his smallsword, and lifted it, turning it this way and that, looking along the blade.

‘Do you like the smallsword?’

‘I can use it,’ Jack said, shrugging. ‘I prefer my staff though.’

‘I like blades better,’ Seraphina said primly, before spinning the sword with an easy movement of her wrist that made Jack realise that she’d had training. The alarm he’d felt at watching her with the weapon started to vanish into outright curiosity.
'Who trains you?'

‘Papa,’ Seraphina said. ‘Mama sometimes. But she’s meaner. Anton will spar with me, but only with wooden ones. So it doesn’t count. Papa says that he fought to make sure that Golden Warriors would still get trained to know how to fight other soldiers. Isn’t it strange? How we keep using weapons for people, when it’s the Darkness we’re meant to fight?’

Jack stared, and Seraphina moved easily through a drill that Jack recognised from his own final year in the Barracks.

‘Uh, well…’

‘The Tsar has his own soldiers,’ Seraphina said. ‘They only train to fight people. Not the Darkness.’

‘Does he have many?’ Jack said.

‘How would I know?’ Seraphina said, looking at him in irritation. ‘I’m a child, not the keeper of his soldiers.’

‘You don’t really act like a child.’

‘Maybe,’ she said, and then sighed. ‘Maybe. I don’t really know how I’m supposed to act. Papa wants me to be more carefree, but I worry about him. I don’t really know how children are supposed to be. Do you?’

‘Well, I was one,’ Jack said, waving his staff and making it snow in the room. He’d have to clean it up later, but it was worth it, watching Seraphina stop what she was doing with the smallsword and stare up in amazement. ‘And I had a sister who used to like playing a lot. We’d escape from the creche and go into the woods or forests together. There’d be snowball fights and climbing trees and stuff.’

‘I know how to climb a tree,’ Seraphina said firmly, and then held her other hand out to catch the snow. There wasn’t much, but she waited until she had about four or five pieces of the stuff, and then curled her fingers over it. ‘What was the creche like? Everyone says that only criminals come from the Overland creche, but you’re not a criminal.’

That’s not…exactly true, given what I’m thinking about the Tsar these days, but sure, okay.

‘It’s just a creche,’ Jack said. ‘They fed us and gave us clothing, made sure we knew how to be farmers or whatever. Most of the people in the Overland creche become farmers. Sometimes kids escape, or sometimes farmers rebel, but it’s like, not as common as…as everyone here seems to think.’

‘Papa thinks it’s wrong to take children away from their parents. Especially if parents want to keep them.’

‘Uh, well, most parents don’t want to keep them,’ Jack said quietly. ‘No one in a creche had parents who wanted them.’

‘Papa says that’s a lie you all get told, so you bond to Lune, instead of your parents.’

The snow in the room got heavier, ice spread out from where Jack was sitting.

‘What?’
‘Your parents probably wanted you,’ Seraphina said, moving through another drill and spinning at
the end with a flourish, her green coat whirling about her, snow still falling. ‘This is so much more
fun with the snow. We should do this all the time.’

‘They…didn’t,’ Jack said. ‘They didn’t want either of us.’

‘Did they tell you that?’ Seraphina said, looking at him in interest. ‘If Papa ever said something
like that to me, I’d slap him. No, I’d cry. I don’t cry very often. But that would make me cry. Did
you cry?’

Jack couldn’t remember. He couldn’t remember what they’d told him. He couldn’t remember the
journey to the creche. And he couldn’t remember crying. But he had the faintest memory of Pippa
crying night after night, and Jack holding her, feeling her small shape in his arms, a ghost he’d
never feel again.

‘I don’t remember,’ Jack said.

‘Then you were probably just told lies about it. If parents don’t have kids, they focus on work, and
work harder for Lune. And if kids don’t have parents, they end up wanting Lune as a parent, or the
Tsar. That’s the way it’s been for a long time. I get to stay with Papa because he’s a Golden
Warrior, but if he wasn’t, I’d be in a creche too. Just a nice one. And I’d still get to see him. But I
like it better, living with Mama when she’s here. You would’ve liked it more than the creche,
living with your parents. You don’t think so?’

‘Maybe,’ Jack said, feeling like he’d been struck hard by something. If Pitch was right… But why
didn’t any of the creche children know that? Some of them did see their parents again, afterwards,
over a decade later. There were no stories of joyful reunions. The parents sometimes embraced their
children, but were often detached about it. That was like…

That was what he’d been told by the creche team leaders, anyway.

‘The creche was a better place to be raised,’ Jack said, though the words felt wooden. ‘There was
always food, and- There were other children. My sister was there. They…they gave us a lot.’

‘Perhaps,’ Seraphina said, the tone dubious. ‘I’d still rather live with Mama or Papa, or the other
Warriors. Creches sound weird. Especially the peasant ones. I suppose you’re all very poor
anyway, but don’t you think the Tsar could do something about that? There’s a lot of gold in the
Palace.’

‘Do you talk like this with everyone?’

‘I’m not stupid,’ Seraphina said, putting the sword back and folding her arms, seeming to take the
question as a personal insult. ‘Papa trusts you, so I can speak about these things. And I want to.
Papa doesn’t like it when I ask him lots of questions about things. He says children aren’t supposed
to know that much about politics. But I’m in the Palace, what else will I learn about that aren’t my
plants? Adults think they’re so smart. They’re not though.’

‘Tell me about it.’

At first when he’d been learning with Seraphina, he’d mostly been preoccupied with trying not to
stare at her while thinking: ‘I think I’m in a relationship with your Dad, who’s really screwed up by
the way.’ Now, he was reeling about what she’d said about kids being taken from their parents, the
idea that his parents maybe did want him? Was that the case with all the children? Was that
something Pitch knew and didn’t speak about?
It seemed like a pretty important thing to not bring up yet.

*Papa thinks it's wrong to take children away from their parents.*

Of course he always knew that the creches were designed to help children bond to Lune, that was something they were supposed to be proud of. But he’d never really considered that there might have been an alternative. That he could have been raised on a farm, with his parents, with his sister. That he and Pippa could have gone to the forest without breaking out of a creche, that they could have foraged for rare spring berries without Jack having to sit in isolation for it, once they did it too many times.

‘What’s wrong?’ Seraphina said, her voice softer than before.

‘You seem like you know a bit about politics,’ Jack said warily, and watched as she nodded a little, black eyebrows pulling together. Her green eyes were bright, inquisitive. ‘Why would the Tsar want kids to bond to Lune instead of their parents?’

‘Oh, easy,’ Seraphina said. ‘War. Papa taught me that a few years ago, when he was sad about the soldiers and the initiation. Maybe he didn’t mean to? He doesn’t realise how much I listen to what he says sometimes, or what he doesn’t say. By the Light, adults are so stupid! They don’t know anything about what we listen to. Kids don’t want to die. They might want to die for their parents, but kids are meant to be selfish. So you have to bond them to Lune, and then they might want to die for Lune instead of their parents.’

‘Well, if we didn’t have enough soldiers to fight the Darkness…’

‘Maybe,’ Seraphina said, shrugging. ‘The only thing I know about war is how sad it makes everyone. So what would I know? Just a girl, remember?’

‘Just a boy,’ Jack added, and she grinned at him.

He couldn’t stop thinking about it. He wished he could remember his childhood. Had his parents cried when he and Pippa had gone? Had they been forcibly separated? What had happened? Why couldn’t he remember? It seemed like an important thing. How had he just woken up one day in the creche, accepting that his parents didn’t want him anymore?

‘Do you know where Pitch is today?’ Jack said, realising that he needed to sort this out. He needed to know. He was pretty sure his parents didn’t want him, and once he knew that for certain, he wouldn’t have to think about it anymore.

‘In his office, did you want to go see him? We can go see him, if you like. If I’m there, he won’t get mad.’

‘That sounds like a really cool idea,’ Jack said, ‘but I need to talk to him about something that might upset me, and I’m not always good to be around when I’m upset.’

Seraphina was quiet, and Jack wondered if she was going to push to go with him, but instead she raised the corner of her index finger to her mouth and bit down on the edge of a nail, before saying:

‘Did I make you upset? Was it me?’

‘No,’ Jack said, walking over to her. ‘No, I promise.’

‘Because Papa says sometimes I’m a little too honest, and I’m not trying to-’
'I know,' Jack said, grasping her shoulders and looking down at her. ‘I know. Seraphina, I promise, I love you teaching me the alphabet, and coming to visit me, and bringing different things to eat. Okay? Spending time with you is really important to me. Sometimes I just get upset around your Dad, because you know…war and stuff.’

‘Oh,’ she said, like she finally understood. ‘Yes, Anton and Mama are the same. War makes everyone upset. Besides, I have to go soon. Mama wants to do some gardening. I’m already late, but she knows I’m late to things.’

‘You’re never late here.’

‘Only because I never gave you a time,’ Seraphina said airily, hugging him briefly before walking back to the books she brought with her. ‘Maybe I should’ve been here at nine all along, and you never knew.’

Jack laughed, and Seraphina smiled at him. Her fingers worried at the corners of the books, but she did that a lot. She had quite a few nervous habits. He wondered if Pitch ever dreamed of taking her away from the Palace and the Tsar, and where they’d go.

Or maybe not, since Pitch seemed convinced he was going to die soon. Along with Jack.

‘Tell Papa I say hi. I mean, I’m going to say hi to him later,’ Seraphina said, ‘but if you say that I say hi, he’ll be happier to see you.’

‘Oh, teaching me the ways of manipulating the Royal Admiral, huh?’ Jack said, as he followed her to the door.

‘Of course,’ Seraphina said. ‘Also, he likes apples. But the sour ones, not the sweet ones.’

‘Why doesn’t that surprise me?’

‘See? This is why I like that you’re living here. You get it. Mama says he eats sour things to fuel his spite at the world.’

Jack snorted, could imagine Eva saying exactly that.

Seraphina waved to him – a dignified wave that had clearly been practiced – and then ran off down the halls, the tail of her braid flying out behind her, books clutched in her arms. Jack watched her go, smiling to himself, glad for the lessons they had. He had a feeling if it wasn’t the alphabet, she’d find some other reason to come see him, and he liked that.

* 

Pitch wasn’t happy to see Jack. He looked up from his paperwork, irritation affecting his whole face.

‘Seraphina says hi,’ Jack blurted.

Then, Jack got to watch the miracle of Pitch’s face softening just the tiniest bit, and reminded himself to make some more glacier goats out of ice the next time he saw Seraphina.

‘Are you upset after last night?’ Pitch said immediately.

Jack shook his head, and carefully closed the door behind him. He looked around at all the cabinets, the paperwork on the desk Pitch was hunched over. It looked like files of recruits, except
that it wasn’t anyone he recognised from the Barracks.

‘Then why are you bothering me?’

‘Okay, so…’

Jack lifted into the air a little, and floated so that he could lean his back against one of the cabinets. He was getting used to working with the winds now. They could lift him, and it didn’t even make Pitch’s papers ruffle. Well, not much, anyway.

‘So… Um, there’s something I wanted to ask? That seems kind of important, except I only learned about it today. So maybe it’s not true or something. The parents of the kids in the creches, they give their kids away right? Because they don’t want them anymore?’

Pitch raised his eyebrows and Jack felt like he was interrupting with something really stupid and small. Except it didn’t feel small at all.

‘No,’ Pitch said. ‘They are given a drink that numbs them from the pain of loss, and the children are given a drink of forgetting. Obviously, everyone is drugged to make the process less painful. So you see, by the time you had your initiation, you were already well primed to simply accept the hallucinogens and psychotropics you were given.’

‘But some parents must just want to give their kids away, right?’

Pitch squinted at Jack, as though trying to figure out why this was even a topic of conversation. Jack felt sick, thinking about it. Was this some kind of thing that everyone had gotten so used to, that no one even thought it was a big deal anymore? Except if everyone had gotten so used to it, why did he not find out about it until now? How had no one told him?

‘Parents that want to give their children away will often abandon infants to the creches,’ Pitch said. ‘It’s not common.’

‘But then why don’t- I mean- Parents could just go to the creches and they could just ask to get their kids back, or they could-’

‘Yes, and so every year there will be a few more parents who think they can beat the system and they go to the Asylums for it. Their offspring don’t find out. There’s about two incidents of parents breaking children out of creches per year, but if discovered, they will all be executed or sent to Asylums.’

It was hard to breathe.

Up until this point, Jack had still held out a kind of hope that everything that was happening, everything the Tsar chose to do, was somehow for the good of the Lune citizens. So what if a few people died to help the many? So what if Lune plundered other planets for their riches, and lied about it?

‘Was… Was it always like that? Since the beginning?’

Pitch finally put down his fountain pen, studying Jack like he’d only just realised how serious the subject was.

‘No,’ Pitch said. ‘It was instituted at the beginning of the Tsar’s reign. It was, in part, why there was a rebellion in the first place. The drugs developed in the Tsar’s chemical laboratories were also imperfect, and Alchemists and Mages were hired to fix the rest. But people were loath to
accept that the Tsar’s creches would raise their own offspring better than they could. The creches themselves have always existed, but they were smaller, and genuinely designed for those who could not care for their children.’

‘Why didn’t anyone tell me?’ Jack whispered.

Pitch hesitated for a long time, staring blankly at one of the documents.

‘Perhaps I thought you knew already,’ Pitch said. ‘Or perhaps I no longer thought it was something worth telling. It is a painful thing to learn.’

‘So my parents could still be alive somewhere…’ Jack said, ‘and they’d want me?’

‘Is that what you imagine, Jack? That you will reunite with them, somewhere in the peasant outreaches, and they can show you their impoverished farm and their empty lives and that you would all be happy together when you told them that your sister was taken by the Darkness? Is that the plan now? To go back to them and see for yourself how the numbing drugs have affected them and their love for you? It happens, you know. You could try your luck at it. Perhaps they’ll even recognise you. Except – would you even recognise them? Do you remember them at all?’

Jack’s breath shuddered out of his mouth. Anger was sprouting inside of him. How could Pitch talk to him about such a serious matter in this calloused way? Like Pitch hadn’t just opened up the night before, about everything.

‘The next rebellion…’ Jack said. ‘I’m going to be a part of it.’

He’d never seen Pitch’s expression change so quickly from that careful blankness, to utter, pale rage.

‘You will not.’

‘I’m gonna do it,’ Jack said, his voice shaking. ‘I’m gonna join. North said I could be a weapon. I could bring Lune to a standstill with the snow and the ice. I know I could. And we could get Flitmouse out of the Asylums and we could-‘

‘Ah, wonderful, so you’ll give it less than twenty four hours after me opening up to you, before you go off and become as large a fool as Fyodor was? Excellent. I shan’t be attending your funeral.’

‘You could help,’ Jack said, feeling the darkness inside of him like a vicious biting thing. ‘It’s your obligation to help. It’s your duty!’

‘My duty is to serve the Tsar in capacity as Royal Admiral.’

‘You know he doesn’t want you,’ Jack spat. ‘He murders the people you love, he forces you out on missions you hate, he makes you take young men and women to that mountain to die and he-‘

Pitch stood up, his eyes blazing.

‘You have no plan,’ Pitch said, his voice so soft that Jack felt the hair on his skin stand up. ‘You have no plan, and you have nothing more than anger at injustice, which as galvanising as I’m sure it feels right now, Jack, is nothing more than the first rung of a very large ladder when you are fighting a war. You have no one to organise. You have very few allies. You have no ships or machinery, no weapons, no funding, no back up stores of food or clean water, no willingness from those around you to join you. And when you and the Guardians front up to the Tsar again, for the
second time, he will kill you all, and be rid of you forever.’

‘You too,’ Jack said. ‘And then Seraphina won’t have her Papa anymore, all because you’re too
gutless to stand up to him again. That’s if you’re lucky, and the Tsar doesn’t murder her in front of
you first.’

There, it felt so good to speak the poison of it, the darkness that raced inside of him. Pitch rushed at
him, and Jack had a split second to think that they really had to stop fighting in his office, before
Pitch grabbed him by the collar of his shirt and slammed him back into the cabinet.

‘Your threats are not a plan,’ Pitch said to him. ‘Congratulations, you have finally found the one
way to ensure that I’ll have no feelings of affection for you. This? Now? This is a disgusting
display of immaturity of the likes I thought you were better than. What, do you want to cry about
how hard it’s been for you? Do you want to poke the Tsar with your smallsword and tell him it’s
not fair? What do you imagine he’ll do, Jack?’

Jack struck out with his legs, and kicked Pitch on the shin hard enough that Pitch dropped him.
Jack moved sideways, out of arm’s reach, and glared at him.

‘You should be the one with the plan,’ Jack said. ‘It’s not my job. You’re the Royal Admiral. The
Golden Warriors? Most of them would do anything for you. It’s you who has access to the ships
and the galleons. It’s you who remembers how to properly fight against people instead of just the
Darkness. It’s you—’

‘I was the one who helped seed those planets with Darkness in the first place,’ Pitch said, staring at
him with a peculiar deadness in his eyes. ‘I am the reason the first rebellion failed, and I am the
reason I am now sent out on missions I hate.’

‘You…’ Jack felt cold. As cold as he’d felt in the mountain, when he could have been dying of
hypothermia. ‘You seeded the planets? What does that mean?’

‘Not all of them,’ Pitch said, his voice rough for the first time since Jack had visited. ‘We were at
war with planets that were stronger and richer than us. Lune was in genuine danger of being
conquered. So we found a way to capture the Darkness and use it to seed planets that had no
defence against it. Then, the Tsar offered the services of our special Golden Warriors to help,
where we would have once fought each other on fields of blood. They let us into their nations, and
they paid us handsomely. But there was always too much Darkness running unchecked, and
eventually it led to refugees, and then extinction.’

‘I…’

‘There was never a fundamental war between Light and Dark, for the Lune citizens,’ Pitch said,
showing all of his teeth in a vicious smile. ‘Oh, well, on other planets, yes. But not here. We had to
find a way to learn how to make the Light. We’re not supposed to make it, we’re not made for it,
and that’s why so many people die in the mountain.’

Jack was shaking.

‘There,’ Pitch said with some satisfaction. ‘Still want me to lead that rebellion? Hm?’

‘I didn’t say I wanted you to lead it,’ Jack said, numb and frightened. ‘I said you should be the one
to come up with the plan.’

Jack rubbed at his face, feeling dizzy. Hadn’t Pitch warned him? Hadn’t Jack known that it would
be monstrous? Jack felt out of step with the world.
Alongside it, a steel glint of something that he managed to hang onto, despite Pitch’s words.

‘That’s why we need the rebellion,’ Jack said. ‘Now, more than ever. It’s… You know, it didn’t work the first time, haven’t you thought, since then, what you’d do differently? Doesn’t it bother you at night? Don’t you think of all those people who died on your watch, and don’t you wonder what you would have done differently?’

‘There was nothing,’ Pitch hissed.

‘Didn’t you turn it over in that mind of yours?’ Jack said persistently, catching something like desperation in Pitch’s eyes, as Pitch turned away. ‘All those things you don’t want to think about, but they come and bug you anyway, right? And there’s things now that weren’t there back then. I bet North has come up with a lot of stuff to help you, as soon as you say you’re ready.’

‘Did you ever stop to think,’ Pitch said, turning back, ‘that maybe this is what the Tsar wanted, as an outcome of us living together?’

‘Do I care?’ Jack said. ‘According to you, every outcome works for him. Whether he kills us, or doesn’t kill us, or the Guardians live, or don’t live, if I wear the brooch, or I don’t wear it. It doesn’t matter! Did you ever stop to think that maybe he wants you to feel like every pathway works for him, so that you don’t choose one anymore? What is he doing except taking choices away from everyone! Parents can’t have their kids. Memories are taken away. The mountain kills about half of us on a good year. You’ve given up. Like… that all seems to work in his favour.’

‘You don’t know what you’re talking about, and-’

‘Yeah, you know, maybe? I mean I wasn’t there the first time. And I don’t know everything yet. I know you’re scared of dying, and you’re sure you’re going to die. And you’re sure I’m going to die. And you’re going to sit there and take it like, like some dumb farm animal that doesn’t know any better – except you do know better! Bunnymund and North were there, do you think they don’t know what they’re talking about too? Is anyone who doesn’t agree with you just wrong?’

‘Get out,’ Pitch said.

‘You’re a coward,’ Jack said, staring at him. ‘You are nothing more than a coward dressed up in a uniform.’

‘Get out!’ Pitch shouted at him, and Jack glared, his anger growing, the darkness behind it encouraging Jack to hurt him, to get Pitch out of his way so he didn’t have to deal with him anymore. Jack let the ice flood from his feet instead, crackling across the floor.

‘You have all these years of experience and all it’s done is turn you into a sad, sulking child.’

Pitch stared at him, and Jack realised that it wasn’t just outrage he was seeing, but genuine hurt. He was distantly aware that Pitch hardly opened up to anyone, had stripped himself bare, and Jack was rewarding him with this. It was like he’d opened up a seam of darkness inside of himself, and he couldn’t make himself stop.

‘No wonder you don’t want me to have feelings for you,’ Jack said, gaining momentum, his hand iced to his staff, and a sharp point in his forehead aching. ‘Because you see it better than any of us, don’t you? But you don’t like hearing your own thoughts reflected back to you, right? Don’t like hearing that you really are weak and pathetic, that you’d rather hide from the fight, and for so long too. So many missed opportunities to fight back. Maybe you could’ve killed him before now. Maybe you could’ve done a million things. Instead you just hide away in this little fortified wing of
‘Take care of yourself, like a child in a blanket fort hiding from the team leaders in the creches.’

Jack wrenched his staff up from where it had frozen to the ground, and then slammed it back into
the ice, splintering it, never looking away from Pitch’s shocked expression.

‘The Tsar said he’d broken your wing,’ Jack said. ‘Seraphina says your heart is locked in a tower. But I think you’re just—’

‘Get out.’ Pitch’s voice was calm. ‘If you want to join the rebellion, join it. I’ll forward your things
to North and you can go live with him, or stay in one of his strongholds. I don’t care. Get out.’

Jack was torn between the hurt in his chest, and thinking: North has strongholds?

‘You can’t even have a conversation with some kid about the truth,’ Jack said, his voice trembling
all over again. ‘Look how scared you are. You think I’m not scared? You think it’s easy for me to
stand here and say that this is what we should be doing? Not just me, but us?’

‘Clearly you were my rebound after Fyodor,’ Pitch said, his voice both cold and dead. ‘It’s good to
know that’s out of my system.’

The hurt fractured into sharp pieces, making every inhale difficult. He watched as Pitch sat down
at his desk, picked up the fountain pen, and didn’t look at Jack again. He wasn’t shaking. His hand
was steady.

‘Why are you still here?’ Pitch said, without looking up.

There were so many things Jack wanted to say, but instead he took a step backwards, and then
another, and he swallowed his ice down into some dark place inside of himself.

He paused at the door, his hand iced to the doorknob.

‘I don’t understand,’ Jack said, his voice finally breaking, ‘why you’d push me to learn so much
about the truth of Lune, and open up this pathway for me, only to then make it a dead end. Maybe—
Maybe you really believe it is? I’m telling you it’s not.’

Pitch said nothing. He scrutinised a file, and then made some notes on a piece of paper next to it,
and Jack’s small flash of rage at being ignored, vanished beneath how much he felt lost, alone.

‘If you didn’t want me to be like him,’ Jack said, ‘maybe you shouldn’t have tried to push me on a
pathway that led to the same thing. He was too reckless, and too foolish, and too rebellious, but
maybe he wasn’t wrong.’

Pitch didn’t look up. The rise and fall of his shoulders didn’t change. His fountain pen didn’t pause
where it scratched out ink onto the page.

Jack gulped down the sob that threatened, because he couldn’t stand the idea of Pitch hearing it,
and doing nothing.

So he shook the ice off his fingers where they had stuck to the door handle, and let himself out. He
closed it behind him, and sobbed once, before covering his mouth with his hand. This didn’t feel
like the kind of thing that Anton could yell at Pitch over, and it would somehow be fixed. He could
tell it was different. He could tell Pitch would rather risk the Tsar’s wrath than have Jack living
with him in his wing any longer.

He ran down the corridor towards the corridor that led to the guest rooms. He passed his, on the
way to the room with the windows that opened. It wasn’t safe to leave through the Palace, but he could fly, he could find North maybe, he could…

He just had to get out of there.

He levered the window open and paused on the window sill. The winds were already fierce around him, but Jack needed a moment to just stop crying.

The sound of a thin whine getting quickly closer – the hum of a very angry insect – and Jack opened blurry eyes. He saw thin, blue translucence, and then he yelped when it landed like an arrow in his upper arm. His staff dropped, tumbling away from him. His hand flexed open, he couldn’t move it.

He scrabbled at the window frame, only to realise the vibrating magical thing was attached to a rope that was being yanked down. Pain crawled up his arm and he shrieked hoarsely, trying to get his other hand around the arrow. He couldn’t get a grip on it, and then he was falling quickly, too quickly to call the winds to him.

A hard thud, and he knew nothing but blackness.

*

He woke to Sharpwood standing over him. Jack was still outside, the arrow was no longer in his arm. In fact, all Jack could see was the rope coiled next to him, and nothing attached to it, like the blue shaft had been made to vanish. His arm ached, was bleeding, but he didn’t feel as badly injured as he might have if the arrow had been real. His breathing was raw, he felt dazed.

‘The Tsar wishes to have a meeting with you,’ Sharpwood said.

Horror flooded him. He had a sudden vision of Fyodor dead. He knew that this wasn’t the kind of meeting he’d be coming back from. He just knew.

‘Pitch!’ Jack shouted. ‘PITCH!’

Sharpwood withdrew a baton from his belt, and Jack cried out when he saw it. Efficiently, with indifference on his face, Sharpwood raised it and brought it down onto Jack’s head. Jack didn’t even feel the shock of the impact, collapsing immediately.
The Tsar of Many Things

Chapter Notes

Haha...ha...*ducks projectiles*

I can't believe I'm finally putting this chapter up after 84 years...

Jack woke to a splitting headache. His upper right arm ached fiercely. He lay on something soft, he could already tell the room wasn’t brightly lit, he was grateful. He almost thought he’d been struck down by Pitch during training except…no, it had been a long time since he’d actually done any training with Pitch at all. And he’d-

An echo of a name in the back of his head, the cold black gaze of Sharpwood, and the clamouring of a fight that Jack had tried to get away from.

He bolted upright, whimpered when he felt a hand at his upper back, his shoulder.

‘Oh, careful, careful,’ said the Tsar. Then, a fall of gentle laughter. ‘Sharpwood gave you quite a knock! One would think he didn’t appreciate his surveillance detail. So be still, please. How sore you must feel? Such a shame.’

Jack’s eyes fluttered open and he stared at the Tsar, his breathing coming faster, nausea swamping him until he gulped. The Tsar watched him with those grey eyes, that honey-brown hair perfectly curled as always. The triangle of beauty marks the only aberration on his clear skin. He was so beautiful. Their ever-young and ever-beautiful Tsar.

Even as Jack knew he was part of the resistance, he couldn’t hate him.

‘Are you going to kill me?’ Jack said.

‘Of course I’m not,’ the Tsar crooned. ‘I want to talk to you. You’ve always intrigued me, you see.’

Jack’s heart felt too large to fit in his chest. He was too frightened. He looked around for an exit, then frowned when he realised that they weren’t in any kind of place he’d ever seen in the Lune Palace before.

A treasury, perhaps. Stacked with gold bullion, but almost completely covered in darkness, Jack could only see the bricks of gold by their mellifluous gleam. Three candles were lit. No fireplace here today. Jack couldn’t see any doors. He couldn’t see any windows. The air was stifling, but cool. He felt like he was back in the mountain again.

‘I feel like,’ the Tsar said, ‘you’ve lost sight of something. You’re going the wrong way. I’m sure you’re aware of it. Do you know what I woke up to, a week ago? The City of Lune papered in hundreds of posters that weren’t of our make. I know who makes them. That little hoppity rabbit who can’t seem to tame himself. But it’s foolish, don’t you think? These members of the resistance, what will they do when I’m gone? Which of them is fit to rule?’

Jack swallowed. He pushed himself upright, noticed he was on some kind of chaise. That was
normal, right? A *chaise* in a treasury, underground.

The Tsar moved around him and lit another candle by the *chaise longue*, his face contemplative, a small smile at the corners of his mouth. He was so calm. He didn’t look like he was truly bothered by the resistance at all.

‘The mountain can give remarkable gifts to people,’ the Tsar said. ‘It gave me the greatest gift of all. But I think it gave you something very special too. I had wanted an ally. A friend. But none of you really understand what I’m trying to do. That’s my responsibility, but sometimes it is necessary to keep things secret from the children of a nation. Lest they be too afraid to function.’

The Tsar lit another candle, and smiled at the light it emitted. He ran his hand over the top of the flame without touching it. The glow made the Tsar look even prettier.

‘Elsewhere, I am considered a King,’ the Tsar said, finally putting down the matches and walking back to a chair by Jack’s *chaise*. ‘They don’t use the title of Tsar on almost all the other planets, so it’s almost quaint, that it’s still in use here. I am King of Lune, but…they have other names for me, elsewhere. Monikers I enjoy, but cannot let anyone here know me by.’

‘Pitch told me how you- How he seeded planets with the Darkness. And now it’s all backfiring, isn’t it?’

‘Is it?’ the Tsar said, arching his eyebrows. ‘Is that what you think?’

‘The Palace was attacked! The platform! You can’t control it anymore!’

The Tsar leaned back in his chair and regarded Jack seriously. Jack reached for his staff and then realised it wasn’t anywhere near him. He looked around the vaulted space, but couldn’t see the shine or shape of it anywhere. It had fallen when he’d been attacked.

‘I’m going to tell you a story,’ the Tsar said. ‘Why don’t you relax?’

‘Why am I here?’ Jack said. ‘Why did you- Why did you shoot me with an *arrow*?’

‘I didn’t do that,’ the Tsar said. ‘Professor Sharpwood did. His magic is effective, is it not? You’re here because I want you to enjoy – for a moment, anyway – just how wealthy Lune is. This is the fourth treasury we’ve had to excavate beneath the Palace, when I began a new era for our planet. The fourth, Jack. It isn’t the last, either. You once asked me if we were the richest planet out there, and in this system of planets, we are. But there are other planets, other frontiers, places we haven’t begun to explore. Riches unimaginable. Perhaps Lune couldn’t hold them all, we’d fill her fit to bursting.’

Jack stared down at the ground. It was weird that he couldn’t see it. Just an inky blackness, like the candle-light couldn’t reveal what the ground was.

‘Once, Lune was a humble planet. Her soils not that arable, her beaches too rough, her citizens poor but loyal, ruled by wise Tsars and Tsarininas. We had little to trade in, but we were able to trade charms and small magics, along with fine embroidered fabrics. We invested in alliances with nations that looked peaceably upon us, and did not wish to conquer us. Through those alliances, we were drawn into war. It is the story of most planets, in that way.’

The Tsar seemed absorbed by a candle flame for a long time. Jack, in spite of himself, couldn’t stop listening. He knew he should be trying to escape, and yet… the Tsar had said he wasn’t going to kill him, and Jack wanted to know these details. His head hurt so much, he wasn’t sure he could run anywhere, anyway.
‘There was a planet which had the Darkness before ours did. But they lived in balance with it. Citizens of both the Light and the Dark. They were peaceable too. But they had a singular way to protect their nation – nothing else living could fight against the Darkness, and should the Darkness absorb and kill those who came to conquer them, it would channel any extra magic or power it gained into an orb. No one knew about the orb, but I divined it myself one day, with the help of Pitch, who carries a level of political insight about him of the kind that he doesn’t get to exercise a great deal these days.’

Once, Jack had been led to a singing ball of energy. In it, he had seen other cities, other landscapes, heard other languages. He’d never seen anything as beautiful in his entire life, and his sister told him it was a present, and he’d thrust his hand inside and the world had gone dark after an explosion of so much colour, so much light.

‘The magic,’ Jack whispered, ‘in the mountain. The magic ball.’

Of course he knew what the Tsar was speaking about. The ball that he wasn’t supposed to tell the Tsar that he touched. The one that gave him his ice powers in the first place, when he’d heard all those voices whispering, even Pippa whispering to him.

It had never belonged to them?

In the sacred books – the ones that had apparently always existed – it was written:

For Lune had ever been a sacred planet
With a mountain that sheltered both Darkness and Light
And those brave enough to dare it.

‘It wasn’t easy to steal,’ the Tsar said. ‘Nothing that valuable is ever easy to steal. Though, perhaps you’d be surprised at how well we managed it. That planet had grown content with its peace, and they never presumed that someone would think it might be worthwhile to steal the Darkness, to control their enemies, to gain a repository of magic of the likes that no one has ever seen before. You see, Jack, we are a tremendously rich nation. In so many ways.’

‘But…’

‘So, then, we learned the trick of the Light at great cost, and parcelled out Darkness to other planets, though they never knew. Later, planets that we were fighting with for resources or on behalf of our weak alliances, became planets who were grateful for how we helped them. They paid us richly, but…oh, how tragic, we could never quite get on top of the Darkness. Of course, Lune had to be seeded too, in order to hold up that charade, but you’d be amazed how stupid the governing bodies of planets or countries become when their future is at risk.’

‘And now you can’t get on top of it anymore,’ Jack said, his mouth dry.

The Tsar tilted his head, and then giggled. He clapped his hands together like Jack had said something particularly delightful.

‘Look at you, exercising those defective powers of logic, and still coming to the wrong conclusion. Jack- Sweet, sweet, Jack, I can remove the Darkness from Lune whenever I like. From everywhere, if I choose.’

Pitch had no idea Jack was here, he was sure of it. Jack had said such cruel things, and Pitch wouldn’t even know where he was.

Jack swung his feet off the longue and gasped as his head spun. He could hear a whispering, like
being in the mountain, or even on Endan. He pressed a hand carefully to the top of his head. Then, as he tried looking around again, he saw something dark and shadowy flit by in the corner of his vision.

He stood, retched from the pounding in his head, spun around trying to pinpoint it, but it had melted back into the shadows.

‘Your Imperial Majesty,’ Jack said, holding his hand out protectively, years of training combining even as he tried to grasp a staff that wasn’t there, ‘I think…you’re in danger.’

‘Do you?’ the Tsar said. ‘It seems you are the one in danger, Jack Frost.’

Another shadow moved in the corner of his vision, and Jack opened his mouth to shout a warning, when he felt something clammy and cold at his foot. He looked down, saw a single hand of Darkness, clasping his ankle.

The ice came automatically, drove the Darkness back, but didn’t extinguish it. Jack tried to reach for his Light, but he’d never been able to find it without powering through his ice first. He didn’t have his staff, and…

_The Tsar…_

‘You see,’ the Tsar said, ‘I have been called a King of many things, elsewhere. King of Lune. King of the Gambit – I did like that one. King of Darkness. Even, can you imagine, the King of Nightmares?’

Jack’s breathing was loud in his ears. The Tsar walked calmly towards him, and Jack inched backwards.

‘Your Imperial Majesty,’ Jack said, his voice trembling, ‘I fear you- Perhaps you’ve taken leave of your senses… If you would just let the Priests _treat_ you, maybe…’

_This can’t be happening._

Maybe it was a new development. Something in the last few months. Or few years. Something to account for all the changes. Maybe, beneath everything, there was a good leader, and if he was just- If he was only _healed_…

‘I, too, went into the mountain,’ the Tsar said, his grey eyes disappearing behind a murky black, before turning that shining, sweet grey again. ‘I touched the orb. I bent my will towards what I wished, and I was blessed with _greatness_. Do you want to know my gift, Jack?’

‘They can _help_ you,’ Jack gasped, falling back into a stand of gold that tumbled down with brutal, heavy thuds. He yanked his hands forward to stop bars of gold crushing his fingers, and his arm hurt where Sharpwood had shot him.

The Tsar leaned over him, face half in candlelight, half in darkness.

_‘Look,’ _the Tsar breathed, holding his hand out before Jack.

Impossibly, _Light_ spilled from it. Golden and perfect, passing through Jack’s body and containing warmth and healing. The very Light Jack had tried to find in himself, and couldn’t.

‘It made me truly invulnerable,’ the Tsar said. ‘Do you understand yet? Pitch learned the hard way. He didn’t know what gift I’d obtained from the mountain, and wished to de-possess me as you just
did, not understanding that I puppet the Darkness, not the other way around. So he cleansed me with his Light, and, oh, you should have seen his face when nothing happened. That first rebellion, and what a fool he was, to think that I wasn’t already prepared for my supposed fatal weakness. The orb was generous. Do you want to try? Can you even make the Light yet? Here, shall I give you a demonstration?’

The Tsar pressed both of his hands against his own chest, and his whole being was suffused with that golden glow. It burned so brightly that it cast the room into sharp relief, and that was when Jack realised that there were fearlings and nightmare men and other shifting shapes of Living Darkness everywhere. The ground was almost completely covered, like a pool of inky oil.

‘This is usually the point where they start to hyperventilate,’ the Tsar said, staring down as Jack couldn’t stop the way his breath tore at his throat, his chest hiccupping down on a tension so fierce he couldn’t draw a full breath. ‘If you wish, you can destroy anything I don’t currently touch myself with the Light. Whatever is outside of me can be defeated, Jack! Take heart!’

The Tsar laughed, then knelt swiftly, placing a warm hand on Jack’s knee.

‘Dear me,’ the Tsar said, ‘and here I thought you’d bring a better A-game.’

Ice was pouring from Jack’s body, running quickly along the floor, unknowingly pushing the Darkness back. He felt a peculiar kind of horror. It was the knowledge that the Tsar wouldn’t show Jack these secrets, unless he planned to end his life. It was the sheer scale of what the Tsar was opening up in his mind. Too much, too soon.

Pitch knew.

He’d known all along.

He’d known when he’d been looking into Jack’s eyes, that night. Jack whimpered to remember it:

‘If only that were the problem.’

‘I can handle it,’ Jack had said.

‘But maybe I cannot. Maybe there are things I do not yet want to see reflected back to me in your eyes. Not yet, Jack. Not yet. Give me that. Do I ask too much?’

Pitch, who didn’t know where Jack was now, and maybe didn’t care – except Jack knew that he did. Jack knew, didn’t he? Even after their stupid fight. Maybe even because of their stupid fight. Pitch had shut down because Jack had pushed him too hard, because Jack didn’t know the truth, because he didn’t know what the Tsar truly was. Jack had felt the pain of being called a rebound, being told that he didn’t matter, but beneath all of that, it was clear he’d pushed Pitch too hard. Tried to get him to join a resistance he didn’t believe in, because he didn’t know how to defeat the Tsar without the Light.

‘You have a body,’ Jack said, ‘you can be hurt. People don’t need the Light for that.’

He tried pushing himself upright, but his body wasn’t behaving properly. His head still hurt, his arm felt half-paralysed. His mouth was open as he sucked down breath after breath.

‘Do you know which planet Professor Sharpwood comes from, Jack? I’ll give you three guesses, though you seem a little dazed, so I’ll make it easy for you. There was an inside man when we stole that orb. Did you never think it odd that he had entirely black eyes? Is that not the cardinal sign of possession? Honestly, Lune citizens are so profoundly stupid; you are all fat, docile cows,
ready for the slaughter. You believe what we’ve sold you, you do what we tell you, you die when we say so, and you’ll take the Darkness in so nicely when I’m ready to move onto better things. Did you really think Lune was the end game for someone like me? This tiny planet? You unremarkable people?"

‘You-

‘I digressed, didn’t I?’ the Tsar laughed. ‘It’s always tremendously exciting getting to share this part. I was talking about Sharpwood, I believe. He is a Mage, a Professor, an Alchemist. Where I go, he goes. No one ever questions it, why a Professor serves a Tsar in any capacity other than as Professor. Do you know how many have attempted to assassinate me? Here? On other planets? You can guess, if you like. Let’s not even include the attempts that were made on me when I was but an innocent child, and we’ll start from when I gained this Darkness, this Light.’

Jack stared at him, terrified for his own life, but struck with a horrid sense of foreknowing. For he could see his own body, left somewhere in the Palace, and Pitch finding it. Perhaps being *made* to find it. He could see Pitch shutting down further. Even giving up entirely. Could see how these revelations now would mean Pitch’s endless suffering, in some dark place where he was ruled by someone that Jack had once loved and adored and *worshipped* with his entire being.

He knew how hard it would be to convince others of this, because of how long it had taken him to see that the Tsar might not be all that is bright and good in the world after all, despite overwhelming evidence.

‘Don’t feel like guessing?’ the Tsar said amiably. ‘No matter. I am charmed, you see. Charming, yes, but charmed too. Swords cannot touch me. Arrows do not reach me.’

‘What about ice?’ Jack said.

‘Do you want to try?’ the Tsar said, smiling. ‘You’re welcome to try.’

‘How- What about the Tsarina? And…I…’

‘She doesn’t know,’ the Tsar said. ‘But she doesn’t have a great deal to do with me as it is. You could say that we are a *tad* incompatible. The Darkness doesn’t *procreate* through genitals, how utterly crude. We only need take over the bodies of those fully formed. It’s why we only ever had the one heir, even though he is miserably unsuited to be heir at all. I suppose you could say that Mihail inspired me to change my plans. I see a future vista, Jack, one that can be hallmarked by a single word: *Expansion.*’

Jack was kneeling now, wished he had his staff so he could push himself up. Would Pitch see it? Was it still on the ground by the window? Pitch would never have heard him. Those windows were totally soundproof.

‘You said you weren’t going to kill me,’ Jack said.

‘That’s because it’s *opposite day,*’ the Tsar said, and then laughed like a child, and Jack felt some distant memory rumble back into view. All the things the Tsar had said today, that Jack was going the *wrong way,* that he needed to bring a better A-game, that it was *opposite day*…

Jack felt something in his chest hurt when he realised where he’d heard all those things before.

‘You heard me,’ Jack said, his voice weak, ‘in the mountain?’

‘I always keep an eye on the new recruits,’ the Tsar said.
‘You kill us?’

‘Oh goodness gracious, no!’ The Tsar placed a hand to his chest, as though offended. ‘I only try to make sure that people stay away from the orb. You were getting much too close to it. People are more than equipped to die on their own in that mountain. I don’t need more sacrifices. Without the Golden Warriors I wouldn’t have this glorious Kingdom that I have now! Ah, but that’s the thing, isn’t it? How things change. You said so yourself, Lune isn’t safe, the charade is beginning to fall apart, and I grow bored of maintaining it.’

‘So you’re going to kill me?’ It was like he wasn’t quite focusing on the things he was meant to be focusing on. He was twitchy, sensing the Darkness everywhere, knowing the Tsar was the only reason he hadn’t been attacked. Yet. Had the Darkness killed Fyodor too? Was this what the Tsar had revealed to him before the end?

‘No, I’m not,’ the Tsar said. ‘I never lied to you. I’m not going to be the one to do it.’

‘But… So, the…’ Jack couldn’t even said it, looking around the treasury with wide eyes. Now that the Tsar wasn’t making the Light anymore, Jack couldn’t see anything except the dark.

‘Hm?’ the Tsar said. ‘Oh, no, how dreary. I need to make an example of you, Jack Frost. My mascot from the outreaches. Everyone so certain that despite your Overland background, you could come good, be proof that we are doing good work out there. But, oh dear, that terrible file of yours, and how many times have you been to the Disciplinarian again? People will see that the peasants of the outreaches can’t be trusted, and so when the Darkness makes its first attack there, everyone will be very sad about it, but not all that worried.’

The Tsar walked over and held out a hand, and Jack – numb – took it. He was helped to his feet, and the Tsar brushed at his clothing. Jack was only wearing his training clothes, not expecting to be seeing the Tsar. He still felt, somehow, like he wasn’t in good enough clothing for someone like the Tsar. He wished he could feel hatred. Wished he could even feel that striking, malicious darkness inside of him. Why did it come out around Pitch? But never around the Tsar?

Jack almost wanted to ask, but he wasn’t sure he wanted to hear the answer.

‘Here,’ the Tsar said, reaching into his pocket and drawing out a stiff, folded sheet of paper. Jack recognised it immediately, even as the Tsar started to unfold it. His whole body went a bone deep cold that even he couldn’t stand. He was shaking. ‘This is for you.’

His trembling fingers took the paper.

A write up sheet for the Disciplinarian.

In the Tsar’s perfect writing – complete with an official seal from the Palace of Lune – was the reason for Jack’s discipline. But it was the discipline marker itself that made him stare until his eyes were blurred by tears.

Not five lashes. Not ten. Not fifty. Not even a hundred. An abbreviated command, one that Jack had only heard about in rumours.

It hadn’t been ordered in years, as far as Jack knew.

100 PC.

One hundred lashes, post-collapse. However many lashes it took for Jack to fall unconscious, and then one hundred more after that, to ensure he died from it.
He blinked, tears falling from his eyes onto the slip, even as he looked down to the bottom right of the form and saw that the Tsar, at least, hadn’t decided to make it a public execution. But it was still an execution order.

‘I said last time,’ the Tsar said, grasping Jack’s shoulder and squeezing in something that was almost reassurance, ‘that I wanted you to do something to prove yourself to me. Perhaps we’re past that now, but I’d like to think that you’re strong enough to walk towards this with your head held high. You can do one last thing to make me proud, can’t you? What a profound disappointment you’ve been.’

Jack couldn’t tear his eyes away from the form. The reason given was simply ‘Treason.’ The Tsar could have done this at any time, and it was plain he’d been thinking of it for a while.

‘E. Aster Bunnymund also needs to be disciplined for his brazen use of those posters,’ the Tsar continued. ‘He’s not afraid of torture, he’s not afraid of many things that others might be. He’s not even afraid of the Asylums. But this job breaks him. Killing you? Do you think he’s too compassionate? That he’ll make a stand by his principles and he won’t go through with it?’

‘He won’t,’ Jack whispered.

He can’t.

The Tsar leaned forward until his mouth was close to Jack’s ear, and he said: ‘He will.’

‘He’s… But the resistance…’

‘There is something that Aster understands, that you do not,’ the Tsar said, caressing Jack’s hair gently, his face so full of expression for someone who had carried the Darkness in him for so long. ‘He knows that this is a game where pieces must be sacrificed, in order for a win to be attained. Aster does not believe that sacrificing one or two people here or there, is too high a price to pay. While this move of mine may break him, he will have other strategies up his sleeve. Ones already in motion. Aster’s common good, is a common good that allows for men and women to be broken upon the cross, and he has a cruel right hand.’

Jack wanted to say that he’d fly away, but his arm still ached from the arrow that had caught him and the wind hadn’t stirred once in this place. He wanted to say that Bunnymund wouldn’t do it, but Bunnymund had never hesitated in whipping Jack, or even giving him extra lashes if Jack so much as talked back to him. Bunnymund had always asked if Jack wanted to report Crossholt, but he’d never pushed the issue, and Crossholt had never been questioned. He was always so quick to defend himself whenever his being the Disciplinarian was challenged.

Would he be quick to defend this too? Maybe this wouldn’t even break him. He’d never liked Jack.

It was hard to hold back all the things that tumbled in his head. He wanted to go home. He wanted to be back in the creches as a child with his sister. He wanted to be in the Barracks, in his room with Jamie, both of them looking over the different medals Pitch had won in service to Lune, talking about the different designs. He didn’t want to do this. He didn’t want to die this way. He knew in his gut that he couldn’t avoid it. Somehow, with a certainty that carved him in two, he knew he couldn’t avoid this.

‘Please,’ Jack whispered.

‘We’re long past pathetic shows of begging,’ the Tsar said. ‘Though at least you haven’t tried to apologise. I suppose that’s something! Not much though, is it? I truly thought you’d try and fight
me. Are you such a coward? Go on, Jack. I want to see what you’re made of. Show me what the orb gave you.’

Jack’s eyes still couldn’t move away from the $100\ PC$, the Tsar’s seal directly beneath it.

Even if Bunnymund refused, someone else would have to do it.

He didn’t realise he hated the idea of dying from whipping, more than dying from the Darkness, until now.

‘No?’ the Tsar said. ‘Dear me. I’d expected so much more from you. I always do, don’t I? Perhaps that’s my failing! Look at me, Jack, I am brave enough to admit my failings. Are you?’

‘How long?’ Jack said, his voice shaking. ‘How long did you know you were going to kill me this way?’

‘My team read your report. They asked around after you. I decided this would be very fitting, some time ago. After all, you’re so very disobedient, aren’t you? What I can’t fathom at all, is why you would be interested in someone like Pitch, knowing that he does the same thing to so many others.’

It’s not the same thing.

Jack could feel every inch of scar tissue across his back, either by its absence – the numbness of damaged nerves – or by its itchy, unusual pain. He could almost feel Pitch’s fingers at the base of his spine, steadying him.

He’d never see Pitch again.

The last thing they’d done was let their inner darkness loose and yell at each other.

He’d never see Seraphina again. Or Eva or Anton. He’d never know that Jamie was safe by… hearing from him somehow, seeing him, getting a letter with Jamie’s ridiculous handwriting. He wouldn’t get to explain himself to Cupcake. Flitmouse was locked in an Asylum somewhere, and he…

‘I gave you plenty of chances to be my friend,’ the Tsar said, shaking his head. ‘Is it really better? Is turning against me really better than being my friend? I’d get your answer while you were on the cross, but I don’t have much patience for blood loss, and I have other matters I need to get on with.’ The Tsar laughed, leaned back and placed his hands on his hips. ‘You’re really not going to try and attack me?’

Jack’s survival instincts had ramped up. He knew if he tried to attack the Tsar now, he’d surely die. The Tsar showed zero fear at the idea of being attacked by Jack, only glee. Which meant that Jack stood a large chance of dying down here underground, amongst the Living Darkness, and he’d lose all chances to try and escape. But it took time to get from the Palace to the Discipinarian’s Tower. The platform for the whipping was aboveground, exposed to the sky, and the Tsar had already said he wouldn’t be there.

Jack could fly.

The Tsar walked away from Jack, leaving him to his thoughts, and Jack kept trembling. He kept spilling tears. He’d thought that if he had to see the Tsar again, he’d somehow tap into some deep, fighting instinct. Instead, he only felt small and afraid. His head hurt. A part of him just wanted to climb into Pitch’s arms, feel that warmth, hear his voice.
A door opened, and Jack stared as Sharpwood walked in, following the Tsar. He was taller, his blue hair glinting in the candlelight. Jack stared at his opaque black eyes and wondered why he’d never even suspected...

But Sharpwood didn’t behave like a man possessed by Darkness. He was composed and calm. He followed the Tsar’s orders and he seemed to be his own person. Maybe it was true. Maybe there really were people who could hold that evil in their bodies and still be people.

‘Take him,’ the Tsar said, gesturing to Jack.

‘Yes, Your Imperial Majesty,’ Sharpwood said dispassionately, bowing only slightly, and walking towards Jack. He stood by Jack’s side, and then grasped him by his injured upper arm. His fingers only tightened when Jack flinched.

Jack thought about dropping the execution order, but his fingers were too tense. Would it matter? The Tsar would give it to Sharpwood, who would deliver it himself.

‘If he tries to run, knock him out,’ the Tsar said, without looking at Jack again. He was staring at the mounds of gold stretching back into the vault. ‘He doesn’t need to be well to receive his punishment, he only has to receive it.’

‘Of course,’ Sharpwood said. ‘Do you wish me to take the shortcut?’

‘If you have the energy for it,’ the Tsar said absently.

‘Of course,’ Sharpwood said.

His other arm came around and dug into Jack’s shoulder. He took a slow, audible breath, and then the light from the room vanished and Jack yelped as he sensed himself travelling somewhere very fast. Everything was dark, and then just as quickly, they were standing in Bunnymund’s office, a stack of papers flying around the room as they arrived. To Jack’s amazement, he still held the execution order in his hand.

Behind him, Sharpwood was breathing quickly, as though he’d exerted himself.

The door at the other end of the room opened.

‘Crikey, what the devil is-’

Bunnymund stopped and stared between Jack and Sharpwood, his eyes widening, his ears dropping to his back immediately. Then, he saw the order in Jack’s hand, and he went very still.

‘Good afternoon, Epiphanes,’ Sharpwood said, having caught his breath. ‘There’s an order for you, from the Palace of Lune.’

Jack watched as Bunnymund walked over. He watched as Bunnymund took the execution order and read it, his ears twitching once. He stared back when Bunnymund met his eyes, like Jack had personally betrayed him somehow. He watched Bunnymund’s whiskers quiver. Watched the way the fingers of his paws passed the execution order from hand to hand. Watched everything.

So he saw the moment when Bunnymund straightened, squared his shoulders, looked away from Jack with a kind of finality and nodded once towards Sharpwood.

He saw the moment when Bunnymund was willing to kill Jack, after all.
Jack stared at Bunnymund – no, the Disciplinarian – like he could will him to stop. Even though they were out on the exposed, elevated, grassy platform. Even though Sharpwood was standing nearby, watching the whole thing calmly, his opaque black eyes terrifying now that Jack knew what it meant. Jack stared at the Disciplinarian when he’d told Jack to strip off, when he’d gotten the whip, when he’d pointed at the cross.

His own inner darkness, he wished it would come to life. But it stayed numb and dead inside of him. He couldn’t even feel it. He’d never felt it around the Tsar, and he never seemed to feel it around Sharpwood either, and distantly he wondered if it was connected to their abilities, their command of the real Darkness that inspired fear and intimidation in everyone. He laughed a bubble of hysteria, his realisation wouldn’t matter. He couldn’t share it with anyone.

Jack told himself he didn’t even need that inner darkness to kill the Disciplinarian. Even Sharpwood. It would be self-defence. Really, he had to.

Do it. Do it. You know that Jamie would forgive you for this. You know that all the people that matter to you, would forgive you for this.

Ice skittered out in crazed patterns from beneath his feet, but it was beyond his control. The wind whipped past his bare skin, and he couldn’t make it stop. He’d never really learned how to fully control himself when he felt like this, any more than he could control the goose pimples on his skin or the way his hair stood on end over his arms, across the back of his neck.

So he stared at the Disciplinarian, and willed him to be the strong one. The one who wouldn’t murder someone because the Tsar said so.

The Disciplinarian met his eyes frequently. Sometimes he seemed flat. Sometimes he seemed angry. Sometimes exhausted or despairing or…

None of those expressions was enough to make the Disciplinarian stop what he was doing.

Jack had been lashed naked to the cross before. Anything over twenty five lashes, and it was a full strip down. For the first time, he cared about his nudity. He couldn’t switch his mind off as he walked to the cross, and at the last moment – remembering the Tsar saying that Jack should walk towards his death with his head held high – he struggled, weakly but with desperation, and hated that the Disciplinarian – never Epiphanes, or Bunnymund, or any of the other names they called him – was strong enough to force him back into place.

When the Disciplinarian came around the front of the cross where Jack could see him, Jack said through a dry mouth:

‘The Tsar’s possessed by the Darkness.’
‘No he’s not,’ the Disciplinarian said, his voice flat. He glanced over to Sharpwood, his ears twitching several times, and then he shook his head as Jack opened his mouth to shout the truth so fervently that the Disciplinarian would have to listen to him and stop this madness. ‘He’s not possessed. He’s taken it in. He’s still himself. It’s different. Like Sharpwood. Not like what would happen to you or me.’

_He knows, and he’s still going to do it._

‘Don’t do this,’ Jack said, feeling like his insides were being iced. Like splinters of frost were stopping his throat from working, making his lungs seize up. Could he freeze to death before he was whipped to death? ‘He said- He said he wants to break you- He said…’

Jack’s voice strangled into nothing when he saw the Disciplinarian pick up the leather bit. The thing that would stop him destroying his own teeth and tongue from biting down too hard. Like that mattered.

A short, swallowed down whimper. He wouldn’t be able to shout or scream or say anything else once it was in his mouth.

‘Please,’ Jack begged, hardly louder than a whisper. ‘I’m- I’m one of you, aren’t I?’

At that, the Disciplinarian’s eyes narrowed and he looked away for a long moment. All his fur lay flat against his skin, his whiskers pulled back tight. But then he seemed to shake himself, and he glared at Jack like it was his fault for trying that angle in the first place.

Then the bit was forced between Jack’s teeth – salty and tasting of the chemicals used to clean it – and tied behind his head.

It was so familiar, so inevitable, Jack had been here so many times, that he could feel the way he withdrew into himself. The way he knew how to harden himself up beneath the lash no matter how miserable he felt. He could remember so many different times he’d been here.

The first time, when he had no idea what he was getting himself in for, because creche discipline was nothing like this. When he thought it would be easy, because he’d already lost his sister. When he didn’t have the skills to stop himself from screaming, and felt embarrassed for himself, even though no one seemed surprised at his reaction.

The second time, when he almost pissed himself, because then he knew how bad it was, and still made himself walk to it.

The third time, he’d told himself he was used to it. He walked towards the cross with his chin up and his eyes flinty. He’d told himself it would be fine, because he knew what to expect, and he knew he would survive it. He’d be fine.

Except he wasn’t.

He remembered the first time he’d been sentenced to fifty lashes, for some infraction so minor he couldn’t remember it, though he could remember Crossholt saying:

‘You’ll _never_ forget this. Maybe you’ll _learn_ something.’

Jack could remember that, the hiss in Crossholt’s voice, but he couldn’t remember the crime. Jack remembered the other recruits thinking that Jack must have done something way worse, and that Crossholt was just trying to protect him. Though later, many of them realised that Crossholt just liked to have someone to pick on.
Those fifty lashes… Jamie had been beside himself. He’d tried to get his parents involved, and Jack had begged him not to, over and over. There were some things that even Jamie couldn’t keep secret. But in the end, Jamie’s parents didn’t care, and Jack got into trouble for that too, and Jamie never tried to intervene again, beyond tending to Jack personally.

He could hear Pitch’s voice telling him that every time he looked at Jack, he saw what was wrong with Lune. Jack hadn’t really given it much thought, but now it seemed like he could see everything wrong with Lune too. From Seraphina’s easy authority about how Jack had been taken from his parents, to Crossholt’s casual malice, to the Tsar’s cheer when he played a trump card he’d been planning to play for weeks, maybe longer.

Jack closed his eyes when he heard the Disciplinarian getting into position behind him. It felt like a normal whipping. Except for the tears spilling down his face before he could stop them. They were warmer than the rest of his skin.

The first strikes were bad, but Jack bit down into the leather, knew how to ride these out. He hoped fervently for unconsciousness. He refused to count.

He knew when his skin was cut open, feeling blood trickling down his back. Pain flared a few seconds after each lash, some kind of weird delay where he felt the leather tear at his skin and flesh, but his nerves were too scared to respond. Then a sickening full body throb, a scour of sting across it, eating at his thoughts. He hated each steady whistling swing of the leather whip. Even that didn’t summon enough darkness to attack, and he couldn’t even encase himself in ice like he had at North’s tower, all that time ago.

After a few more strokes, he began to swim in the pain, his thoughts drifted. This had happened in the past. He almost craved it. Terrible, yes, but also empty, like there wasn’t room for anything else in his mind. He couldn’t stay silent anymore, but he wasn’t yet screaming. He was aware of dull things – that his hands and wrists ached, and his jaw throbbed. He could smell ice and snow, leather and wood and old acrid sweat where it had soaked into the wood.

For minutes it went on like that, longer than Jack was used to maybe. He didn’t know how many strikes it had been, but he knew it was bad. He could sense his body like a distant thing, like viewing a dead animal in the distance.

In jagged flashes of agony, Jack was pulled back from that swimming hollowness, back into himself. Started shouting hoarsely, teeth locked down, even as he wanted to open his mouth to gasp. He had no idea how many strikes there had been, only that he remembered this during the worst whippings he’d gotten in the past. That right at the end, it had gone from something he could endure, to something that cleaved him from himself.

Jack blinked his eyes open, spots dancing before him, and was startled to see Sharpwood there, staring at him.

A pause in the steady, hard strikes from the whip. Jack’s body wet with blood and sweat, but hope twisting inside of him, thinking that maybe the Disciplinarian couldn’t go through with it after all. That maybe-

‘He’s not unconscious,’ Sharpwood said, taking several steps back. ‘Reset the count. You’re not at the last hundred yet.’

‘Fuck,’ the Disciplinarian said, the venom in it making Jack flinch, the pain in his back making him whine just to try and get it out of him.
Was he supposed to be unconscious by now?

*I’d sure like to be unconscious. By the Light, what I’d give…*

Maybe he could *pretend* to be unconscious, and then the Disciplinarian would give him the hundred lashes, and then…

And then…

He’d be dead anyway, from the blood loss. Or from the whip cutting into his spinal column, or whatever happened when it got that extreme. Jack had heard stories, but he’d never seen. He’d never wanted to know.

Jack was halfway through thinking that he didn’t want Sharpwood there in front of him, staring at him like that, and then the next lash from the whip came.

He didn’t know what was so much worse about it. Whether it was that he’d had a short break first, or that Sharpwood was watching, or some other thing.

The screams wrenched out of him, and he heard the Disciplinarian curse again behind him, and squeezed his eyes shut and tried to ice the ties at his wrists and his ankles so he could snap the leather, so that he could get *free.*

It didn’t work, and the strikes kept coming. At one point the Disciplinarian shouted something, Sharpwood said something back, and Jack hated them for speaking at all, because it hurt. It was excruciating just to hear one more thing on top the agony he was suffering.

What had first started as a struggle to not *die,* quickly became a blurred litany in his mind that erased every other hope.

*Pass out pass out pass out pass out PLEASE PASS OUT JUST-*

His vision starting to go grey, filling with bright white spots, like snow – like the day Pippa had been taken from the Darkness. He didn’t even *care.* He wouldn’t have to hear his own ragged screaming and shrieking, not nearly muffled enough by the leather, and he wouldn’t have to be in this stupid world anymore and he could just stop, he could just *stop.*

The white spots got brighter, and Jack felt himself struggle on the cross, as though he could gallop on his hands and feet towards unconsciousness. He would crawl animal-like into his own death, he would do whatever it took, he would-

The white *blazed* and Jack had never been so grateful for unconsciousness in his life.

As Jack fell into it, he felt blessed to fall into golden Light. Felt like maybe, for the first time, he was being received by something good, that it was going to be okay, that he’d get to rest – really rest – and he’d never have to get up for drills or training or fighting the Darkness or the Tsar or anything else ever again.

It shouldn’t have felt so good.

Then, it didn’t feel good at all.

Something twisted into his back, and Jack screamed so hoarsely that he heard it, and dimly realised – hanging from the cross – that he wasn’t unconscious at all. His eyes were open, and all he could see was a golden *blaze* of Light. It poured through him, surrounded him, knotted through his
ruined back and slowly – too slowly – knitted it back together. There were fingers in the blood and muscle of him, and Jack blinked to see a figure lying gracelessly on the grassy ground in front of him, even as he couldn’t stop himself from sobbing.

That was when he heard Pitch’s voice for the first time, low and quick behind him, words running together.

‘Come on, come on, come on, work, work, work, work.’

It was working, but slowly. The pain was so bright. It rivalled the Light in its brightness.

Jack hyperventilated, his vision swimming, shudders wracking his body.

‘Confound you, WORK!’ Pitch roared.

The Light blazed brighter, though it was already blinding. Still, Jack thought he could feel it, knitting his muscles together faster. It felt like brief cramps and spasmodic twinging. It felt like fingers on raw nerves and his skin regenerating which was painful, then prickling, then more like what his back and shoulders should feel like.

One hand stayed on the flesh of his back, the other came up and started working at leather knots, yanking and tugging, Pitch’s voice breaking as he cursed his own Light to heal faster. Trembling fingers at the back of Jack’s sagging head untied the knot there too, and a hand absolutely drenched in blood came around to the front of his face, fingers pressing at the corner of his mouth to lever the leather bit free, since Jack couldn’t unlock his own jaw properly.


Jack wanted to ask how Pitch had found him, how he knew to come. Who could have told him? How would he have guessed? But he couldn’t speak at all, not with the way his breath kept seizing in his lungs. His vision cleared enough that saw it was Sharpwood, unconscious on the grass. A wound at his temple, still bleeding down his face.

The hand stayed at his back, even as the Light died down from that intense blaze. Instead, Jack felt the warmth behind him, but it wasn’t moving all the way through him anymore.

A groggy sound to the side, the Disciplinarian groaning. Then scraping noises, like someone pushing themselves upright.

‘Pitch…’ the Disciplinarian said.

‘No,’ Pitch said, his voice shaking. He dragged his hands down Jack’s back, and moved to the ties at his ankles, but after tugging at the knot over and over, he seemed to give it up. Jack realised his breathing was audible. There was a jerkiness to Pitch’s movements, a tightness to him that would have been frightening at any other time. ‘No.’

‘Listen, mate, Koz, I-’

‘You HYPOCRITE!’ Pitch shouted, whirling around. ‘Are you so much his slave now? You stand for everything you claim to disdain and deride. You talk down to me, for centuries, and instead you are the yellow-bellied cowardly dog and it has been you all along. With your false resistance, and your posters that only stir him to acts like this. You foul, weak, pathetic hypocrite.’

‘Coming from the one who sends them into the mountain every fucking year, hey?’ the
Disciplinarian snarled.

Pitch cut the ties at Jack’s ankles away with a dagger, and then grabbed him when Jack fell, unable to control his limbs. Jack was still gasping weakly, still panicked, still afraid.

Pitch crooned a soft sound, his entire demeanour changing.

‘I’m right here,’ Pitch said, walking backwards until he could carefully lower Jack down onto a bench. He quickly took off his coat with its golden sigils, draping it around Jack’s shoulders, staring at him with a rawness on his face, his expression drawn. He tucked the coat around Jack’s body, until it met at his front, the warmth of Pitch’s body heat vanishing, even as Jack craved it. Jack’s back felt fragile, like his newly-healed skin would just split apart if he leaned too heavily. But it didn’t split, and he couldn’t stop how hard he rested against the bench.

‘Well, you’ve gone and done it now,’ the Disciplinarian said. ‘Can’t go back after this, can you?’

‘You don’t understand,’ Pitch said, eyes raking over Jack, like he could hardly believe he was there before him. ‘You’ve never understood. I thought our friendship stood for something, and instead…’

Pitch picked up his sword. Jack only then realised that it was resting on the ground, by the cross. By pieces of ice and a pool of blood. Jack felt woozy just looking at it. Nearby on the ground, the whip where it had fallen. Splatters of blood everywhere. Sharpwood was still unconscious. Maybe he was even dead.

‘Draw,’ Pitch said, turning to face the Disciplinarian. ‘Draw your weapon.’

The Disciplinarian stared at him, opening his mouth like he was going to make some insult or scoff, but then his lips thinned. He started to reach behind him, and Pitch stepped forwards without waiting:

‘It’s not like you gave Jack a chance, is it?’ Pitch said.

Jack could only watch in numb amazement as the Disciplinarian only got one of the giant boomerangs from behind him out in time, reaching up to parry Pitch’s sword with a metal-coated weapon. Then, his alchemist’s staff was out, and Jack’s heart was racing – hadn’t stopped racing – and he couldn’t look away as they fought each other fiercely.

The Disciplinarian was injured. He, too, sported a bloodied cut at the top of his head, and it was clear that his arm was fatigued from using the whip for so long. But he fought ferociously, even as Pitch drove him backwards with his sword – side-stepping bursts of magic that Jack didn’t even know he was capable of – explosions of colour that burst into sparks whenever they hit a surface.

It was over quickly. The Disciplinarian against the wall that led into his own tower, and Pitch’s sword at his neck.

‘What will Nikolai say?’ Pitch said coldly. ‘He’ll never forgive you for this.’

‘I don’t need forgiveness to get the resistance back off the bloody ground,’ the Disciplinarian said, his voice thick. ‘I don’t need anyone’s forgiveness for that. It’s the war I’m going to win, not the fantasy that North believes in.’

‘You’re not going to win any war,’ Pitch said. ‘You were defeated a long time ago. You’re his spoils now. Up here in his tower, your people gone, your-’
‘And why are my people gone, Koz?’ the Disciplinarian said, his voice plaintive, before turning cruel again. ‘Why’s that now? Hm? Crikey, you stalk around like you had nothing to do with it, but you only fought back once you’d done everything he wanted you to do. Now your fool heart has gone again for some dumb boy. He’s worth less than Fyodor, and look at you. Is Sharpwood even alive?’

‘We were friends, once,’ Pitch said, staring down at the Disciplinarian with something terrible on his face. He looked over his shoulder once, at Jack, as though checking he was still there, before looking back. ‘But you betrayed me a long time ago, Epiphanes. A long time ago. I will never forgive myself for what I did to those planets, but just because my body wears the blame, doesn’t mean I was ever aware of what I was being made to do. Instead of asking me, you just assumed I’d done it willingly. That I’d bowed before him and taken the Darkness with me as a passenger in a galleon, instead of in me. You can’t imagine what it’s like to truly fight him, because you’ve never done it.’

Pitch reached out with a blood-soaked hand and smeared it down the Disciplinarian’s clothing. Then, idly, he turned his hand and dragged the back of it across his forehead, leaving a dark, crimson trail that ended at his cheek.

‘You like to make assumptions about matters you don’t understand at all,’ Pitch said. ‘You’ve been as motivational in ensuring I don’t join the resistance a second time as he’s been, did you ever see past your ego enough to realise that? Your assumptions are why you’ve ended up the cold-blooded murderer, who can make the calculated risks you think necessary to win your petty revenge plot against the Tsar. All this time, you’ve told yourself you’re the good guy. Instead, you’re just the tyrant who abuses with a whip, because he doesn’t yet have enough power to abuse with that too.’

‘I would never-’

‘Don’t talk. I’m still deciding whether or not I should kill you. I don’t need you for this fight. I have my hostage. I have my plans. I have never stopped thinking about what could have been done differently the first time. But we aren’t ready.’

A long pause, Pitch’s ragged breathing loud enough that Jack could hear it over his own.

‘You were my closest friend,’ Pitch said, his voice breaking. ‘What happened to you?’

The Disciplinarian said nothing at all. He only closed his eyes, and Pitch shoved him once with the hand at his forehead, then stepped away. He didn’t sheathe his sword. Instead, he walked over to Jack,

‘The Tsar,’ Jack said. ‘He’s… He’s the Darkness. I c-can’t- I mean I-’

‘I know,’ Pitch said, then his expression twisted and he looked away. ‘I wish you didn’t.’

‘H-how?’ Jack closed his eyes. ‘How did you find me?’

‘We don’t have time to discuss that now,’ Pitch said, opening his eyes, looking at Jack with a kind of hard certainty that Jack was used to seeing in the posters. There was a light in his eyes, a determination there that Jack hadn’t seen before. ‘I’ll tell you everything I can, I promise, but we need to leave. We don’t have much time. I know- I want nothing more than for you to rest right now, believe me, but you need to stand. You’re my soldier, and I need you to pull on that strength I know you have.’

Jack nodded, moving weakly to his feet, wobbling a little. He staggered, Pitch caught him, hands
careful at Jack’s sides and shoulders, not placing too much pressure on the scars from previous whippings. That awareness alone, knowing that even now Pitch was trying his best to make sure Jack was comfortable, helped him to find his feet. He felt light-headed, told himself that it was like doing one of Crossholt’s demented drills. If he just did it, he’d be able to sleep at the end of the day.

Jack refused to look at the Disciplinarian, he said nothing as Pitch helped him into his clothes. The fabric stuck to the blood on him, even as his skin was whole. His hands were shaking too much to do up buttons, the fastening at his pants, but Pitch did everything deftly, and he looked over to the Disciplinarian often.

Once Jack was dressed, Pitch walked over to Sharpwood, grabbed the back of his shirt and hauled him over to where Jack stood.

‘I can think of no finer and crueller punishment,’ Pitch said, turning to the Disciplinarian, ‘than joining this resistance, leading it against Gavril, and making sure you are never a part of that victory. You are going to be remembered for what you truly are, and not the embittered hero you imagine yourself to be.’

The Disciplinarian looked at him but still said nothing. Had said nothing at all, looked truly defeated. Jack wanted to feel sympathy, but his body was too fragile for him to feel anything except fear whenever he looked at him.

Pitch took a deep, steadying breath, and then slashed his sword through the air twice, the golden light hanging like a curtain, opening into what must have been another place. Pitch dragged Sharpwood closer to himself, and wrapped an arm around Jack’s waist.

‘Seems- Seems a lot to do, for a rebound,’ Jack managed to joke, thinking that he might even be close to crying again, if he thought about how frightening the day had been.

‘Oh, shut up,’ Pitch said, affection and weariness laced in his voice, as he took them both – his hostage and Jack – through the door of golden light.
We Need Him

Jack went down hard to his knees as soon as they arrived, blurrily noticing that they were in Pitch’s lounge, of all places. His breathing was unsteady, it was hard to get his lungs full. He staggered to his feet even as he felt hands beneath his armpits, hauling him back up again. If he thought about anything too hard, he was going to dissolve into terror, so he clutched both of his elbows and blinked to make sense of the room.

Anton was there, staring between them all – Pitch, Jack, Sharpwood – and High Priest Sanderson was already signing to Pitch. The Spymaster Toothiana was there, her cigarette holder balanced precariously in her fingers as she stared at Jack in shock. She didn’t look once at Sharpwood. Behind her, Jack’s staff hung from a chair.

It took him a moment of feeling like he was going to lose his balance, when he realised that Pitch’s hands had moved from his shoulders, to his chest, to the pulse point at his neck. Pitch was saying things, but all he managed to hear was:

‘Anton, he needs the replenishment drinks. At least five.’

‘On it, Admiral,’ Anton said, vanishing down the hall.

‘At least five,’ Toothiana said speculatively. ‘He’s lost that much blood?’

‘He’s in shock, and he’ll collapse without it. He took at least seventy strikes judging from the damage. I’m…’ Pitch broke off and began coughing raggedly. Jack wanted to look at him, but it was taking every shred of energy to stay standing. Pitch had asked him to be a soldier, so Jack was going to do that. Soldiers just followed orders and didn’t have to think. Jack didn’t want to think at all. He wished he still couldn’t hear the echoing sound of the leather whip shredding his skin.

A high-pitched, breathless whining sound, and Jack belatedly realised it was coming from him when Pitch placed shaking fingers at Jack’s neck. The sound stopped.

‘Pitch?’ Toothiana said quietly. ‘Were you hurt?’

‘Two teleportations in one day and then funnelling what felt like an entire week’s worth of Light into this one will rather take it out of you,’ Pitch said, his voice rough. ‘I can get us to North’s, but I’ll be useless after.’

‘That’s fine,’ Toothiana said, smiling brightly. ‘You’ve been useless to us for a long time.’

Anton returned, a whole box of replenishment drinks in his hands. He tried to catch Jack’s eyes, but Jack – even in his numbed state – didn’t want to look at him. Pitch took one of the bottles, unscrewed the metal lid and held the bottle to Jack’s mouth. Another hand at the back of his neck, bracing him.

Jack thought he should really take the bottle in his hands, but it took all of his energy just to open his mouth and remember how to swallow. Even then, after about half, his eyes fluttered shut, his knees buckled.

‘Damn it,’ Pitch hissed. Jack heard the sound from close by, even as he sagged in Pitch’s arms. ‘He’s not out of the woods yet. The Light won’t put blood back into his body. Tooth, keep him conscious for me.’
The quick, clicking steps of Toothiana, and Jack thought it was probably too late for someone to just talk him into staying awake, and then he gasped and jerked when he felt a sharp, stabbing pain in the side of his neck. His eyes opened and Toothiana’s fingers – pinching up sensitive skin – let go.

‘Drink,’ she said kindly, ‘or I’ll keep doing it.’

‘Really?’ Pitch said over Jack’s head, ‘was that necessary?’

‘It worked, didn’t it?’ Toothiana said, her hand coming up and smoothing over Jack’s sweaty, bloodied hair, as Jack got down more of the replenishment solution. It was salty and thick, and Jack knew from training that it was also coloured a pale brown. But it felt like he was drinking cold blood, and he tried not to imagine it, because it churned nausea inside of him. ‘Sweet boy. As for you, I’m surprised you managed to get Sharpwood.’

‘As am I,’ Pitch said, unscrewing the cap on another bottle and pressing it to Jack’s lips. Jack drank with his eyes shut, whole body tremors moving through him.

‘Gavril won’t like that at all.’

‘I rather think he won’t like any of this,’ Pitch said. Jack opened his eyes and looked down at Sharpwood, the wound at his head no longer bleeding. He shuddered. ‘We have…an hour?’

‘Less. A normal person would be dead on the cross by now. Sharpwood wouldn’t linger.’

‘I hope you enjoy your week or two of no longer being a double agent before you die,’ Pitch drawled.

‘I plan on making the most of it,’ Tooth said idly, smoking the cigarette in her holder once more. ‘It wasn’t as though I knew you’d react like this. Or did I? Perhaps I knew. Perhaps it was my idea, Pitch. To get that snow boy up on the cross, to see what you’d do. I’ve always been good at forcing someone’s hand.’

Jack whimpered when the hand supporting the back of his neck tightened into a vice. Pitch had gone still.

‘Your idea,’ Pitch rasped. ‘You know how close Epiphanes was to killing him? You’ve lost yourself an ally in this war if you think I’ll let him anywhere near us without slaughtering him outright.’

‘Such melodrama,’ she laughed. ‘Epiphanes wouldn’t have killed him.’

‘You’re out of touch,’ Pitch said, and Jack found himself led to the lounge, then lifted and placed upon it. Then Sandy was there next to him, kneeling on the couch cushion and holding yet another bottle to Jack’s lips. How many was he supposed to have? How long did they take to help? ‘You’ve spent too long avoiding him and North for your own safety. He would have killed him. He still might, if Jack can’t recover from the blood loss.’

A long silence. Eventually, Pitch was the one who broke it again.

‘So you think we can do this now, if you decided this was the perfect time to force my hand?’

‘This was the only way I could warn you,’ Tooth said abruptly. ‘Gavril wanted him dead. All the other methods were too fast or too private. I made him think it was his idea.’
Toothiana, who had sacrificed Flitmouse to the Asylums. Jack had pieced enough together to know that she’d nearly gotten him killed, but also made it so that Pitch would have to choose a side. She was the one who had pinched his neck, but it had kept him awake enough to drink more. She could never go back to her life, her Tower of Memories. In making Pitch choose a side, she’d chosen one too.

Jack didn’t trust her. He didn’t want to trust anyone. He didn’t even trust the cushion at his back. His skin didn’t feel right. A weak gasp, another, and then he couldn’t breathe properly, and it was all coming too fast, his lungs going into spasm. He could tell Sandy was trying to get his attention, but he was too light-headed to do anything but focus on breathing. He could feel himself drifting away.

‘No, let him,’ came a distant voice. ‘…miracle he’s stayed conscious…so long.’

A worried question from Anton, and Jack passed out before he heard the answer.

* *

Loud voices roused him. He shifted, swallowed a groan. He felt like he’d been trampled by horses. But he forced his eyes open and was almost surprised to see himself in the same lounge as before. Maybe only a few minutes had passed.

Pitch was standing in front of him, glaring at Seraphina, who was staring up at Pitch, hands on her hips. She wore all black clothing, a locket about her neck, her green eyes flinty.

‘So help me,’ Pitch spat, ‘you will leave. Eva, we’ve talked about this! Get a handle on your daughter, please.’

‘Ahhh,’ Eva drawled, ‘today she’s my daughter.’

‘I’m not leaving!’ Seraphina shouted, her feet planting. ‘You can’t send me away! Mihail can help you! He wants to help too. I’m not going away! I’m coming with you. I can fight, and I’m not leaving.’

‘Pitch,’ Eva said quietly, urgently, ‘I cannot make her see sense, and I cannot simply throw her over my shoulder and have her shrieking through the Palace for obvious reasons.’

Jack startled when he saw the small, fat hand rest on his knee, and looked up to see High Priest Sanderson looking at him with a slight, sympathetic frown on his face. But Jack didn’t care about his concern, he cared about the tension. There were unshed tears in Seraphina’s eyes, and Pitch looked ready to bring the entire set of rooms down, and Jack knew this was wasting time.

Something slow, stilted, pushed itself together in his brain. He’d come to care for Seraphina. He knew how hard it must be for them to separate as a family, even if it was for her wellbeing.

‘I will see you very soon,’ Pitch said finally, his voice tight. ‘When things are safer. This isn’t the end, Seraphina, and you know that. We’ve talked about it. A handful of weeks to clear out to safe houses to ensure they are safe. But you cannot come with us now, when we escape.’

‘I’m coming with you,’ Seraphina snapped.

‘You are the most impossible-’

Jack held out a shaking arm, and amazingly that stopped whatever vicious thing Pitch was about to say. Jack pushed himself forwards until his feet were dangling over the edge of the couch.
‘Hey,’ Jack said, looking only at Seraphina.

He’d had a sister once.

Seraphina turned her face first, her eyes lingering on Pitch’s, eyebrows pulled together. But, eventually, her eyes met Jack’s. Then they dropped to his clothing, his legs, and Jack looked down and belatedly realised how much blood covered him. It had soaked through his clothing. It was caked to his feet. For a minute, he forgot what he’d wanted to say, and just looked at himself.

_I need a shower like yesterday. Wait, no, there’s more important things to deal with right now. Focus. Come on._

‘Miss Seraphina,’ Jack said quietly, forcing himself to look up again. ‘I know you want to go with your Papa so badly right now. I know. And I know you probably feel like you’re being treated like a child right now, by all these adults, but they’ve always treated you with respect and love before, yeah? They’re not treating you like a baby, I promise.’

She was as still as stone, she looked entirely unconvinced. Jack thought that when she got older – if she was given the chance to grow older – she’d be one of the most formidable people in the whole of Lune.

‘I had a sister,’ Jack said, smiling a little. ‘She- You remind me of her. I loved her more than anything. Like, the things I would’ve done…’ He shook his head, and hated the way his eyes prickled with tears. How did he have any left? He was so tired. It was the only reason he could say this now, in front of everyone. Eva, Anton, Sanderson, Pitch, Toothiana, Seraphina. Sharpwood still unconscious on the floor. He ignored the rest of them, and then reached out a weak hand to Seraphina.

She seemed like she was going to ignore it at first, but then her eyes widened when she saw how much he was shaking and she took his bloody hand in her own. She frowned at it.

‘So I know what your father’s trying to do,’ Jack said, ‘and I know what your mother’s trying to do. I’ve lived what happens when you don’t protect the people you love, okay? Miss Seraphina, this is not always a kind world, as you’ve been trying to teach me for a long time, but I learned it when I lost her. When the Darkness took her from me, and no one came to the outreaches to do a single thing about it.’

Seraphina stared at him like she hadn’t seen him before, and Jack shifted his hand so he could smooth his thumb over the back of hers. His blood hadn’t even dried yet. He’d left a stain. That wasn’t good. But no one was stopping him. Maybe they were all too shocked that he was interrupting a family argument.

‘This separation now, it has to happen, so you can all reunite later,’ Jack said. ‘So that you have a chance to. I know that goes against your instincts, and once, it would’ve gone against mine too. It’s only a few weeks, Seraphina. Give him the chance to do what he’s always wanted to do, yeah? He just wants to protect you. And you can let me, and whoever is coming, make sure he gets looked after too. I know he’s not very good at it.’

Pitch made a faint scoffing sound from nearby, but Jack didn’t look away from Seraphina.

‘Please,’ Jack said, ‘Miss Seraphina. I know it’s the hardest thing you’ll ever do. But you’ve never lacked, um, you’d call it fortitude, right?’

Seraphina’s face crumpled, then she yanked her hand out of Jack’s and fled into Eva’s arms.
'Before I change my mind,' Seraphina said, her voice wet. ‘Now. Before I change my mind.’

Eva stood and took Seraphina’s hand in hers, and they walked swiftly towards one of the corridors. Eva turned to look over her shoulder at Jack, and mouthed: Thank you.

She gave Pitch a nod, and then they were gone, the door closed behind them.

A lingering silence and Jack sagged back, his eyes fluttering closed. That shouldn’t have taken as much energy as it did.

‘Right,’ Pitch said abruptly. ‘We have thirty minutes. Then we have to leave. The Tsar can’t get in here, but he’ll know where we’re going.’

‘And Epiphanes?’ Toothiana said expectantly.

‘Did you think I didn’t mean it?’ Pitch said dangerously. ‘Who do you value more, Tooth? I’m afraid that’s an ultimatum.’

‘You think we’ll win without him?’ Tooth said.

‘You should have thought of that when you suggested your idea to the Tsar,’ Pitch said, walking over to Jack and picking him up like he weighed nothing. ‘The only person you have to blame for not having a full deck of cards is yourself.’

Toothiana simply hummed like she found the concept intriguing.

Jack kept his eyes only half-open as they walked down the corridor. He frowned when they entered the room where they’d- where…by the Light, where they’d not even fucked yet, and then – even though Pitch didn’t hesitate – he said:

‘Really? Now? You think now’s the time?’

Pitch said nothing. He turned the handle to his bedroom door and flung it open, and Jack looked around curiously even as Pitch sat him on the bed.

‘Arms up,’ Pitch said. ‘You need a shower. I’ll not have you looking like this for however long it is before the next one.’

‘It’s fine,’ Jack said, even as he raised his arms and Pitch pulled at the shirt. It had stuck to Jack’s back, and he flinched hard at the reminder of what the Disciplinarian had done. He went still, his breath locking up in his throat. Even Pitch had stilled.

But then Pitch’s hand moved up between the fabric and his back, and manually unstuck the shirt, every little pull at his skin making Jack bite harder at his lower lip. Nope. Not good. None of that was good.

‘It’s not fine,’ Pitch said, helping Jack with his pants.

‘I can shower myself.’

‘Yes, because now is the time to show your vaunted independence.’

‘You were the one how told me to be more like a soldier.’

‘And soldiers are lone wolves, are they?’ Pitch said acerbically, taking Jack’s sticky hand and leading him towards another bathroom. ‘They never accept help?’
Pitch’s room was nice. It wasn’t as secretive or weird as Jack had imagined. There was a four poster bed, much like the one in the attached room. There was a huge work desk with a lamp still glowing. A wardrobe. Rugs patterned not with stars and constellations, but with the leaves of autumn. Everything was kind of autumnal, now that he thought about it. Bits of gold and red everywhere, like the old colours the Warriors used to wear.

It made Jack think of the uniform he’d seen in Pitch’s storage room. The one with the black feather mantle.

Pitch’s bathroom wasn’t as clean as Jack had been expecting. A shirt was rumpled on the floor. Stains on the counter. Cracks in the top right of one of the mirrors, radiating from a central point, like Pitch had punched it and never allowed it to be replaced.

Jack wanted to say something. He wanted to say a lot of things. About Seraphina and what he’d just said. About Pitch and the resistance and what their lives were going to look like. About the things he’d thought while tied to the cross, the leather bit in his mouth. The things he’d thought while the Tsar had spoken to him.

He watched as Pitch turned on the taps and adjusted the temperature. He didn’t look away when Pitch kept looking at him, quick glances, like he wasn’t quite sure of the situation, or maybe Jack.

‘What a day, huh?’ Jack said.

Pitch paused. A muscle jumped in his jaw several times, but then he took Jack’s hand and led him to check the temperature of the water. Jack adjusted it so it was colder, but Pitch wasn’t that far off from what Jack liked.

‘In,’ Pitch said.

As Jack stepped over the threshold into the shower, he made a sound of shock when he was suddenly pulled back, Pitch wrapping arms tightly around him. Jack was bent at an awkward angle, it took him a moment to return the embrace, his eyes still wide.

‘Toothiana told you,’ Jack said. ‘Did she tell you?’

‘She brought me your staff, and she told me,’ Pitch said. ‘I’d…I’d looked for you. To- To talk. Apologise. You were gone.’

‘The Tsar…’ What could he say? He buried his head into Pitch’s chest and breathed in the scent of him, shaking his head to think of it. ‘I know. The Light. He can make it.’

‘Yes,’ Pitch whispered.

‘You didn’t know until you tried to…stop him? So how can we do it now?’

‘I don’t know,’ Pitch said. His voice was shaking, and a few seconds later he broke off, coughing once more. After a wave of wracking motions, he cleared his throat, took a deep breath. ‘We can’t afford this time. Here. I’ll join you in the shower. Go on, in you get.’

Jack nodded, but it took them some time to pull away from each other.

He scrubbed himself quickly, but he hissed when he touched the cloth to his back. Pitch stepped in and took it from his hands, lathering it with more soap, and then carefully passed it over Jack’s back in long strokes. The skin felt almost mushy. It wasn’t, Jack knew he wasn’t bleeding, but it was tender and strange.
He tried not to move, tried not to think. Pitch touched the scars from past whippings, the space that seemed to exist for the Disciplinarian to destroy it. He placed a hand over his mouth, and then hunched his shoulders when Pitch worked carefully at places where the blood was stubborn. The water at his feet was red.

‘You’ll need more replenishment drinks,’ Pitch said. ‘I want you to try and get three or four more down.’

Jack tried not to think about what that meant in terms of how much blood he’d lost. He didn’t want to think about any of it. He knew it would wait for him while he slept.

‘Where are we going next?’

‘North’s,’ Pitch said quietly. ‘He’s our greatest ally. Our Engineer of Wonders indeed.’

‘He has strongholds?’

‘Some have been compromised over the years, but one thing North is, is tireless. Can you get your legs? The blood’s gone everywhere.’

‘Yeah,’ Jack said, taking the cloth. It fell through his fingers and he stared at it blankly, and Pitch picked it up and hesitated, reluctant to give it to him again. He was passing a critical eye over Jack, who reached out and took the cloth again, bending over and scrubbing at his legs. Blood had dried everywhere. He was a mess. It was between his toes. ‘By the Light. Just think, if I were dead, I wouldn’t have to deal with this part.’

A long silence, Pitch stopped cleaning himself off, and Jack just stared at his feet, absently washing the same patch of his skin.

‘Are there going to be many jokes about how you almost died?’ Pitch said, sounding brittle.

‘Sorry. I didn’t think.’

‘No, it’s… Never mind.’

They finished in silence, and Jack stepped out first, the water still pinkish where it flowed onto the cream bathmat. He dried off quickly, handing another towel to Pitch when he shut off the shower. Pitch hadn’t complained once about the temperature of the water. It had felt warm to Jack, but it must have been unpleasant for him.

A lingering look, and then Pitch simply lifted his chin and said:

‘Later. Not now.’

That was good enough for Jack. He didn’t want to think about it, and there was a lot to do.

*

Someone had placed Jack’s official uniform – the ‘Jack Frost’ uniform – on Pitch’s bed. His smallsword was there. It felt good to have his staff again. A travel pack had been made. Jack had no idea who had done it, but he was grateful. As well as the essentials, there was his cape that glittered with frost, along with his perfectly fitting gloves and the shoes that Flitmouse had measured him for.

Sanderson and Pitch joined their Light to create a portal large enough for Anton, Pitch, Jack,
Sanderson, Sharpwood and Toothiana. Pitch was the last to walk through into North’s tower, and an exclamation of shock came from Toothiana as Pitch crumpled to the floor a step later, unconscious.

Sanderson signed quickly, even as Anton was already there, having caught him. Toothiana watched closely, nodded, translated for everyone else.

‘He must rest,’ she said. ‘Of course. Just because he can do it, doesn’t mean he can do it forever. His reserves are spent.’

‘He’s okay?’ Jack said, staring at him, the pallor of his face. He looked so vulnerable. His sword sheath had hit the ground hard.

‘He’ll be fine,’ Toothiana said.

‘I’ve seen this before,’ Anton said. ‘He normally only needs an hour. Sometimes less.’

‘What about Sharpwood?’ Jack said, staring at him. ‘What if he wakes up? Can’t he just whoosh back to the Tsar?’

‘He’s going to need healing before he wakes up,’ Toothiana said, crouching down by his side and lifting his eyelid. ‘That’s the thing about these Golden Warriors, if they knock someone out, they tend to mean it. Taking that healing energy for granted, I rather suspect. But Sandy can stop him from teleporting, can’t you?’

Sandy nodded vigorously, lifted both of his hands in an emphatic thumbs up signal.

‘I’m going to fetch North,’ Tooth said, swiftly walking away.

Jack saw that they’d ended up in the room where the Disciplinarian had made all of his posters.

As Toothiana passed the metal stork by the door, its red eyes lit up and it began its squawking, screeching in noisy affront.

‘Honestly,’ she laughed, then tapped it once on its head. It was immediately silent, and she shrugged as she left through the door, saying as she went: ‘At least he’ll know I’m here!’

Then, Jack was alone in a room with two unconscious people, Sandy, and Anton. For a moment, he’d almost forgotten what he’d been so angry at Anton about. What resentment had he carried with him all the way into this room? But Anton looked at Jack warily, and Jack didn’t know if he was ready to let any of it go.

‘This is weird,’ Jack said abruptly.

Anton nodded, looked down at Pitch. Anton’s hair today a glossy black with a red sheen whenever the light hit it. He looked like a muted fire, even though his eyes shone as gold as ever.

‘Will the Tsar attack North?’ Jack said. ‘Like, here?’

‘I don’t know,’ Anton said, looking up again. ‘I’m not sure he’d risk an obvious attack against the Engineer and all he represents. Yet he’s going to have to attack him soon enough. I’ve never understood his plans.’

‘Expansion,’ Jack said. ‘He doesn’t care about Lune.’

Anton stared at him, and Jack realised that maybe Anton didn’t know.
‘He wants to go beyond the planets he’s already conquered. Lune was never his endgame. It kind of explains why everything’s been so… I dunno. Doesn’t it? If he doesn’t really care about ruling Lune anymore, and plans to leave, then why would it matter if North was the Engineer? No wonder he talked about not needing the Royal Admiral anymore. No wonder he doesn’t have a replacement.’

It felt good, in a strange way, to have all the information. Despite the background swell of terror that he seemed to be permanently carrying with him. Finally, he could actually try and figure things out. Maybe he’d be getting it all wrong, but Pitch wasn’t awake to correct him, and Jack didn’t think he was so far off.

‘Jack, I owe you an apology,’ Anton said.

‘Forget it.’ Jack didn’t plan on going to him any time soon with sensitive, personal information. Otherwise, he found it hard to keep up the anger that he’d felt. It deflated under the weight of everything else.

‘No, really, I didn’t think it through. I was too- I’m reckless, people get caught up in it, and sometimes I forget that happens outside of a battlefield as well.’ Anton looked over at Sandy, who seemed preoccupied with walking around the room and looking in cabinets. ‘I want us to be friends, at least. I care about you a lot. I think we’re all going to need friendship going into this, and I don’t want to lose yours.’

‘You haven’t,’ Jack said, staring at him. ‘But I don’t trust you. I mean to have my back in battle, sure. And to have fun times with, yeah. But for the rest of it?’

Anton’s expression fell, and Jack pressed his lips together and made himself look at Pitch instead. Pitch could have been sleeping, he looked so peaceful.

‘Maybe, with time, I’ll earn that back,’ Anton said eventually.

‘Yeah, maybe,’ Jack said, making himself walk away. He felt jittery. Just waiting here in the tower didn’t seem wise, but he knew that he’d probably feel that way for a while.

His sister was killed by the shadows, and the Tsar had known they were there the entire time. Maybe even directed them to kill people out where no one important would care about, to keep the threat and fear going. To make sure parents loyally gave their offspring to the creches, to make sure there’d be enough soldiers to die in the wars that kept Lune rich.

Except the Tsar didn’t even care about Lune. He didn’t even care about some demented, twisted version of it.

‘Jack?’ Anton said quietly, hesitantly.

In the motion of turning, Jack realised he’d frozen himself to the floor. He looked down at the ice spiking up from the ground, cementing him in place, then caught Sandy watching him.

Seeing the ice produced a wave of fury that made his vision blur.

Great, so now it’s happening. Not with the Tsar, when it would’ve been useful maybe, and not with the Disciplinarian, when it could’ve saved my life and I wouldn’t have needed Pitch to do it – so he wouldn’t be unconscious now when we need him most. It’s happening now? Great.

A crackle of blue energy lanced quickly across his staff, then flickered upwards towards the ceiling where it burst into shimmering, blue fragments of ice.
An idea clicked into place as the door was thrown open and North strode in, sabres at his side, wearing not the red and white of his Engineer’s uniform, but the black, red and gold standard of his Warrior days. Toothiana followed.

North dropped to his knees beside Pitch and reached out, touching his shoulder.

‘This is not being good. But he is never out for long. I am not wanting to leave until I’ve spoken to him.’

‘What about being attacked?’ Jack said.

North looked over and his eyes narrowed when he saw the ice on the ground, attached to Jack’s legs.

‘I am thinking—’

‘If you need cover,’ Jack said hurriedly, ‘tell me. I have a whole bunch of ice to burn and if it’s a blizzard you want, I can do it. It wouldn’t be hard. You wanted a weapon, right?’

North winced, and Sandy turned to glare at North, looking annoyed, signing quickly and sharply.

‘We will be using ships to leave,’ North said slowly, acknowledging Sandy with a curt sign executed with one hand. ‘Snow will interfere with us as much as it will interfere with him. I am knowing he doesn’t have as many ships. He has the Darkness, yes, but he is not controlling it everywhere, or we would all be dead in our sleep long before now. The problem with the Tsar has never been getting away from him, it has been killing him. But now, we are concerned with getting away from him and grouping again.’

‘Regrouping,’ Anton said absently.

‘I am knowing what I mean,’ North said sternly, ‘and you are knowing too. I am thinking first we wait for Pitch to wake. If he has made this decision now…’

North looked over at Jack again, speculatively. There was something in his gaze that Jack didn’t like.

‘Tooth says that Pitch believes the Disciplinarian intended to kill you.’

Jack figured he had maybe five minutes to get out of there and put a blizzard somewhere. His hand was iced to his staff. He nodded jerkily.

‘That’s because he did.’

‘Epiphanes wouldn’t—’

‘He did,’ Jack spat out. ‘He did, okay? He meant it from the moment he saw the Tsar’s order. He didn’t try to negotiate it. He didn’t tighten up on his whip hand to drag it out if he thought rescue was a possibility. What, you’re all sad that your buddy did something you don’t like? Yeah, I’m pretty upset about it too. I’d really, really like it if you gave me somewhere to put a blizzard. Seriously. Or it will go in here, and no one will like that.’

‘The boy was covered in a rather large amount of blood when I saw him,’ Tooth said eventually. She sighed, and then shook her head. ‘Epiphanes was always capable. It’s why the Tsar had him in that position in the first place.’
'No,' North said. It was outright denial, but he didn’t look away from Jack, and his face had paled beneath his black beard, his bushy eyebrows. Then he forcibly looked away and said to Toothiana: ‘Paravi, you are knowing this cannot be done without him as much as I know.’

‘Pitch didn’t give him much of a choice,’ Jack said. He nudged away some of the ice growing in knife-like shapes around his feet. North looked down, his eyes widened.

‘I am needing ice barrier,’ he said abruptly, ‘around the northern perimeter. Something to block the roads leading in from the city. A big, strong barrier. Can you do this without draining yourself?’

‘Watch me,’ Jack said. He leapt onto the winds and raced to the window, only stopping when Anton called his name.

‘Be careful,’ Anton said. ‘Stay in the air. No longer than thirty minutes. Come back immediately if you see anything out of the ordinary.’

‘Yeah,’ Jack said, and then opened the window – way easier to do from the inside – and sprung out into the open sky, pretending that his breathing was faster because of the winds racing around him.

He wasn’t sure what he expected to see, but the empty forest and the deserted roads weren’t it. The Tsar had the Darkness at his disposal, but did he have the people to populate an army? North said that it wasn’t getting away from him that was the problem, but killing him. Could that be true? Jack didn’t know if he believed any of them, but he couldn’t put himself in the Tsar’s shoes and imagine exactly what he wanted. Expansion? Then why hadn’t he left already? What was it about Lune that kept him here, when he disliked it so much?

Jack powered his excess of ice into making a long, monstrously jagged barrier. He knew as he made it that the ice wasn’t normal, that it might not melt for weeks, even months. He could taste the coldness of it in the back of his throat, numbing his lungs and leaving a splintery ache in his body. He only needed to sweep his staff, and the ice crackled into existence in huge spikes and tiny, skin-cutting shards.

He didn’t need the full thirty minutes, swooping along the shadow the towering edifice of ice made and reinforcing the base, but he hesitated when it came to flying back.

He felt sick. Felt more lost now than he had before when he’d decided to join the resistance. What did he think would happen? That it would get easier?

Jack wasn’t sure what Pitch’s plan was, taking Sharpwood like that. A hostage? Jack knew that when Sharpwood woke again, he wouldn’t feel angry like this anymore. His inner darkness would be muted, even though he didn’t have any of the living stuff inside of him. Something about Sharpwood and the Tsar removed his ability to feel that vengeful wrath, that darkness-caused malice. He’d never felt it around either of them.

He flew higher, towards the clouds, knowing that he only had about ten minutes to get back.

A hard decision had formed in his mind, and he hated it, hated himself for even thinking it. He soared upwards where the air was thinner, frost spinning in patterns across his clothing, and he hung there, hovering on the winds. Normally it felt good to fly, but now he just wanted to bury down where no one could find him, pretend that he didn’t have to make decisions that hurt him.

How is it any different to training with Crossholt every day? Or dealing with what the creches dealt out when you looked after Pippa? It’s not different. Come on, Jack, get your shit together.

He tilted backwards and fell through the air, angling towards the tower. He cut through at speed,
felt like a stooping falcon. He slowed before entering the window, surprised to see Anton stepping back hurriedly to give him space. Had Anton been looking out for him?

Jack looked over to Pitch, to see him sitting up and sipping from a huge mug, North crouched over him and talking rapidly in some language Jack had never even heard. Pitch’s eyes were on Jack, watching him. He nodded to whatever North was saying, murmured a response in the same language. Toothiana and Sandy were listening attentively nearby, could both obviously understand it.

‘Sharpwood won’t be a problem,’ Pitch said, switching back to Lune. ‘He can come with us.’

‘I’d like to know how you plan on taking an unconscious man on the Mora,’ North said.

‘Gable,’ Pitch said. ‘Mora can rest on that for a while. I’m not even sure I should be flying on her, she’s…particular.’

‘She’s always done what you have been needing from her,’ North said, and then turned and smiled at Jack. ‘Feeling better?’

‘No. Not really,’ Jack said, ignoring the way North seemed disconcerted by Jack’s response. He didn’t look away from Pitch. ‘Before we bust up out of here, how do we get the Disciplinarian back on board?’

Pitch pushed himself upright, waving away North’s offer of assistance.

‘I beg your pardon?’

‘You heard me,’ Jack said. ‘If we need him, then-’

‘We most certainly do not-’

‘You say that now,’ Toothiana said, smiling, ‘but you won’t know as a certainty, until we’ve won.’

Jack realised just how Toothiana used that bright smile and her gentle voice as a weapon. Her violet eyes were flinty, her blue-violet suit didn’t make her gaudy at all, it marked her out as someone who was unafraid to appear colourful and cheerful. She held the secrets of Lune in her fingers, had the ear of the Tsar. Jack felt like nothing he knew about her made her any less terrifying.

‘I am not working with someone who as good as murdered Jack,’ Pitch hissed.

‘We need him,’ Jack said, hating the way Pitch looked at him like Jack had betrayed him. ‘Don’t we? Look, I don’t want- I don’t want to be around him, I don’t want to have anything to do with him, pretty much ever, but if everyone is saying that he’s important to this – then...’ Jack couldn’t make himself keep saying it. He didn’t want to see the Disciplinarian ever again. Didn’t know if he could so much as set eyes upon him and stay sane.

‘But if it is as you said,’ North said slowly, ‘then I am not sure... Paravi, you know it is possible to stray too far from the path.’

‘He has the City,’ Tooth said calmly. ‘If you didn’t want him to have such an influence, perhaps you shouldn’t have let him run unchecked. Rabbits get out of hand so quickly, don’t they?’ She laughed, then looked directly at Jack. ‘I’m glad to see at least one of us is capable of being the voice of reason. We do need Epiphanes, no matter what he’s done, or what he’ll do. Never fear, Pitch, if he doesn’t get another direct execution order from the Tsar, he’ll like as not try and avoid
Jack. Which is no matter, as we’re splitting up for a time anyway. So why does it matter if he’s on the team or not? You’ve always appreciated his strategizing, and let’s not forget how much you’ve made use of his magic. Or have you not enjoyed his magic throughout your fortress-like wing all this time?”

Pitch stared only at Jack, and when she was done talking, he walked forwards and took Jack’s hand.

‘I want you to be sure,’ Pitch said. ‘You are dangerous around him.’

‘Then I won’t be around him,’ Jack said, trying to ignore the way his voice shook. He wasn’t sure. He didn’t like it.

‘He is dangerous around you,’ Pitch said. Then Pitch looked up, his jaw working. ‘He was very clear that Jack is just a lesser version of Fyodor. If he continues to treat Jack like that, I’ll happily kill him myself. Let’s be clear. Paravi, you know exactly what pushed me into making my move, so don’t pretend that’s not still in play, just because it’s convenient for you to dismiss it. If you didn’t need me, you wouldn’t have orchestrated this in the first place.’

Jack didn’t want to look at Toothiana, remembering that the Disciplinarian may have been the instrument, but she was the one who’d whispered the idea into the Tsar’s ear in the first place. To make Pitch react, to set this in motion.

Could she be working for the Tsar? Did she really care about the resistance?

He looked at her sidelong, surprised that she was already returning his gaze, like she’d expected it.

‘Maybe you’re working for him,’ Jack said, without thinking.

Toothiana’s eyes widened, and the hand holding the cigarette holder went limp. It was like no one had ever said such a thing to her in her life. Behind her, Sandy looked shocked. North too, had an expression like he’d never even considered it.

‘Jack,’ Pitch said, the warning unmistakeable.

‘Maybe she is, though,’ Jack said.

Toothiana’s shock smoothed into a smile, and she tilted her head. Strangely, she looked impressed.

‘Good boy,’ she said warmly. ‘Why should you trust me? I could tell you I’m not working for him, but why should you believe me? If I was looking at my actions from the outside, I’d conclude that I’d placed Flitmouse in an Asylum, and put you on the cross, maybe even pretended I didn’t know that Epiphanes was capable of such a thing as murder. You’re missing a grand swathe of information, but they’re not so shabby – those critical thinking skills of yours – and you show promise.’

Anton cleared his throat. ‘If we’re going to leave, we should leave. Standing around talking is great, but sitting ducks and everything? I can make a portal with Sandy, to fetch Bunnymund. You and Jack should be getting out now.’

‘Indeed,’ Pitch said, stepping closer to Jack and placing a stabilising hand at the back of his neck. Jack flinched without meaning to, then clenched the fist not holding his staff, annoyed at how he was reacting. The whipping had stopped. He wouldn’t even scar. Pitch was touching his neck anyway, not his back. ‘Tell Epiphanes that the next time I see him, if he shows a shred of the attitude he showed to me today, what I do to him will make him forget there was ever such a thing
as mercy, in this cold, dark universe.’

‘Well, I expect that’s half the problem,’ Toothiana said, shrugging. ‘I think he’s forgotten such a thing as mercy existed a long time ago.’

‘No wonder,’ Pitch said flatly. ‘He’s had you as a friend, hasn’t he?’

Jack felt a small amount of vindication on Pitch’s behalf, when he saw the way her eyes widened at that. He got the sense that not many people managed to shock the Spymaster, and after the day he’d had, he felt a little like she deserved it.
Oof, that was a bit of a longer delay than I generally like! I’ve been working on a bunch of projects and dealing with a bunch of medical appts at the moment (I have a third tumour, huzzah! Oh wait, no, more is bad), returning to these two doofuses and their huge ensemble cast makes me so happy. Even if they are both grumpy little shits right now.

‘Drop the snow,’ Pitch said abruptly, as they coasted to a stop in a patch of dense, bleak forest that looked like the other endless hours of dense, bleak forest.

‘I’m not making it,’ Jack said, yawning. ‘I stopped making it a while back. S’just snowing.’

‘Can’t you make it stop?’

‘What do I look like? The anti-snow boy?’

Pitch made a sound of exasperation. Jack wanted to say something, but Pitch had been in a remarkably short, taciturn mood after they’d exited North’s tower two days before. They’d flown in one of the small clippers, the Mora on board and not clattering around like the last time Jack had seen her. Sharpwood still unconscious beneath the tiny protective stowage section. Apparently Pitch wasn’t concerned if Sharpwood had access to water or food. But Jack didn’t know anything about him, maybe he didn’t need it.

The engine cut off, and Pitch eased the vehicle down to the ground where it landed without a single sound.

Jack looked around warily, staff ready, but no one had come for them. Pitch had flown through the night, eventually looking a bit like death warmed over, but he’d not let Jack take over the wheel.

Even Jack succumbed to sleep eventually, despite wanting to be good at sleep deprivation – at one point he kind of felt like he was in a competition with Pitch to see who could go the longest without sleep. That was when he’d found out that the whip and Bunnymund and the Tsar were all waiting for him in his dreams.

When he’d woken, Jack had rubbed his eyes and looked up to Pitch staring at him in shock, one hand on the wheel, not even looking at where he was flying. Jack didn’t know what was worse, that he’d apparently just fallen asleep on the deck, or that whatever he’d said or done while sleeping was enough to earn that expression.

‘Shouldn’t you focus on where we’re going? How can you even navigate with the snow and the- does this forest ever end?’

Pitch hadn’t responded, he only narrowed his eyes and turned back, placing his other hand back on the wheel and shifting their course slightly, like he knew where they were headed.

Now they were here, apparently. Pitch had spent the last two hours carefully navigating between huge, thick trunks under a canopy that managed to let in an awful lot of snow considering how little
light there was.

‘Can he find us here?’ Jack said.

‘I’m not sure,’ Pitch said slowly. ‘I hope not.’

‘But with how dark it is, and…the Darkness, it could…’

‘He can’t control it in that way,’ Pitch said, anger marking his tone. ‘Which you know. I don’t want to have to be repeating myself two or three times when I know you have a perfectly working brain in that head of yours.’

Jack bit down on the inside of his lip, keeping back a retort. He told himself Pitch was just tired, but it seemed to be more than that. It was like he’d been angry at Jack personally since they’d left. Was it because he’d demanded Bunnymund be brought back? Was it that Pitch had saved his life, and was now regretting it?

‘If he can’t control it out here, then why… Where does it come from?’

‘Here,’ Pitch said, shoving a pack at him. ‘Take the other as well.’

Pitch hauled up Sharpwood in a bridal carry, and eventually – awkwardly – they disembarked and Pitch looked around, eyes searching. He headed towards a tree that looked no different from any other. Pitch put Sharpwood down and used his boot to move snow away from the base of the tree, looking like he’d rather be drinking poison or undergoing torture than doing what he was actually doing.

There, buried amongst jutting roots, a coppery gear that had gone dull green with verdigris over time. It had two levers set into it, and a single button. Pitch pressed the button three times, moved the top lever sideways, pressed the button twice, and then moved the bottom lever down.

A rumbling noise, Jack staring around in alarm, already hovering on the winds in readiness. Then, it was like a curtain dropped in the vista before him. Where he’d seen trees and darkness and the shadows of branches, a two storey house appeared. Its gabled dark green roof was snow-capped, the curtains drawn, the wooden panels painted a dull grey. There were carvings of hearts on the wooden windowsills.

‘There,’ Pitch said, picking up Sharpwood again. ‘Isn’t it wondrous?’

Pitch made it sound like that was the worst thing ever. But Jack was still taking a moment to enjoy the awe of it.

‘How?’ Jack said.

‘North made it, Bunnymund cloaked it. North geared the switchbox to Bunnymund’s magic.’

‘You knew the code.’

‘Yes,’ Pitch said.

‘Just how close did you guys used to be?’

‘Jack?’

‘Yeah?’
‘I’ve gagged you once, don’t make me do it again.’

*That’s it. His personality has been replaced by a sea urchin. Wasn’t he just hugging me in a shower a couple of days ago?*

Jack decided it would just be best if he shut up and carried the packs inside. The carved wooden door wasn’t locked, and Jack was surprised to see the house had been recently cleaned. He wondered if he should be suspicious, but Pitch didn’t seem particularly surprised. Jack also didn’t really think the stronghold looked particularly strong. But whatever.

Some of the pale floorboards creaked underfoot. Jack watched as Pitch first lit candles, and then found another metal panel by a display cabinet hanging on the wall. A few moments with that, and lights blazed. Then Pitch sharply pulled down a lever and nothing happened.

‘What did you do?’

‘It’s cloaked again,’ Pitch said, walking through a doorway that led to a lounge of overstuffed armchairs and one sofa with a particularly hideous floral pattern. Against the wall was a huge hearth with wood stacked nearby, like someone had been expecting them. Bookshelves were filled with training manuals and other paraphernalia that Jack recognised from his own creche. There were war tomes there too. And other things in the more extensive Lune alphabet that he didn’t fully understand. What words he could pick out seemed to be concerned with battle.

‘Why does North have this place?’

Pitch didn’t respond, instead lowering Sharpwood into an armchair after throwing several embroidered but largely useless cushions out of the way. Then he walked off. Jack stood there, not quite knowing what to do. He had a million questions, and up until only a little while ago, he’d assumed he could go to Pitch with them. Now he wasn’t so sure.

A few minutes later Pitch returned with chains, manacles and two padlocks. The chains were thin, but they looked strong. Jack watched in amazement as he wrapped them around Sharpwood’s wrists and ankles, padlocking them into place, occasionally sighing as though he’d never found anything more tedious in his life.

‘Can’t he still get away though?’ Jack said. ‘You know, teleport through the shadows or whatever?’

A long hesitation, an odd expression from Pitch, and then he just grasped both sets of chains in each hand, and rich golden Light infused the chains for several long seconds. The Light faded, and Pitch simply said:

‘He can’t teleport away.’

‘I didn’t know we could do that,’ Jack said.

That odd look again, and Jack wondered what would work better. Should he just yell at Pitch until something changed? Jack rubbed at his face in confusion. He was so tired. Pitch had made him drink *seven* more of those stupid replenishment packs. Jack knew he hadn’t lost that much blood, but even so, he was exhausted. He’d been running on fear and adrenaline for such a long time, expecting to see people chasing them. He knew the whole point of splitting up like this, so early, was so that they *wouldn’t* get chased, but it seemed like the Tsar had been ten steps ahead for so long now.

Jack half-expected the Tsar to just appear. To be the one holding a broom and announcing that he’d
just cleaned the whole place for them, even though Jack was sure he wouldn’t have a speck of dust on him.

Pitch crouched over Sharpwood, and then placed his hands on either side of Sharpwood’s head. They hadn’t cleaned the dried blood away. He looked a sight. Another burst of golden Light, this time sustained, and Jack almost asked if Pitch should be doing that. He was drained, he hadn’t slept, and Jack thought if he got any grumpier he’d probably just start setting people on fire by looking at them.

The head wound healed, and within a surprisingly short amount of time, Sharpwood grunted softly, his eyelids fluttering. Pitch stepped back immediately, right in front of him, staring down.

That unreadable, liquid black in Sharpwood’s eyes. How had none of them ever seen it? Why had they just accepted that as normal?

Sharpwood’s gaze moved groggily to Jack, and then to Pitch. Then he looked around the room slowly. Finally, he looked down at the chains and manacles attached to his wrists. Jack was surprised when he smiled crookedly, and leaned his head back against the chair, closing his eyes like he was unconcerned.

‘You can’t teleport away,’ Pitch said. ‘The chains will stop you.’

‘Yes,’ Sharpwood said. ‘I imagined they might.’

A long silence, and then Sharpwood said:

‘It won’t hurt him as much as you want it to. Taking me from him.’

‘I didn’t imagine it would,’ Pitch said blandly. ‘He’s been around you too long, and he’s learned too much.’

‘War is boring,’ Sharpwood said. ‘I’m going to sleep now.’

‘If you begin to feel like you’re starving to death, let me know.’

‘Mm,’ Sharpwood said, closing his eyes and sighing. A minute later his chest was rising and falling slowly, and Jack stared in amazement. Pitch simply walked away, and then after a moment – when he was halfway across the kitchen – he sternly said:

‘Are you coming?’

Jack stared at Sharpwood for another long moment, and then turned and walked hurriedly after Pitch – who had picked up both of the packs they’d brought with them – his hands opening and closing.

‘What was that?’

‘His biology isn’t like ours,’ Pitch said. ‘He also has no interest in war.’

‘But he’s helping the Tsar.’

‘The Tsar is also not particularly interested in war,’ Pitch said, climbing up the stairs two at a time. ‘He seeks to erase conflict by ruling over everything.’

‘Is he really asleep?’
‘Jack, if I thought he had the slightest chance of escaping here alive, I would have knocked him out again.’

The tone was acerbic, and Jack closed his eyes. He wasn’t even bothering to walk up the steps behind Pitch, choosing to fly instead. He was getting more and more comfortable in the air now, and was beginning to take the flight for granted, no longer thinking of it as a special occasion thing, but actually something he could do whenever he felt like it.

The second storey had another living room, several bedrooms, along with a bathroom and a small kitchenette. Up here, on shelves around the walls, were carvings of animals and trees, and a few small toy soldiers. Jack hovered up so he could see them all, amazed at the level of detail. Clearly a place that belonged to the Engineer, yet it felt like it didn’t at the same time. One shelf simply had carved rabbits. All different species. Many that Jack didn’t recognise.

Pitch was in one of the bedrooms, and Jack eventually hovered in the doorway, watching him make the bed and unpack his belongings. Jack’s pack was by the door, and he wondered if he should take his stuff to another room. Probably. He bent down and picked it up, his feet touching the ground. He held the pack in front of himself, and thought that it was funny how Pitch could put everything on the line to save Jack’s life, and now it felt like maybe Pitch wished he hadn’t taken Toothiana’s bait.

‘Are you mad at me?’ Jack said.

‘No,’ Pitch said, not even looking up at him. He tugged and folded a corner of the blankets into the mattress with a kind of aggressive precision that only made it seem like he was lying.

‘Except how you are,’ Jack said. ‘Y’know, Jamie was pretty good at being passive aggressive sometimes but you’re like, super good at it.’

Pitch paused, his hands hovering somewhere above the extra blanket he’d started laying out. Pitch looked at him.

‘I am tired,’ Pitch said, as though he was speaking to a very small child. ‘My daughter is in danger. More than ever before. All of our lives are in danger. You have just spent your brainwashed ability to self-sacrifice to bring back someone who essentially killed you, had I not been there to rescue you. I am, perhaps, what you might call a little testy. I need a good night’s sleep. For once, I would like it if you could not end every sentence in that upturned lilt that means you are asking me yet another question. If there is one thing I know to do in the middle of a sustained battle, it’s get the sleep when I can get it, which will be in approximately twenty minutes, after a shower. You and I will speak tomorrow.’

Pitch walked up to the bedroom door and started to close it, as Jack stepped back out of the way.

‘Goodnight,’ Pitch said crisply.

The door closed with a sharp click.

Jack stood there a few minutes longer, and then decided he should probably see which of the other rooms he wanted to sleep in. He spent a lot of time trying not to think about anything at all.

*  

After a long shower in lukewarm water where he kept raising the heat in increments until he felt almost dizzy – he didn’t know why, but he missed the warmth more than usual – he found linens in one of the bedroom closets and made up a smaller cot in a room that was clearly meant to house
about six people. It was filled with three bunkbeds. Jack took the top bunk in the corner closest to the window, and watched snow falling outside. It wasn’t even dark yet.

He wanted to sleep, but he remembered whatever he’d done on the clipper that had made Pitch stare at him like that, and he didn’t want to wake Pitch. It was unnerving, Sharpwood downstairs like that. Jack didn’t really want to wake either of them. So he sat on the bed with his knees up, and then eventually got sick of that and shifted so that his back was against the wall.

He folded his hands in his lap and focused on his breathing. There were military exercises that would keep him alert, but also let him enter a mild state of rest. He’d never been very good at them, but now was probably a good time to try.

*

By morning, Jack was agitated, tired, hungry. He floated silently downstairs, and noticed a laundry off the kitchen, but then realised it’d make too much noise to clean clothing. There were fresh apples in the bowl on the table, and Jack took one, biting into it and wondering who had done all of this. Pitch didn’t question it, but surely North didn’t have time to come two days out just to maintain this place, and then go back? And North couldn’t teleport, Jack was pretty sure.

Was it even one of the Guardians? Could Bunnymund move from one place to another magically? It seemed like if any of them could, it would be him. He was way more magical than even Jack realised, and his magic was everywhere. Jack tried to imagine a time when Bunnymund was friendlier, or more generous, but all he felt when he imagined Bunnymund at all, was the skin being carved from his back.

He floated towards the lounge and peeked in.

Sharpwood was already looking at him. He hadn’t shifted at all.

They stared at each other in silence. Eventually Jack just took another bite of his apple, and wondered if that annoyed him. The Professor of Lune who didn’t even work as a Professor. Jack found him frustrating, but he was also pretty confident of his ability to defend himself away from the Tsar.

‘Comfy?’ Jack said eventually.

‘The manacles could be looser,’ Sharpwood said. ‘Do you want to come loosen them?’

‘I’m good, thanks.’

Sharpwood looked like he almost smiled. Jack kept eating the apple, curious. Why had Sharpwood come with them? Was Pitch planning on interrogating him? Or was it for some other reason?

‘Pitch said you were a hostage, but you’re not, are you?’ Jack said. ‘I mean he can’t ransom you back.’

‘Can’t he?’

Sharpwood had obviously gone to the same taciturn snarky shit-talking club that Pitch had. Jack’s teeth ground together, and he stared at those black eyes and wished he could feel that malice in him, that need to hurt. Sharpwood had knocked him out. He’d delivered him to the Tsar to be tortured and killed.

‘Why hasn’t anyone guessed what you are?’
‘What am I?’ Sharpwood said benignly. ‘Evil?’

‘Yes,’ Jack said angrily. ‘You know you are.’

‘First, you believe what you’re told as a child. Then you believe what everyone else tells you. Eventually, you’ll believe what you tell yourself. After that, one day you might come to know the truth.’

‘Is that something a Professor would say?’

‘I believe so,’ Sharpwood said.

Jack crunched down the core of the apple. He’d seen how wasteful they were in the Palace, leaving the core, the stem, even the skin sometimes. But he knew all of it was edible, even the bitter seeds.

‘What’s it like to be possessed by the Darkness all the time?’

‘I wouldn’t know,’ Sharpwood said. ‘I am not possessed by it. I am self-possessed. Can you say the same for yourself?’

‘Why are your eyes like that, if you’re not possessed? The Darkness is just making you say this crap.’

‘If I were possessed,’ Sharpwood said slowly, ‘then I could send the Darkness out of myself, and it could crawl, living and hungry, across the floor and slide up your legs into your very soul. Could it not?’

Jack stared down at the floor by Sharpwood’s feet for long moments, his heart beating faster. No unnatural shadows emerged, and Jack felt a brief flash of anger, there and gone in a moment. By Jack’s feet, frost was delicately filigreeing the floorboards and the rug.

‘Do you like him?’ Jack said abruptly. ‘Gavril?’

It felt weird using his name. It made it seem like he was a regular person, instead of what he was. The Tsar. King of Nightmares.

Sharpwood didn’t respond. He just tilted his head and watched Jack as though he were a peculiar and interesting beetle. It creeped Jack out, and after a while he turned and walked back into the kitchen, washing his hands at the sink before floating back up the flight of wooden stairs to the second storey.

Wasn’t it supposed to get easier?

He landed lightly, dragging his staff across the floor, wishing he knew what to do. Shouldn’t he be doing something?

After ten minutes of just standing there, he realised that Pitch wasn’t going to miraculously wake up, and Jack took himself back to the bedroom he’d picked out as his, and decided he wanted the cosiness of the bottom bunk. It was still snowing outside, and Jack watched the fat flakes drift by, hoping that everyone else was safe.

* 

It was hard to tell what ate at him most, the incessant screaming that he couldn’t stop, or the shredding, violent force of the whip reaching his back, over and over again. The details were
choppy. Blistering detail one moment, as though every nerve was sending feedback all at once and he was horrifically aware of all of it, then it would blur into an underwater numbness, even his ears didn’t work, and that was relief and dread. He knew it wasn’t normal.

What he’d thought at the time was just everything becoming a blur and vanishing, had – apparently – been recorded by some shadowy corner of his mind in crisp, mind-shattering detail. The sound of blood spattering the ground, the glint in Sharpwood’s impassive eyes, the occasional grunt as the Disciplinarian – Bunnymund – put himself into what he was doing. How his body still managed to register the discomfort of blood trickling in itchy, tickling clots down his legs, he didn’t know.

His dreaming mind multiplied it. As though every whipping had been this one. As though that training session with Pitch and the Disciplinarian had been like this. Even Crossholt backhanding Jack in his office for back-talking, and Jack felt like his back was being sloughed down to his spine.

Through it all, Jack knew the Tsar was there. He just knew. He could never see him, but sometimes he’d hear a flash of his voice, or the sound of a chuckle, or that playful laugh he’d given in the earlier meetings. In every flash of every memory, a joyful evil nearby, always making sure the next thing would be worse.

‘Jack!’

It was enough. Enough. He couldn’t go through it again. He didn’t want to listen. He didn’t want to listen to anyone.

A huge crack, an explosion of cold outward energy, and Jack woke up in a room covered in a fine rime of frost. Everything glittered and sparkled like diamonds, and Pitch was against the other bunk, staring at him wide-eyed, ice sticking to his robes.

‘Shit,’ Jack whispered. ‘Shit, did I hurt you? How about you not wake me from my nightmares, okay?’

Pitch stared at him like he couldn’t believe what Jack was saying. Then, he pushed himself upright and began to pull the ice off his robe. He had to unsnap it in places. But it didn’t seem to have gone through the fabric.

‘I need you to come downstairs and help me move the clipper so that it too can remain invisible. Then, I think, we can stay here for a little longer. You need to be debriefed.’

‘What?’

‘Did you not change out of those clothes in order to sleep?’ Pitch said.

‘Oh. I…’ Jack looked down at himself. He looked out the window. He had no idea how long he’d slept for but it surely hadn’t been more than a couple of hours. ‘I didn’t sleep last night.’

Pitch didn’t say anything, and Jack looked away from that penetrating gaze.

‘Because of all of this,’ Jack said, waving at the frost covering nearly every surface. At whatever had made Pitch wake him up. By the Light, he hoped he hadn’t been screaming like he’d been screaming in the nightmare.

‘Are you well enough to move the clipper?’ Pitch said, and looked like he was now seriously considering that Jack might be too sick to even get up and help out. The thought was rankling.
‘I’m fine,’ Jack snapped. He pushed himself up off the bed and floated down the stairs, ignoring whatever curse Pitch muttered behind him. He opened the door, snow drifting in, and Pitch was out soon afterwards. Pitch found the control panel by the base of the tree and changed it so that the house was visible again, and then Pitch hopped fluidly into the clipper and got the engine idling, so that Jack could help him steer it behind the house without knocking into anything.

The Mora was whirring of her own accord. Clattering and bouncing around, the single hydrofoil inching along the deck until it was beside Pitch. Jack looked up in amazement, because it was like the hydrofoil was really alive. It was even more incredible to see Pitch casually reach out with a hand and place it upon the navigation compass on Mora’s narrow dash. The machine settled down instantly, like someone might calm an animal.

Pitch unravelled a tarp, brushing snow off the Mora before he made sure that she was safely away. Then another went over the clipper. It made Jack wonder if they were meant to be staying at this house for a while. Just the three of them. Him, Pitch, and a really creepy tag-along.

They went back inside, and Pitch went to the control panel that cloaked the house – and now the clipper – and presumably made it invisible again. Jack watched as he opened a refrigerator powered on…North’s engineering? Bunnymund’s magic? Jack didn’t know. He pulled out some eggs, and moved over to the cupboards, looking for a frying pan. It was so mundane, and Jack felt jittery just watching it.

This wasn’t what was supposed to be happening.

It was a war. It wasn’t- It wasn’t the time to make eggs. Especially not with Sharpwood in the next room.

Jack flew over to the entry into the living room, and Sharpwood was already looking at him, though he seemed disinterested.

‘Leave him be,’ Pitch said, like Jack was harassing him.

Jack flew back, and then dug his nails into his staff – which only succeeded in causing his nails to bend and ache.

‘What are we even doing?’ Jack said.

‘I’m making breakfast. Man cannot live on replenishment packs alone.’

‘Who’s looking after this house?’

‘ Likely one of the Guardian’s lackeys. They have plenty.’

‘And you trust them?’

Pitch looked over to Jack, lifted one eyebrow, and then began deftly cracking eggs into a bowl. A moment later he went back to the refrigerator and pulled out milk, and the kind of hard cheese that Jack was used to seeing in the creche, but hadn’t actually seen once at the Palace. Then, Pitch was stirring finely cut cheese, eggs and milk together with a fork, and Jack felt like he wanted to slam some doors or something. This wasn’t normal. Something was wrong with Pitch.

‘Shouldn’t we be talking about strategy?’

‘Sharpwood will be able to overhear.’
‘Then upstairs?’ Jack said, leaning on the word.

‘Later.’

‘Because it just seems like – to me – the world is kinda falling apart right now and you’re making what, scrambled eggs? An omelette? If you’ve cracked and this is you in denial or something, I’d like to know now. Just like…just tell me. I can handle it.’

‘I’m hungry,’ Pitch said evenly. ‘Even when the world is falling apart, I still need food. So do you.’

‘I’ve had a million replenishment packs, thanks to you,’ Jack said. ‘And besides, don’t you think-

‘Jack, be quiet now,’ Pitch said, his voice softening. He looked Jack up and down, as though assessing something, and he sighed. ‘We can afford a few days. The Tsar will be expecting it. But he’s not found North’s invisible houses yet, and he won’t find them now.’

‘He might,’ Jack said. ‘What if Sharpwood can telepathically communicate with the Tsar? They’re super close.’

‘He can’t,’ Pitch said.

‘I cannot,’ Sharpwood said, from the other room.

Jack wanted to scream. But he’d apparently already done plenty of that in his sleep.

‘I’m not doing this,’ Jack said abruptly. He turned to leave.

‘Yes,’ Pitch said, his voice sharp. ‘You are. You are not my guest, you are a soldier of Lune, and it would not do to imagine you have a choice when the Royal Admiral-’

‘I don’t see a Royal Admiral,’ Jack said. ‘I see someone who’s pretty much just given that position up.’

The frying pan slammed down onto the grill and Jack startled.

Whoops. Too far, Jack. Too far.

Jack held his hands up – one holding the staff, the other palm forward. The gesture immediately stopped whatever cutting thing Pitch was about to say, but he still sported an intense glare.

‘Sit,’ Pitch said, staring at the seats at the table pointedly.

Jack went, pulling the chair out, sitting down, nervously making ice patterns on the underside of the table and hoping he wouldn’t warp the wood too badly. He was on edge. He couldn’t sit with his back leaning against the chair, because it reminded him too much of things that had happened. That hadn’t really been an issue before. It wasn’t even really an issue once he’d been rescued. He’d leaned back against the sofa in Pitch’s rooms hadn’t he? He’d done it the whole time, until he’d talked Seraphina into leaving her father.

Maybe Pitch is mad about that too. He hasn’t said a single thing about it.

The smell of eggs and cheese didn’t really make him any hungrier, and Jack felt like arguing that he’d had an apple, and he didn’t need anything else. He certainly didn’t need some maybe-Royal-Admiral making him breakfast, like they were living the kind of domestic life they’d never have.
Pitch moved efficiently around the kitchen, and Jack rested his staff against the table, wringing his hands in his lap. He hated all of this.

Only a few minutes later, half an omelette appeared on a plate that was set down a tad too hard. Then a knife and fork clattered down next to the plate, and Pitch sat down at the opposite end of the table. He ate without looking at Jack, staring off into space, and making sure to eat slowly. Jack wolfed his food down, hardly tasting it. Then he took his plate to the sink, washed it about as quickly as he could while still getting it clean, put it in the little rack to dry – like seriously, who had places like this? – and then flew up the stairs to the second landing as quickly as he could.

After that, he walked to the room with all the bunk beds, closed the door, and then huffed a sigh when he realised that all the frost was beginning to melt, dripping and sliding towards the floor. He’d made a mess.

He made a small sound of frustration and walked into the bathroom, grabbing some of the spare towels and walking back into the room, beginning to sop up the water trickling down the walls. He’d only been there less than a day, and he was already ruining it. Maybe he just wasn’t meant to live inside…

As he worked, the scars on his back from old whippings brushed against the fabric of his shirt, and he’d never really minded in the past, but stopped now, staring blankly. He felt nauseous. After a minute or so, he started cleaning again, but the scars spoke to him, reminded him, and Jack thought that he’d spent the past two days basically escaping on a ship and it hadn’t bothered him then, so why now?

He jolted when the door opened.

‘We need to talk,’ Pitch said.

‘The water’s going to ruin this room,’ Jack said.

‘I don’t care about that. Put the towel down, and come with me.’

‘It won’t take much longer.’

A pause, where Jack imagined that Pitch was winding himself up into a state, that he was about to say something cruel, but instead Pitch just sighed. Jack was having a hard time making himself keep cleaning the walls, when the scars were drawing more of his attention. Eventually he stopped, holding the wet towel, looking over at Pitch.

‘Put the towel down,’ Pitch said gently, and Jack’s hands opened, and he dropped it. He felt kind of trapped, Pitch just standing in the doorway like that.

‘I don’t want to talk about anything,’ Jack said.

The truth was, he’d heard Pitch mention the word debrief, and he didn’t want a bar of it. He knew what it was, knew what it was for. To talk about difficult things after they’d happened, something soldiers often shared with each other. He didn’t want to talk about any of it. As far as he was concerned, Pitch had saved his life, and now they were out of the Palace. The end.

‘I know,’ Pitch said. ‘I need to.’

‘What?’

‘Do you imagine that the act of debriefing is only for young recruits?’ Pitch said, his smile
crooked and perhaps regretful. ‘There is no one else here. I shan’t be doing it with Sharpwood. I
daresay his insights into what we’ve just been through will be thrilling, but likely not my cup of

tea.’

A pause, and then Pitch said:

‘I want to check your back.’

‘It’s the same,’ Jack said in a rush. ‘As it ever was. You healed it so it’s just like before.’

‘Nevertheless…’

‘It’s the same,’ Jack repeated.

‘All right,’ Pitch said, opening the door fully and now leaning against the doorframe. ‘I want you
to look at how you’re behaving, how you’re sleeping, and tell me what you’d recommend for a
young soldier who was doing the same thing.’

‘No.’

‘No? That’s it? You won’t even participate in realising objectively that you need to talk about what
happened?’

‘No,’ Jack whispered, his voice so much smaller than before. ‘I don’t want to talk to you. You
were…’ mean. Well he couldn’t say that. It wasn’t like he’d change his mind if Pitch was nice
about it. That’d probably make things worse.

‘And here I thought you were stronger than this.’

Jack knew what Pitch was doing, even as he bristled at the taunt. He wasn’t going to fall for it. As
if he’d let himself be goaded into talking about it! Not a chance. He picked up his staff where he’d
leaned it against the bunk, and then folded his arms while still holding it, and stared at Pitch
implacably.

‘At any rate, I still need to talk about it, or I will go stir crazy in this place,’ Pitch said. ‘Are you up
for that? Or will you disintegrate at the thought of being there for someone else?’

‘I don’t like you,’ Jack said abruptly. ‘You might have saved my life, but I don’t like you at all.’

‘I didn’t think you would,’ Pitch said, his voice suddenly tired.

‘Did you treat Fyodor like this? When you decided to fight back against the Tsar? Did you just
become-?’

His voice choked in his throat at the look Pitch gave him. Somewhere between contained fury and
something so cold that even Jack could feel it in the already frigid room.

‘I don’t want to be like this around you,’ Jack said, when it seemed like Pitch was so angry he
couldn’t actually think of anything to say in reply. ‘I don’t know why I’m being like this. I thought
it’d be different. I don’t know what I thought.’

‘Come sit with me,’ Pitch said, his voice coaxing.

‘You’re gonna make me talk,’ Jack said, pointing his staff at Pitch. ‘I know you are.’

‘Perhaps you could trust that I know what I’m doing.’
That was part of the problem, wasn’t it? Jack wanted to be with Pitch. He had feelings for Pitch. But he still wasn’t sure he trusted him. Jack closed his eyes and sighed, his staff lowering until the base touched the ground. He was just so tired. He thought of Sharpwood downstairs, the prisoner who didn’t really behave like a prisoner. He hadn’t even tested the chains. He seemed in no hurry to get back to the Tsar.

‘What’s the deal with Sharpwood?’ Jack said.

A long silence, and Jack prepared to hear an answer that was a complete non-answer. Then, Pitch squared his shoulders and met Jack’s eyes, resolve in the gold there.

‘Sharpwood has not been entirely loyal to the Tsar for some time,’ Pitch said. ‘He and I have… something of an accord.’

‘What?’

‘He’s never been entirely loyal to us, either. It's complicated’

‘He sure seemed pretty loyal when he knocked me out.’

‘If he’s by the Tsar’s side, he will do what the Tsar wishes,’ Pitch said evenly. ‘That’s what he does. I want to see what he does away from the influence of the Tsar. But deep down, he is homesick. While he is loyal to people, he will shape that loyalty towards getting back to Grisaille, his home planet. Even if he hasn’t seen it in centuries. It was something I didn’t realise for a long time, but Sharpwood likely stays so loyal to the Tsar, partly because he must, and partly because it’s the closest chance he has of one day seeing his planet again. I want to see if he can be useful to us, beyond simply separating him from the Tsar. But he’ll need some time. He doesn’t think as we do.’

‘Grisaille,’ Jack said quietly to himself.

‘I saw an opportunity, and I took him,’ Pitch said. ‘Truthfully it never occurred to me the first time, because he seemed so utterly loyal. But – while he would have had no compunctions watching you die, he doesn’t really care for any of us – I suspect Sharpwood is…something. Something more than I understood the first time. But I could never have separated him from the Tsar, if the Tsar hadn’t sent him away.’

‘Maybe that was the Tsar’s plan,’ Jack said.

‘For once, I think the Tsar only saw that he needed a solid witness to your death to make sure Bunnymund didn’t package you away and help you escape. He’s always underestimated you. It made the outcome flimsy. No one attacked Sharpwood the first time, I’m not sure it’s occurred to him that we would do it this time.’

‘But he might not be loyal to us, or help us at all,’ Jack said.

‘He might not. We still get the benefit of separating the two of them and seeing what happens.’

‘He told me he was a Professor of Lune.’

Pitch laughed, looked down.

‘So he’s not?’ Jack said, confused.

‘No,’ Pitch said. ‘Though I can see why he responded that way.’
'Is he even a Professor?'

'Yes,' Pitch said, smiling. 'He always was.'

'A Professor of what?'

'Back on Grisaille, he was a Professor of the Darkness, and therefore, also of philosophy. There, the Darkness and Light are not...like here. Not endless weapons against each other. Given Lune is almost overtaken, in many respects, by the Tsar’s relationship to the Dark, he sees himself more as only a Professor of this planet. He’s not been permitted to study much else since he’s been here.'

'I talked to him before,' Jack said, swallowing. 'Just a bit. He didn’t tell me much.'

'Nor do you,' Pitch said, tilting his head. 'Now that you’ve derailed the subject, shall we get back on track? Come with me. Let’s sit down. Chat a bit.'

Jack made a small sound of frustration. He wanted to talk about Sharpwood, and their plans for the future, and...

Pitch held out his hand, palm up, inviting. Jack wanted that touch. He wanted to lean against him, to have more than just that brief embrace before the shower. But he knew the cost would be high.

Then again, he knew deep down that all of this was going to be pretty hard. And it wasn’t like he could be expected to fight or do anything functional if everything just reminded him of what the Disciplinarian had done. Jack sighed and closed his eyes, and then walked forwards and slid his hand into Pitch’s warm one.

'I am sorry,' Pitch said, ‘for how I’ve been.’

'Yeah,' Jack said, following him towards Pitch’s bedroom. ‘I always kind of knew you were like this through. Well, I mean, once I met you. Plus your daughter is in danger and all that other stuff you said. And I suppose you’d be regretting saving me too, right?’

Jack felt sick just saying it, but he had to say it, even if Pitch got angry at him for it. Instead, Pitch’s hand tightened on Jack’s, and he stopped walking.

'No,' Pitch said. ‘I don’t regret that.’

'It’d be cool if you did,' Jack said, refusing to look at him.

'No it wouldn’t,' Pitch said. ‘But to be clear, I don’t regret that.’

'Yeah, but-'

Pitch made a sound. 'Jack, look at me.'

Jack met his eyes, and swallowed at the expression he saw, the fierceness there.

'I don’t regret it,' Pitch said. ‘In a world of so many things that I regret, saving your life will never be on the list. I swear.’

'Okay,' Jack said quietly, his own hand tightening automatically. ‘Well. I guess I’m kinda sorry for how I’ve been lately.’

‘Ah,’ Pitch said, a hint of a smile at his mouth. ‘It’s not like you were nearly beaten to death, or anything so serious.’
‘Nah,’ Jack said, half-smiling at the game they seemed to be playing.

‘Also, I always knew you were like this. Well,’ Pitch smiled properly then, ‘once I met you, at any rate.’

It seemed easier, after that, to follow Pitch into his bedroom. Easier to sit on one of the two chairs at a small table by a large window looking out onto a snowy wilderness. He met Pitch’s gaze and there was some new understanding between them. Nothing about this journey was easy, but perhaps the fact that they were trying to do it together, counted for more than he knew.
It Shouldn't Be This Hard

Chapter Notes

Pitch’s ways of dealing with post-trauma and flashbacks is super unconventional. Do not recommend. Unless you live on Lune.

Jack looked around the room that Pitch had chosen for himself. Pitch’s bed was made as though no one had ever slept in it, yet his old clothes were in a rumpled heap on the floor. Jack was shocked to see it. He’d always been taught to fold all of his clothing, even the old items that needed to be washed if there wasn’t a hamper available.

He sat an inch forward from the back of the chair, so that his back didn’t have to touch it. He wanted to pretend he could do it, but he knew he couldn’t.

‘Who do you normally do this with?’ Jack said, as he rested his staff against the windowsill. His fingers itched to have it back in his hand, but he couldn’t stop thinking of Pitch telling him that everyone else could put their weapons down, while Jack carried his around like a security blanket.

‘Anton or Eva,’ Pitch said. ‘Sometimes others, whoever is on hand that I trust.’

‘That must be a long list,’ Jack said, rolling his eyes.

‘Oh, tremendously long,’ Pitch said, smirking. ‘And yet I wonder if my list would be longer than yours.’

Jack wanted to say something witty in response to that, but the words dried up in his throat. He didn’t want to talk to Pitch about anything that had happened. It had never occurred to him that debriefs – which were widely assumed to be difficult – were something he’d ever struggle with. Except the time he had to do a test one with Crossholt. But then he’d just made a lot of stuff up, and pretended to be upset, and Crossholt had gotten that glint in his eye when Jack had faked feeling vulnerable that meant he was enjoying it.

‘I’ll go first,’ Pitch said, breaking across Jack’s concentration.

Then, a lengthy silence, as Pitch opened his mouth and then closed it again. His forehead furrowed, and he looked out of the window. Jack didn’t interrupt, it was clear he was trying to collect his thoughts. But it was weird to see Pitch not knowing what to say, where to start.

‘I didn’t understand why you were talking to me about the creches,’ Pitch said slowly.

Jack blinked. Was that-? Were they going all the way back to that? Debriefs were only supposed to cover the intense stuff so why… Why was Pitch talking about that?

‘And then I was annoyed,’ Pitch said, sighing. He didn’t look at Jack as he spoke, but stared grimly out of the window, like he was being forced to speak. ‘I had just told you the night before of how much you remind me of every bad thing in Lune, and within- within hardly any time at all, there you are telling me that you’ve just found out that you were taken from your parents. That you didn’t know how it worked, and I- Imagine me, looking over paperwork as assigned to me by Gavril, living in his realm, perpetuating his reign, monstrous but calm about it. You interrupted me
with one of the many things that makes it hard to escape what I am, what I’ve done.’

Pitch glanced sidelong at Jack, his golden eyes speculative. Jack didn’t know what to say. He remembered how he’d felt, going from that conversation with Seraphina, straight to Pitch, and how awful it had been.

‘You were mean,’ Jack said, though his voice wasn’t an accusation. He hated that he sounded like a child.

‘I was,’ Pitch said. ‘I will be again. Your naivety, how much growing up you have to do, how fast you’ve had to do it, the fact that you’re still doing it… I lose patience with it. I don’t want you to have to do it at all, and then I think, well, if you have to do it, at least don’t do it around me. But then you bring it to me, and I cannot help but– There is this cruelty inside me that thinks that if you must grow up, I will ensure it will happen as quickly as possible. As brutally. Better the plaster be ripped off at all at once, than slowly soaked free.’

‘It wasn’t just that,’ Jack said, looking out of the window. Snow everywhere, and he had nothing to do with it. Somehow, it reminded him of his sister, of the day she was taken. He sighed and shifted, unable to lean back against the chair. He placed his elbow on the armrest and leaned his chin on his hand. ‘I reminded you of Fyodor.’

‘Yes,’ Pitch said. ‘You’d picked a side. You had no plan. I… It’s probably best to never wonder if you’re capable of killing someone to stop them from being destroyed by something worse. But I’ve wondered it. When Seraphina was a baby, I wondered it then. Wondered if something that came at my hand would be better than the Tsar, than Lune, all of it. There. And Lune still thinks of me as their military hero.’

Jack had a feeling this wasn’t the kind of debrief that Pitch had with Anton or Eva. He licked his dry lips. He could see it too clearly. Pitch standing over a cot perhaps, looking down at a tiny child. Did Seraphina have a lot of hair when she was born? Was she kind of baby born with a full head of it? It was hard to imagine her otherwise. Jack could almost see it – Pitch caught in indecision, love would be the emotion that stayed his hand, even as love drove his darkest thoughts.

‘You are though,’ Jack said quietly. ‘Their military hero.’

‘Oh, please,’ Pitch said, smirking. ‘Really?’

‘You didn’t kill her, even if you thought about it,’ Jack said. ‘You didn’t kill me, even if you wondered if you should. You just kind of…’

Jack cleared his throat. It wasn’t his turn to talk about this yet. He didn’t want to talk about this. He still didn’t like thinking about the conversation, even if he’d already decided that Pitch didn’t mean everything he’d said.

‘I was cruel,’ Pitch said evenly.

‘Yep,’ Jack said hoarsely.

Pitch gave him a look, which Jack was pretty sure meant that no matter where Jack started his own side of things, Pitch was probably going to drag him back to that.

‘You left,’ Pitch said. ‘I’m not sure how long it took me to realise I was being a fool. Too long. I knew you’d likely flown off, but on the off-chance you were hiding away, I looked for you. I wanted to- Oh, apologise, repent, see if I could find the thread of what we’d had the night before. It is so easy to think you are him when you are not him. I saw the open window, I thought you’d gone
to North’s. It made me angrier, to think of you going to the Guardians. To the ones that- Ah, I’m bitter about it. Their rejection. They had all their reasons, I did what I did, spread the Darkness, made sure the Tsar could get control of other planets faster.’

‘You told Bunnymund you didn’t know,’ Jack said. ‘That you’d- That the Tsar had possessed you?’

‘You remember that?’ Pitch said, staring at him.

‘Kinda. I mean it’s not really something you forget. You told me that you’d seeded the planets, those were your words. But you never knew, did you?’

‘Eventually I knew,’ Pitch said.

‘But did you ever have a choice?’

‘One could argue there is always a choice.’

‘I mean beyond say abandoning Lune or killing yourself?’

A long silence, and then Pitch simply looked out of the window again and didn’t reply, which seemed like enough of a response to Jack. He made a mental note to ask Pitch about it later, how often he’d thought about it. If he’d considered killing loved ones to get them out of danger, he’d probably considered it for himself too.

‘Anyway,’ Jack said. ‘You were saying that you thought I’d gone to North’s, and you were upset about it.’

‘Quite,’ Pitch said, giving Jack a rueful smile. ‘I tried to get back to work, and then Toothiana was there at my door, with your staff, telling me there wasn’t much time and…genuinely panicked.’ Pitch frowned, looking off into the middle distance. ‘She likes us to believe she is more manipulative than she is, sometimes. Don’t mistake me, she is exemplary at deceit, but she was afraid for you, and she told me that it would very possibly be too late. I think she came as soon as she reasonably could. She was not composed when I saw her.’

‘What did you do?’

‘I had her summon my family,’ Pitch said. ‘There’s a protocol. She knows it. And then I teleported to the top of Bunnymund’s Tower.’

A long silence, and Pitch folded his arms, and then unfolded them and got up, pacing away from Jack and the window. Jack wanted to say things that would sound comforting – that Jack was still alive, that they’d gotten away – but he didn’t know how comforting it would sound. Not when he couldn’t let his scars touch the back of a chair. Not when he didn’t feel it himself.

‘I’ve seen executions,’ Pitch said, ‘by whipping. I’ve seen them. I was made to watch them when I was younger, after the first resistance failed. When I had to stand by Gavril’s side. I know how much blood is shed when someone dies, and I know what that looks like. I know exactly…’

Pitch folded his arms again, though Jack still couldn’t see his face. Pitch seemed wound up with a tension that he couldn’t get rid of by pacing. In the end, he just stood there, facing a section of wall that had a shelf on it, and tiny sculptures of golden trees with little baubles on them.

‘You’d lost that much blood,’ Pitch said quietly. ‘Even accounting for your smaller stature. It was the first thing I saw. So I didn’t- I had decided you must be dead. I thought it would be easier to
decide that, based on the evidence. I didn’t have much time to act. I disabled Sharpwood, and then I disabled Bunnymund, and then- I saw your back rise and fall. And then I heard you.’

Jack wasn’t sure if he could listen to this, he felt pinned when Pitch turned around and looked at him.

‘You can’t talk about this,’ Pitch said, frowning.

‘I’m not talking at all.’

‘You’re not ready to listen to me talk about it,’ Pitch said, exasperated.

‘We can just forget it happened,’ Jack said, ‘right? I’m alive. I’m-

‘Don’t think I haven’t noticed that you can’t let your back touch the chair,’ Pitch said crisply.

‘Don’t think I can’t see that.’

‘I can,’ Jack said, without making a single move backwards.

‘Then do it,’ Pitch said, gesturing towards him.

Jack didn’t do it. He didn’t even bother to try. And Pitch pressed a hand to his forehead, shook his head abruptly and turned away. Jack – for once – didn’t feel like Pitch was angry at him, but annoyed at the whole situation.

‘You can’t be a soldier with that sort of handicap,’ Pitch said. ‘You know that.’

‘I really do,’ Jack said, feeling dizzy. He understood that only too well. He’d worked hard to make sure his scar tissue would still stretch and do all the things that normal skin could do. Well, almost all of them. He knew how important it was to still be able to rely on his reflexes when cloth brushed over the scars. He understood how flashbacks and sensory feedback like what he was getting now, was useless on the field. He’d done the work before, he knew how hard it was.

But he’d never been through anything like this before. He had no idea how to begin dealing with it.

‘We’ll backtrack,’ Pitch said, walking back over to his chair and sitting down. ‘Forcing you to talk about it will be useless, and there’s still things I need to know about – like your meeting with the Tsar.’

‘Yay,’ Jack said, rolling his eyes. ‘This is the best day ever.’

‘In a long line of best days,’ Pitch said, lifting a brow.

‘By the Light, the longest,’ Jack said, looking out of the window again. He knew Pitch wasn’t judging him, but Jack hated that he couldn’t just talk about it. He should, at least, be able to listen to Pitch talking about it. Jack rubbed a hand over his face, and then scrubbed at his hair, thinking about what Pitch had started with – the creches.

‘I didn’t know,’ Jack said. ‘Which is like, apparently my entire life right now. I don’t know anything. But I really didn’t know the thing with my parents. ‘Cuz I was told they didn’t want me or my sister. I mean it was a miracle I got to stay with Pippa.’

‘It was,’ Pitch murmured. ‘They try and separate siblings.’

‘Yeah, that didn’t go down so great,’ Jack said. ‘Why didn’t they just give the…medicine stuff to me? The stuff they give to numb my parents?’
‘Your parents had already bonded to Lune, so they had a secondary relationship to fall back on when you and your sister were taken. But if you’d been given the serum during the crucial time you were supposed to bond with the creche environment, you wouldn’t have been capable,’ Pitch said. ‘They trialled it centuries ago, and those children…suffered. Also, in the outreaches, I doubt it’s easy or cost effective for them to split siblings when the nearest neighbouring creche might be several days away.’

‘Longer even,’ Jack said. ‘And we didn’t have horses that could handle that kind of riding. And no roads were automobile worthy. That’s only out here really, that you can have those. The Overland creche was kept separate from the others anyway. No one really wanted anything to do with us. Do you think-? If I looked for them now…’

‘They very likely wouldn’t recognise you,’ Pitch said, ‘and if they did, they wouldn’t be capable of bonding to you beyond acquaintanceship. I’m sorry, Jack.’

‘All I’d have to tell them is I got my sister killed anyway,’ Jack said, sighing. ‘And that’s if they were still alive. Wouldn’t be the greatest reunion ever, would it?’

‘They likely wouldn’t care that she’d died, either,’ Pitch said, and Jack stared at him, horrified. He’d never really thought about that side of things. He’d assumed it would be the one thing to pull them out of their numbness, but it was obvious from Pitch’s expression, that they really wouldn’t care.

‘I was surprised you didn’t find out any of this during training,’ Pitch said, offering an apologetic look. ‘It never came up?’

‘I don’t think a lot of us knew,’ Jack said. ‘Like people didn’t baby me or anything, everyone was really honest about what they thought of Overlands anyway. Because I was like, the first Overland that had ever made it, and they kept sort of telling me what I was and where I’d come from, like they told me I’d break and leave, and they made it hard. A lot of them stopped anyway. Especially after Crossholt.’

‘Did Jamie ever mock you?’

‘A little, in the very beginning,’ Jack said. ‘He was kind of nicer about it. I just think he really didn’t understand what I was doing there. But he also didn’t understand what he was there – I mean aside from what his parents wanted for him. So- And he was always nicer about it. I felt a bit like a weird science specimen for a while. Y’know, like, ‘here’s an Overland, what’s it gonna do next, watch and find out.’ And then the class just waiting to see what would happen.’

‘What happened when you left our argument?’ Pitch said.

‘I dunno,’ Jack said, shrugging. The motion pulled on his scars and he winced. ‘Sharpwood was waiting for me on the ground, outside your windows. Like, how long would he have been posted there for? Was he just waiting there for *days*?’

‘I doubt it was constant, likely there would have been shifts,’ Pitch said, sighing. ‘Poor luck for you that it was him.’

‘He shot me with an *arrow*. But...oh, I suppose you healed that. It was a really weird arrow. It just kind of vanished? And he could pull me down with it. I’ve never seen anything like it.’

‘His magic,’ Pitch said, nodding to himself. ‘He can use energy to mimic weapons when he needs to. I’ve only seen it twice. It taxes him.’
‘I dropped my staff, he said the Tsar wanted a meeting, and then he knocked me out. So I don’t feel
like super bad that you knocked him out a few hours later. Actually I feel kind of great about it.
You can knock him out any time you like.’

‘It would be a travesty for me to take opportunities away from you,’ Pitch said decorously. ‘Next
time you can be the one to knock him unconscious.’

‘Done,’ Jack said, smiling in spite of the mood. A pause then, where they both looked at each other
uncomfortably. Jack wasn’t sure they were allowed this part. Where it could be okay between
them. Had they fixed things yet? Was it okay? Jack chewed on his bottom lip.

‘I presume you woke up to the company of the Tsar?’ Pitch prompted.

‘Yeah, basically. I guess. Underground. Another treasury. He likes talking about how rich he is.
And…’ Jack’s eyes widened. ‘Actually I think there’s some stuff from that meeting that might be
important. He knew about the resistance. And he said no one was fit to rule once he was gone.’

‘He relies on that,’ Pitch said. ‘It’s true, to a point. He’s made sure of it. But he’s a fool if he thinks
the Guardians haven’t considered that since the beginning – you don’t hold a coup and forget to
consider the future; at least, not with Toothiana on your team. Not that she’s angling for the
position.’

‘Who would rule?’ Jack said, eyes widening. ‘You?’

Pitch stared at him like he’d been clouted on the head, and then he started laughing. He kept
laughing, covered his face, and then kept going, and Jack glared at him.

‘It won’t be Mihail. The Tsar’s already said so.’

‘But me?’

‘You’re the Royal Admiral! Everyone- Look even if you don’t believe the posters and wonder and
crap, everyone else does.’

‘Jack,’ Pitch said, and then paused to finish laughing. ‘Darkness help me, that would be terrible.
No. We have someone else in mind.’

‘We?’

‘…They.’

‘Uh huh,’ Jack said, squinting at him. ‘Who?’

‘What else did the Tsar say?’

‘Who?’

‘If they survive all of this, you’ll find out in short order,’ Pitch said.

‘Don’t you think that maybe keeping me in the dark about everything, forever, and then ‘ripping
off the plaster’ when you’re mad at me, is maybe not…great?’

A pause where Jack had no idea if Pitch was going to get mad or not. It was impossible to read his
expression. After a while, Jack got the impression that maybe Pitch was actually considering what
he’d said seriously.
‘Agnessa,’ Pitch said. ‘The Tsarina. Toothiana’s been preparing her to step into the role. Not much is known about her, but she still has a great deal of love from the citizens of Lune. But there is every chance she may not survive. The Tsar suspects. He’s worked hard to cut her off from all avenues of power, which is why she’s almost never seen.’

Jack opened his mouth, and Pitch cut him off with a sharp:

‘What else did Gavril say?’

‘That Lune used to be way poorer, that you both stole an orb from…Grisaille? And used the powers in that to destroy or take other planets under your power, while, I dunno, like leasing the Golden Warriors to other planets to save the day where previously you’d all just been at war. And that he could remove the Darkness from everywhere if he wanted to, but y’know, he doesn’t want to…so, he won’t.’

‘He said everywhere?’ Pitch said. ‘That’s exactly what he said?’

‘Not a conversation I’m going to forget in a hurry, honestly. And yeah, that’s what he said. Why do you think I’ve been so paranoid about like, the Darkness out here? Maybe you’re wrong about what he can control.’

‘No,’ Pitch said with certainty. ‘I’m not. He cannot consciously control the Darkness on Endan, or in the outreaches, and he didn’t send the Darkness to kill your sister, it just took her because that’s what it does. But he still said he could remove it from everywhere?’

‘Yeah,’ Jack said. ‘He wasn’t… I don’t think he was bluffing. I mean he obviously didn’t expect me to pass on this information to you, did he? Or did he?’

‘He never saw Toothiana’s betrayal coming,’ Pitch said idly. ‘She’s been the Guardian’s best kept secret. He’s never so much as suspected her, because she’s been willing to throw so many people under the carriage of his leadership. She’s more mercenary than many of the people on his own team. If he’s suspected her of anything, it’s wanting to rule.’

‘But he’s always been like fifty steps ahead, and-’

‘He must mean the orb,’ Pitch said to himself, not even looking at Jack. He stared down at the ground, walked back and forth a few times, and then shook his head slowly. ‘It shouldn’t be capable of something like that… It wasn’t when we first took it. But he can’t mean anything else.’

‘Maybe he’s lying,’ Jack said.

‘Perhaps,’ Pitch said frankly. ‘What else?’

‘You know the rest. He’s like…the King of Darkness, he can make the Light, you tried to save or defeat him with it, and he surprised you with his ‘gift from the mountain.’ And he used a whole bunch of things I’d said to the Darkness, back at me. Like during my initiation in the mountain I’d maybe mocked the Darkness a bit?’

Pitch stared in disbelief, and Jack grimaced.

‘I mean what was I supposed to do? I didn’t like it and I wasn’t having a great time. So I told it to get lost, basically. But in a few specific ways. The Tsar used nearly all of them. He said he only watched, and that he tries to keep people away from the orb. But he’s obviously there, like- Is that through meditation or something? Or Sharpwood?’
'I have no idea,' Pitch said. ‘You never told anyone else that you said those things to the Darkness? He couldn’t have found out in any other way?'

‘I never talked to anyone about it,’ Jack said. ‘Why would I? It went wrong.’

‘You drew his attention so early. He must have felt remarkably threatened by that power.’

‘I get why you didn’t want me to tell him about the orb now, by the way. I mean finally. But it wouldn’t have made any difference, would it?’

‘It would have only made him more suspicious,’ Pitch said, sighing. ‘Especially that he knew you’d already found it. Small mercies that you were so earnest and difficult to manipulate. He would have certainly known that you’d been advised to stay quiet.’

‘And I guess the only other thing he said is he doesn’t give a crap about Lune, and he wants to expand his empire. Mihail made him change his plans, when he wasn’t suitable to be heir. I think he wants to leave.’

‘He can’t while the orb is here.’

‘Then I guess he’ll take it with him?’ Jack said.

Pitch looked as though he was about to disagree, and then closed his mouth with a snap. He walked swiftly over to a chest of drawers, brought out a leather-bound notebook, and began to quickly make notes with a fountain pen stored in the drawer. Jack couldn’t see what he was writing, but he knew something he’d said was significant.

‘So yeah, aside from being given the order that you know – um, aside from the Tsar telling me how I was going to die, that was pretty much it.’

‘Full of praise for you, was he?’ Pitch said, looking up. ‘Couched all of that information in the most clinical, non-judgemental of ways?’

‘I mean he was mean,’ Jack said, rolling his eyes.

‘You said I was mean,’ Pitch said. ‘During the argument. So he lost his temper?’

‘No,’ Jack said, beginning to feel trapped. ‘There’s different kinds- That’s not what I said.’

‘He yelled at you?’ Pitch said.

‘No. He doesn’t do that.’

‘No?’ Pitch said. ‘So he’s proud of you then?’

‘You know he’s not,’ Jack said. ‘I told you he doesn’t like me. Just- Just imagine more of that, and you’ll be on track, okay?’

Even now, thinking about the Tsar’s disappointment, his disgust, cut at him. If Jack was going to be hated by the Tsar, he wanted to be hated for being a brilliant, incisive enemy. He wanted to be a real threat. Not some small thing that the Tsar hated for being pathetic. Jack refused to look at Pitch, this didn’t need to be part of their conversation. They didn’t need to talk about it at all.

‘You’ve never properly talked about any of the things he’s said to you,’ Pitch said. ‘Have you? With anyone?’
'Why would I need to? You have an imagination, don’t you?'

‘Mm,’ Pitch said. ‘It still didn’t prepare me for the tactics he’d use with you. He approached me differently, you see. He crushed me in other ways.’

Yeah, probably because he respected you.

‘I tried to protect him,’ Jack said, trying to change the subject by giving Pitch something else he might want. ‘Did you know that? He showed me the Darkness first, and I assumed he was possessed. I tried to warn him. Told him he wasn’t really being himself. He loved that.’

‘I can only imagine,’ Pitch said. He walked closer. Jack assumed he was going to sit down opposite him again, but instead, Pitch stood behind Jack’s chair.

Jack twisted to look up at him, and then aborted the movement when his back felt like it was going to split. It wouldn’t, of course, that was just the mixed feedback of all the old scar tissue. He stilled, then turned forwards again, his skin prickling and crawling. He didn’t want anyone standing behind him. Not right now.

‘Do you have to stand right there?’ Jack said, hating how his voice sounded.

‘Yes,’ Pitch said calmly. ‘I do. What did he say to you? Perhaps you can’t remember.’

‘Of course I can remem-’ Jack grit his teeth. That was him just falling straight into the trap. He stared down at his knees. He was so tired. He hadn’t slept properly, and he knew the sleep he’d gotten hadn’t been at all restful, unlike Pitch, who had apparently just switched his mind off and slept for a full evening.

‘Then tell me.’

It was so tempting to yell, to rage, to come up with insults. But Jack was tired of that too. He wanted to be someone who didn’t just reflexively react every time his fears were poked. Pitch made him feel so young sometimes, when he did things like this, but Jack knew that Pitch could be the same, if Jack found the right sore spot.

Jack hunched forwards.

‘He didn’t say much this time, actually, about me,’ Jack said. ‘He just kind of…um, he said no one cared about peasants, and that’s why he’d attack the outreaches first. Is that useful?’

‘Yes,’ Pitch said, ‘but you know I want more than that.’

‘He just… He said that walking towards my death with my head held high could be like, the last thing I could do for him; like the last strong thing or something. After I’d been such a disappointment to him. He often- Like, he said just about everything I did was disappointing.’

Pitch shifted behind him, and Jack flinched, expecting the blow of a whip and hating himself for it. Took a moment to catch his breath, and then cried out when he felt fingers on his shoulder.

‘Settle,’ Pitch said, when Jack tried to move away from the touch. ‘I’m not hurting you. Everything you’re expecting has already happened. It will never happen again.’

‘I don’t want you to stand behind me,’ Jack hissed.

‘I know,’ Pitch said calmly. ‘Why do you think I’m standing here?’
‘So it doesn’t matter what I want?’

‘What do you want, Jack? To be useless to the resistance? To have to stay behind like a child every time we go out and see what we can do against the forces of the Tsar? You can’t have it both ways, Jack. You can’t avoid this, and then pretend you’ll get to be one of us later. Personally, I want you in the frontlines, with me, even if you are an abysmal risk for possession, I know I can save you from it. I’ve seen your Light. I’ve seen your frost. Do you expect me to just sit back and watch your fears devour you?’

Pitch’s fingers curved towards the front of Jack’s shoulder, away from his scars, and then squeezed.

‘Do you think I’m not aware of what I’m doing?’ Pitch said. ‘Are you pretending that none of this is premeditated? Why don’t you tell me what you want? If you’re happy hiding away from what you’ve told me you’ve always wanted – to look after Lune, to protect her – then tell me now. We’ll stop this, and I’ll go downstairs and interrogate Sharpwood. What do you want more? For me to leave you alone now? Or to be allowed to fight later?’

‘I can fight,’ Jack said. ‘Just because-’

‘You can’t sleep,’ Pitch said. ‘You can’t manage people standing behind you; where do you think the Golden Warriors will stand, Jack, if not at your back? Can you strap a pack to your back, if necessary? Can your fellows clap you on the shoulder when you’ve done a good job? Will you be able to stand with Bunnymund in the same room and rationally talk strategy, because you invited him back into your world? I can about taste your fear.’

Jack swallowed his rebuttals down. But Pitch wasn’t done.

‘It will take less than a second for your concentration to waver, and in that second, you will be cut down, or possessed, or destroyed. How many times have you thought about your scars since you were sentenced to death by whipping, Jack? Are you just hoping you’ll magically stop thinking about them? Is that how it worked in the past? Wonderfully, you were just free of the feel of them?’

‘I don’t even have- I don’t have any new scars, thanks to you,’ Jack said. ‘I have all the- Only the old ones.’

‘Ah,’ Pitch said. ‘Of course you’ve been fine with those being touched too.’

Pitch pressed his palm flat to Jack’s back, and Jack jerked forwards, only for fingers to dig in hard at his shoulder. Points of pain that kept him in place, even as Jack had to listen to his own breathing spiral out of control.

‘Dear me. You seem to be panicking a bit more than usual. I thought these were only your old scars, Jack?’

‘Stop it,’ Jack said.

‘I’d like to.’

‘You’ll make it worse.’

‘Making you look at what is already there, is not the same as making it worse. Bunnymund and Gavril made it worse. Perhaps you hate me, then fine, tell me that you don’t have to confront this. Tell me how effective a soldier you’ll be, sleep-deprived and panicking about something that is
already done.’

‘Can you just take your hand off my back, please?’ Jack said, and then closed his eyes in wretched relief when Pitch moved it away. The other hand stayed on his shoulder though. Jack knew he wasn’t going anywhere. He wanted to sag back into the chair, only he couldn’t.

‘Tell me what the Tsar said,’ Pitch said, his voice very nearly gentle.

‘Are you mad at me for making Seraphina go?’ Jack said abruptly.

‘What?’

‘Are you? You didn’t say anything about it. Did you want her to stay? Even if you couldn’t like… even if you couldn’t say that in front of the others?’

Pitch moved around to Jack’s side, kneeling down and staring up at him. The hand on his shoulder had moved down to Jack’s wrist. His touch was so warm. His skin never seemed to cool, even after prolonged contact with Jack’s body.

‘Is that what you think?’ Pitch said.

‘I know it wasn’t my place to say anything,’ Jack said quickly. ‘But I just-’

‘I haven’t said anything, because I’ve been trying not to think about her,’ Pitch said, smiling crookedly. ‘I still don’t know if she survived the escape. I haven’t heard back from Tooth yet, and it’s occurred to me that you and I and Sharpwood downstairs may be the only ones left. That’s- No, Jack, I was so grateful. I didn’t know what to say. Was that not clear enough? I know you feel like you don’t belong with us, I know how I’ve behaved hasn’t…helped. Of course it was your place to say something, you know what it’s like to lose family. On so many levels, not just Pippa. Being able to do what you did for Seraphina… I was so proud of you.’

Jack stared him, but saw nothing but the truth there, in the earnestness of Pitch’s gaze, in the way Pitch squeezed his wrist gently.

‘You know I’m going to stand behind you again,’ Pitch said, his forehead creasing. ‘If this was some attempt at distraction…’

‘No,’ Jack said. ‘I mean… no, not really. I just thought maybe- I don’t know. Thought maybe you’d saved my life and decided you hated me again. People can regret things like that, you know.’

‘I do know,’ Pitch said soberly. ‘I don’t hate you.’

‘Or just… not like me much.’

‘I don’t dislike you,’ Pitch said.

‘Or you could-’

‘Jack,’ Pitch said, and Jack swallowed. ‘I cannot apologise every time my being a military leader puts you on the back foot. There are times when my fear for Seraphina and Eva, when my uncertainty about our future, when my fear for you, will all determine my ability to be civil and kind to you, when I’m not particularly given to being kind in the first place. Is that something you should accept? No, of course not. Did I ever tell you to accept me? Have I ever expected that from you?’
Pitch slid his hand to Jack’s, smoothed his thumb over Jack’s palm, attempted to straighten the stiff fingers.

‘I am still sorry,’ Pitch said. ‘I suspect it’s a lot easier for you to interpret all my behaviour as… It’s not all that surprising, given how things started between us, your conditioning notwithstanding. You know I don’t regret saving your life. I like you, as a person. Even if you are infuriating at times. I’m sure I return the favour.’

Jack smiled a little, and felt something distant and strange between them, crack through the middle. Whatever wall had gone up between them felt weaker than before, and Jack closed his eyes, because that made the next part harder.

‘You really think you can desensitise me?’ Jack said. ‘By standing behind me? By…all of that?’

‘Not exactly,’ Pitch said. ‘First I want to see what I’m dealing with. The measure of your panic and fear and fury. Then I want to think about how to desensitise it. Make no mistake, Jack, I don’t expect you to be without issue. But I know the longer we leave this, the harder it will get. I’ve never had the luxury of time. I cannot expect that we’ll both be alive in three months in order to try it then.’

‘Okay,’ Jack said, nodding, steeling himself. ‘Okay, I guess you’d better stand behind me again, while I think of a million other reasons to not talk about this shit.’

Pitch squeezed his hand again, then stood, and Jack wished that the exchange between them would stop him from tensing, would stop the anxiety from climbing. It didn’t. He could tell himself it was Pitch instead of Bunnymund, he could tell himself there were no whips, he could tell himself he didn’t carry a single new scar, and it didn’t matter. Something animal and enormous was far louder than anything he could tell himself that looked like logic.

The fingers on his shoulder again, but they almost felt like a relief now. He closed his eyes, thinking back to what he was supposed to be talking about.

‘The Tsar called me pathetic, but he did that a lot,’ Jack said. ‘Called me a coward for not fighting him with the ice. I didn’t even want to, so it’s not like he was wrong, y’know? I couldn’t even- I was just so scared.’

‘Of course you were,’ Pitch said. ‘He controls Darkness. What does the Darkness do in everyone? Evoke fear. Why do you think the Tsar has been attacked so few times? Even I’m not immune to it.’

‘Oh,’ Jack said. ‘That’s… I thought…’

‘Did he have Living Darkness around him as well?’

‘Yeah,’ Jack said. ‘I could still attack it on Endan though.’

‘I’d love to see you argue that the Tsar is just a regular person and not actually terrifying in his own right. But I wouldn’t believe you, and you wouldn’t believe yourself. He didn’t exactly inspire comfort and calm even before he took the Darkness into himself. He was always…a corrupt man.’

‘He always said he wanted to be my friend,’ Jack said. ‘He kept bringing it up. That there were so few people he could really be friends with, and… It’s like I knew he was lying, because why would he want to be friends with me? But I still wanted- and he just always knew exactly how to let me know it could never happen.’
‘He likes to put the thing on the table you’re starving for,’ Pitch said. ‘Then he likes to tell you all the reasons why you’re too flawed to have it.’

‘Okay, yeah,’ Jack sighed. ‘That’s kind of what it felt like. It’s so stupid though.’

‘Why?’

‘Because I’m stronger than that? Because I should definitely be stronger than that. And instead, I’m just this thing that he can’t stand, and… He never even let me apologise to him. The look he’d give me when I did, like I’d just said the most insulting thing. The rest of the time, he…’ Jack squinted, thinking about it. He hated thinking back over it, feeling small and little, except now – especially knowing that he was supposed to be dead at the Tsar’s hands – it was beginning to look different. ‘He always stepped that kind of stuff up when it looked like I wasn’t doing what he wanted. I think. I also think he just didn’t like me though.’

‘It’s a pleasant thing, to have his regard,’ Pitch said, rubbing his thumb over Jack’s neck. The touch wasn’t intended to be sensual, but it still made Jack feel tingly. ‘It’s not silly to want it, or to miss it when it’s gone. But you’re right, he would have been increasingly cruel every time you showed a sign of not being what he wanted. His skill is starting with something small and normal. An apology. He singles it out as aberrant, and then every normal thing is somehow something you have to be vigilant over. What if there are other things that could be offending him? Plain ordinary everyday things?

‘From there, it is so easy for him to simply be cruel and abuse when you are doing things that even you know you shouldn’t be doing. He can apply it to a nation, he can certainly break individuals. I know you don’t like hearing that you were an easy target for him. But Jack, it speaks measures that you didn’t have the experience in double-dealing, deceit and cruelty. Naïve, yes, but honourable, full of integrity and resilience, strong where others would be weak. Where I would be.’

‘You can just say stuff like this to me forever,’ Jack said, even though he fairly itched with discomfort. Pitch saying these things to him, how could it feel so good and leave him feeling desperate to escape at the same time?

‘Jack, he handed you your death, I’m assuming on a standard piece of paper that you’ve seen countless times.’

‘I could count them,’ Jack said, knowing he couldn’t. He just needed something to say. Some faux confidence as he felt the fear clawing up inside of him again. A cracking, tinkling sound by his feet, and he knew the ice would be skittering away from him, forming around him, and he couldn’t make it stop.

‘You were alone, and I had just told you that you and I were nothing, or at least, something I regretted.’

‘No, but…’

‘No?’

‘I knew…you didn’t mean all of it,’ Jack said, his mouth dry. Hadn’t he known? ‘I knew I’d pushed you too hard.’

Had he known that at the time? Or had he realised that while on the cross? It was too blurry, and he couldn’t remember. He licked at the roof of his mouth and tasted leather, like he was biting into it again. His jaw flashed with the phantom ache of gritting his teeth through the agony of it, and he
contemplated what it might be like to never talk about this. He could stay behind while they went on missions. He didn’t have to be a soldier.

Even as he thought it, he knew he couldn’t live with himself.

‘I knew I’d pushed you too hard,’ Jack said again, knowing that at some point, that had become true. ‘I kept going at you on something you couldn’t handle. You seem like someone who is never really affected by anything except I dunno, disobedience. But it’s not true. I was upset about it, that I didn’t- that I wouldn’t have a chance to tell you that I knew that, and that I was sorry. Like, annoyed that you’d find me like that, and it would just be another thing reminding you of Fyodor. I don’t want to be an echo of him, but I didn’t see a way out of it.’

‘There wasn’t,’ Pitch said, his voice more uneven than before. ‘Was there? Did you find any way out of it? An appeal to Sharpwood? The Tsar? Bunnymund? If I hadn’t by some miracle turned up on top of the Tower, would you have saved yourself?’

Jack folded his arms around his torso and stared ahead, heart fluttering unpleasantly in his chest, and then closed his eyes when he felt Pitch’s other hand on his other shoulder. The warmth at both points felt like an anchor, was reminding him less of Bunnymund standing behind him, and more of that time when – not even that long ago – Pitch had held him on that bed in that room. He’d held him, and they’d slept like that, touching each other.

‘Did you try?’ Pitch said, something too gentle to be a condemnation if Jack hadn’t.

But Jack had tried.

‘I begged the Tsar,’ Jack said. ‘And Sharpwood took me too fast – he teleported through… shadows – for me to ask him. And then Bunnymund was there and I told him, I told him not to do it, and I told him the Tsar was just doing it to break him – because that’s what the Tsar said – and I… I said please, and I told him- I told him that I was one of them. I told him I was a Guardian. I thought maybe it would count for something.’

Pitch’s fingers squeezed and released, then squeezed again.

‘But I couldn’t struggle,’ Jack said. ‘I couldn’t use my ice. I couldn’t… I should’ve been able to, right? I mean I managed to use it when you got Bunnymund to attack me during training, right? So why-? I mean isn’t that what someone would’ve done? They would’ve just fought harder instead of begging like- Instead of begging like an idiot, instead of…’

Jack’s breathing was too shaky, and he felt like he was standing there all over again, watching Bunnymund pick up the leather bit, watching Bunnymund hesitate at Jack’s words, and then continue anyway. That was who they needed for the resistance, according to everyone else. The Disciplinarian. The one who Jack had attacked at the after-party. The one who had whipped Jack with his magic, because he knew how much it would affect him. Because he and Pitch had talked about it together and knew it would break him.

A shuddering breath, and suddenly Jack’s eyes were wet, hurt too much, and he wanted to press his fingers into them to stop the reaction from happening, but then Pitch would know. He didn’t want Pitch to know.

‘It’s okay that you didn’t fight back with your ice,’ Pitch said. ‘Even factoring in the Darkness, it’s normal to freeze up in the face of that sort of monstrousness. Training can only do so much, but every soldier finds themselves paralysed at least once.’
‘Do you think he knew?’ Jack said, his voice higher, reedier. ‘Do you think he knew, when he picked the whip, how…bad it would be? I mean- for me? I mean obviously being killed by a whip is bad for anyone. But he knew it was personal, didn’t he? That- I mean you talked about it, when you wanted to bring the darkness up in me. You even said it was underhanded but- you said it was… but he didn’t know, did he? He couldn’t have known.’

Jack blinked, and tears spilled. He wasn’t sobbing. His breathing was uneven, but he didn’t think it sounded like he was crying. Not about this. He’d been rescued, and he wasn’t dead.

Some part of him bitterly reminded him that no, he wasn’t dead, he had to stick around and deal with this part, the shitty aftermath.

‘He knew,’ Pitch said. ‘He might not have fully understood the depth of it, but I’m not sure I do either. But he knew.’

‘He still did it.’

‘Yes,’ Pitch said. ‘I still think I should have killed him.’

‘You said you were friends,’ Jack said.

‘Blood brothers.’

‘You can’t kill a blood brother,’ Jack said. ‘Jamie’s mine.’

‘If Bunnymund so much as insults you in front of me, I’ll show you what you do to blood brothers who try and kill the ones you love.’

Jack started to nod, and then realised what Pitch had said. Pitch, who had said that he didn’t love Jack, but could. Maybe it was just a turn of phrase. He wanted to turn around, meet Pitch’s eyes, but he was still locked up in the remembered horror of what had happened, and he didn’t want to hear that Pitch didn’t mean it after all, that it really was just a turn of phrase.

‘I wouldn’t pass out,’ Jack said, distracting himself from one painful thing with another. ‘At one point Bunnymund must’ve assumed I had, and then Sharpwood realised I was still awake and told Bunnymund to reset the count. And it was 100 PC on the sheet, so he must’ve started the hundred after- And I just wouldn’t pass out. I started to think- I started to… Like maybe I was just going to be awake right up until the point I was dead. And then Bunnymund would just have to whip my corpse a hundred times. I thought that. I didn’t want to, but I did.’

It’d flashed through his mind, a distant image that he couldn’t latch onto beneath the pain.

‘It hurt,’ Jack whispered.

He could hear the sound of his own tears hitting the fabric of his shirt, his forearms. If he could hear it, then Pitch could too. Everything twisted up inside of him, and he wanted to get away, but he didn’t want those hands on his shoulder to disappear.

‘I should’ve just passed out, right?’ Jack said. ‘Like, do you think I knew I deserved it, and maybe that’s why I couldn’t?’

Pitch cleared his throat, then shifted one of his hands to move through Jack’s hair, reach around to the front of his face and cup his cheek. Then fingers smearing his tears, as though wiping them away. Except there were too many. All of Jack’s face was wet. He’d had most of his life to practice crying without making a sound, but he’d also honestly thought he’d grown out of crying like this
before he’d left the creche.

“You think you deserved that?” Pitch said roughly.


“What crime- No…” Pitch sounded annoyed with himself. Then: ‘What would it mean if you didn’t? If you didn’t deserve that? And they went ahead with it anyway?’

“I don’t know,” Jack said, not wanting to think about it. Something too huge there, something he couldn’t see the full shape of. Something more terrifying than being whipped to death and thinking he deserved it. ‘I can’t…”

The hand at his cheek moved back to his shoulder, squeezed it, and then moved with slow deliberation to Jack’s back, over his shirt, over the scars. Jack didn’t like it, but he didn’t move. He didn’t hate it. He heard himself laugh.

‘Look, you fixed it.’

Pitch laughed too, the sound of it wet, fractured.

“Well done, us,’ Pitch said, pressing his nose to the back of Jack’s head carefully. ‘It possibly won’t last. I want to work on this when you’re in not so fraught an emotional state. But this is…this is good.’

‘Good, huh?’ Jack said, and then heard his next exhale, almost like a sob. ‘How though? I mean, not to be that person, but how is any of this good? I keep trying to see how, but- I keep thinking after that, after what he did, after thinking I might get to know what it feels like to have leather on my spine before I die – or maybe I did? That’s impossible, right? But how is any of this- I don’t meant to sound ungrateful, I really don’t. I really… But what have we won? I feel like it should’ve been worth more, I feel like it should’ve been worth more, I feel like it should’ve been- I’m not- I’m not-

It was getting harder to form full sentences, Jack losing the trail of his thoughts, trapped between the heaving of his chest and the flooding of emotions that drowned nearly all the words he wanted.

‘It wasn’t worth anything,’ Jack said. ‘He did that to me and it wasn’t for anything.’

Jack’s voice splintered on the next sob, and he covered his mouth and his eyes with his hands as he couldn’t stop the wave of hard, ugly sobs that followed. The hands left his back and shoulders, and he hardly noticed. The chair shifted and he didn’t care. Then he was being pulled down, pulled into warmth, and he hardly cared about that either. He hated the sounds he was making into his own palm, hated how loud they were, muffled by cloth and skin. He hated that he could feel how fragile his back was, because the scars were always there, reminding him of Lune, of Crossholt, of Bunnymund, of the whip, of the Tsar.

In between gulped breaths, he turned his head to the side and said:

‘It shouldn’t have to be this hard. It shouldn’t- It shouldn’t be this hard. I don’t know how I know that but I just know it, and everything- everything, by the Light everything seems to exist to prove me wrong and it’s like ‘hey, look, Jack, actually it’s meant to be even harder.’ But it’s not meant to be this hard, and I hate it, I hate you, I hate this whole stupid- I hate everything.’

Pitch held him so close it hurt, and Jack was limp in that grip, wishing that Pitch could hold him like that until he vanished into warmth and didn’t have to feel another thing ever again.
'It’s unfair,’ Pitch said. Words that Jack never tried to let himself think, let alone say.

It was, but Jack didn’t have the energy or the words to agree. He spent a few seconds trying to think of a way to tell Pitch that he didn’t really hate him, but couldn’t find the thread of it, and his body was too hung up on crying anyway. He hadn’t lost it like this since… he couldn’t even remember. Pippa, maybe.

Maybe not even then.

Jack caught his breath, face against Pitch’s chest, rubbing clumsily at his eyes with the side of his hand.

‘I don’t even like feeling cold all the time,’ Jack said, laughing weakly. ‘Isn’t that stupid? I miss it. I miss feeling warm. You make me feel like- I want to be this warm all the time.’

‘We can quit the war,’ Pitch said. ‘You can become my parasite. It might be somewhat unconventional, but you’ve never much been one for convention anyway.’

‘I don’t hate you.’

‘Not when you’ve so much reason to?’

Jack moved his arms where they’d been pressed against his chest, and moved them around Pitch’s body. One of Pitch’s hands was clasped around the back of his neck, the other arm strong around his shoulders. Jack could feel the cold of the ice he’d made on the floor.

‘It shouldn’t be this hard,’ Pitch said. ‘You deserve so much better than this. I want to believe it can be better, but I’ve forgotten how. I don’t think I remember what hope feels like. Being in your presence is like a reawakening. It’s not painless, easy, or even something I want, but then you’re not with me, and I realise it’s worse without you there. When I thought you were dead… I didn’t even know if the healing would work. There’s a point where it won’t take- And you were fighting it.’

‘Maybe because I’d decided I wanted to be dead,’ Jack said. Pitch’s breath hitched. ‘I was so… It was such a relief to realise it was just done. Then you put your hands on my back, and it was the worst thing. I don’t even know if I’m glad that you did it. I have to be though, right? You saved my life. That’s amazing, isn’t it?’

‘You don’t have to know how you feel about it,’ Pitch said. ‘I know how I feel about it. That feeling could carry me through a thousand wars, but I’m hoping it won’t come to that.’

‘Are you…? Like…a romantic?’ Jack hiccupped a laugh as soon as he said it, feeling tired and wrung out, sprawled as he was across Pitch’s body. His chest still shuddered with the motion of sobbing, even if he wasn’t properly crying anymore. Pitch couldn’t have been comfortable, either. He wasn’t really leaning against anything. But he seemed in no rush to move.

‘It didn’t feel especially romantic, putting everything on the line for you,’ Pitch said. He pressed his cheek against the top of Jack’s head. ‘The house will be stocked with sleeping serum. I want you to take some. I’ll measure out a dose for you. I promise I am not trying to exclude you from what’s happening, but there’s only so much fortitude you can find when running on fumes. This I know. A few hours of sleep for you today, I think, and then we can talk this evening. Hopefully we’ll receive news that everyone made it safely on their varying escape routes.’

Jack wanted to say that Seraphina would be okay, but he couldn’t do that either. He wouldn’t lie. But he hoped desperately that she would be. Jack didn’t know how Pitch lived without it –
something as fundamental as hope – because Jack was pretty sure he wouldn’t see a single reason to keep on going if he didn’t have hope to hang onto. Even when it hurt so much.

‘So I guess we should be getting up,’ Jack said, rubbing his face against Pitch’s clothing.

‘Not yet,’ Pitch said. ‘Just let me have you like this for a little longer.’

Truthfully, Jack didn’t want to move. He didn’t want to pretend to be strong, he didn’t want to pretend to be fine. He knew he still might not be able to fight when they needed him. Was leeching of enough scratchy, nervous energy to know that the damage to his mind might be too extensive.

Maybe he didn’t know how he felt about having been saved by Pitch, but he knew he ached for the warmth around him now, the feeling that someone cared. Like Pitch, he just wanted this for a little longer. Long enough that he wouldn’t forget what it felt like, that he could carry it with him into the future, a kind of hope that he could one day return to Pitch.
Jack woke slowly, swimming from a sleep so deep that his whole body felt weighed down. He made a faint noise, another, and realised that this was way different to the dosage Pitch had given him for the nap in the afternoon. Whatever he’d given Jack to make him sleep through the night had knocked him out.

‘It’s all right,’ Pitch said from nearby. Then, a pressure on the side of the bed as Pitch sat down. ‘How are you feeling?’

‘Have they contacted us yet?’

‘No,’ Pitch said, his voice tight. Jack thought he’d fall asleep again when he felt fingers at his forehead, in his hair. Pitch’s body was so warm, and the bed still held the warmth from Pitch sleeping next to him. Because now they were sharing a bed.

Jack forced his eyes open, and then rubbed at them. ‘It feels like we’re wasting so much time.’

‘I know,’ Pitch said. ‘No one ever tells you that war is a lot of waiting around until the right moment. There’s a lot of waiting sometimes. Especially in a situation such as this, when we’re in no position to go on the offensive.’

‘They haven’t contacted us,’ Jack said. ‘Do you think-?’

‘Try not to think about it,’ Pitch said abruptly. ‘If I haven’t heard from Toothiana in twenty four hours, we’ll reassess.’

For someone who was probably terrified his daughter – his family and friends – were dead, Pitch seemed pretty good at hiding his emotions. Jack knew they were there now. He didn’t think he’d ever forget again, after everything they’d talked about the day before. But maybe he would. Sometimes it was hard to remember the things Pitch carried with him all the time, because of situations like right now, when his poker face was so good.

‘Have you like, ever slept with any of the Guardians?’ Jack said abruptly.

Pitch stared at him, visibly shocked, and then his eyebrows lifted as high as they could go. Jack couldn’t stop the snort of laughter that followed. He was still waking up, and he’d just thought of it.

‘No,’ Pitch said, in amazement. Then: ‘Oh, actually…’

Jack shot upright, and then groaned as his head swam. Okay, maybe not ready to be vertical yet. Pitch’s hand at his shoulder helped.

‘Actually?’ Jack squeaked.
‘Nikolai and I got very drunk once, a long time ago. Neither of us remembers it. Our clothing was in some disarray the next morning.’

‘North? I thought like…Bunnymund or something, or the Spymaster maybe…’

‘No, besides, it’s very likely nothing happened. It’s not as though either of us woke up feeling like our asses had been pounded half to death. Though of the two of us, it would have been his, I can assure you.’

‘By the Light, Pitch, you can’t just-’

Fingers at his chin turned his face up, and then Pitch rested his mouth against Jack’s, lips curved in a smile.

‘You’re obviously feeling quite well-rested, if you’re asking me which of the Guardians I’ve fucked.’

Jack’s hands shifted over the covers nervously. He’d not even really thought about sex since they’d gotten to the cottage, but now it was like a switch had been flicked, and he couldn’t think about anything else.

‘I mean…’ Jack said against Pitch’s mouth. ‘Given the fact that you haven’t even fucked me yet, there are a ton of things you and North could do without like, without feeling like…without what you just said happening.’

‘You mean without North walking bow-legged afterwards?’

Pitch hesitated, and then carefully drew Jack’s lower lip into his mouth with his tongue licking it, his own lips capturing it. Pitch’s hand on his shoulder tightened, and slid possessively to the back of Jack’s neck and grasped it tight. Then, he bit down quickly, a flash of pain that wasn’t remotely sexual. Jack cried out, and Pitch didn’t let go.

It was in the not letting go, the fading of the sharp pain as Pitch began stroking Jack’s neck languidly, that Jack realised how that flash of cold that had raced through him could be followed by heat. Especially with how his mouth felt like it was warming, Pitch’s tongue licking slowly over the lip he’d caught.

Eventually, Pitch let go, and Jack heard his own shaky breathing. He kept his mouth tilted up, and Pitch nuzzled gently into his cheek, before kissing it lightly.

‘That hurt,’ Jack said weakly.

‘I know,’ Pitch said. That hand kept stroking the side of his neck. ‘Did you like it?’

‘It hurt though,’ Jack said.

‘So did spanking you,’ Pitch said. ‘You still came. You could barely stand.’

Jack made a faint sound of annoyance and arousal in the back of his throat. He wanted it to be a growl, but it sounded more like a whine.

‘You don’t even have that room anymore. With all those things in it.’

Though privately, he was glad he’d never see that wall of whips ever again. But the rest of it – the endless possibilities that Jack had felt while in that room, while Pitch undid him with a single glass
of water – Jack felt an undercurrent of mourning.

‘I’m very good at improvising,’ Pitch said against Jack’s jaw. He had one knee upon the bed. ‘Do you doubt me?’

‘I mean, I just-’

‘Do you really think that’s the only place I’d keep my equipment?’

‘But not here,’ Jack said.

‘Are you asking?’ Pitch said, pulling back and looking at him, something wicked and hungry in his eyes. ‘I can kiss you sweetly instead, if you want. Or…’

Pitch pushed him back down into the bed, and then – more smoothly than Jack would ever have been capable of, even with being able to fly – Pitch was straddling him. But there were about three blankets in the way of proper contact. Jack wriggled, frustrated, and Pitch looked pleased, watching Jack realise he was pinned by Pitch’s knees.

‘What can we even do, when-’

Pitch kissed him, and there was nothing sweet about it. Jack – caught up in the lingering traces of the sleep serum, the way Pitch claimed him with nothing more than his mouth – felt himself get swept away. He barely noticed Pitch’s hand moving confidently beneath the blankets until he felt a warm palm on his chest, a thumb moving tenderly over his nipple, each time making Jack jolt from the sensation, before those fingers pinched cruelly together.

Jack’s back arched, first into the rush of sensation, and then he moved backwards, to try and get away from it.

‘Are you trying to stop me?’ Pitch said darkly. ‘Is that what this is? Lie still. You can do better than that.’

Jack, trembling, already hard and unable to get any friction for himself, forced himself to lie as still as he could despite that one point of pain that lanced through sensitive flesh and spread achingly through his whole chest. Pitch’s grip was cruel and Jack wanted to escape it, could hear his breath shuddering out of him. But Pitch’s words were so good. Even as they were stern and commanding.

Jack wanted that. So he stayed as still as he could, and Pitch stared down at him like he wanted nothing more than to devour him.

Pitch let go, but then rubbed over the sore nipple and that stung and somehow felt good at the same time, Jack biting down on his lower lip and catching the place where Pitch had bitten him. He grunted, closed his eyes, and Pitch leaned down and said:

‘You have to get up now. We’re talking to Sharpwood after breakfast.’

It took entirely too long to realise what Pitch had said, and it wasn’t until Pitch had moved his hand from beneath the blankets, until he’d gotten off the bed entirely, that Jack opened his eyes and stared up at the ceiling, still breathing heavily.

‘You are…so awful,’ Jack said. ‘The most awful. I can’t get up now! I’m not eating breakfast while- While I’m like… I mean-’

‘You have my permission to beat off in the shower, if you need it so badly,’ Pitch said, sweeping
his eyes over Jack’s form, entirely smug.

‘Your permission?’

‘Mm,’ Pitch said. ‘But if you don’t, I’ll make it worth your while.’

‘You could do that right now,’ Jack said, pushing himself up into a sitting position. His chest ached, his nipple throbbed. His lip hurt and his cock was so hard that he was pretty sure if he got a hand on himself, he’d last a whole two minutes. ‘You’re literally two steps away.’

In response to that, Pitch walked over to the doorway and leaned against it. Pitch had increased the level of smugness on his face to something so self-satisfied that Jack wondered if he was more turned on by denying people orgasms than he was actually having sex with them.

‘You’re seriously not walking away right now,’ Jack said in outrage, staring at him.

‘You’re awake, aren’t you?’ Pitch said. ‘Shower, and get dressed. Then come down for breakfast.’

‘Don’t you dare,’ Jack said, as Pitch turned to leave. ‘Pitch!’

‘Don’t take too long,’ Pitch called over his shoulder. Then Jack heard the sound of him taking the steps rapidly down to the first floor, and Jack thumped back into the bed and groaned. He pressed his hand down, just above his cock, and thought of Pitch saying he’d make it worth Jack’s while if he didn’t beat off in the shower. How would he even know?

He’ll know. He’ll have some kind of stupid radar for it.

Jack took several deep breaths and forced himself to get up. It wasn’t until Jack stripped off in the bathroom and stilled at the scars on his back, that he realised how much the sleep had helped with everything that had happened. He touched his fingers to the side of the old scars, unable to see a single sign of what Bunnymund had done to him most recently. He thought of how embarrassing it had been, to cry in Pitch’s lap, only he’d hardly been aware of the embarrassment at the time, and now it felt like a distant concern.

Pitch had been crying too. Just not in the same way. It was hard to tell himself that Pitch didn’t really care, or that he was callous, after they’d talked about the things that had happened. Jack had stayed slumped in Pitch’s arms for so long, that he’d started to fall asleep, and all Pitch had done was encourage it, soothing him with gentle touches and words. He’d only gone away to get some of the serum, and then he’d tucked Jack into his bed with a look on his face like concern, and it didn’t leave, even as Jack had drifted into sleep.

He’d woken up after the nap and Pitch had gotten him to eat, they’d talked a bit about random things – whether the ornaments in the house were North’s (they mostly were, except for the collection of rabbits, which belonged to Bunnymund and made Jack feel ill-disposed towards them), whether Pitch would let Jack ride the Mora (he would, maybe, if she’d behave herself), who looked after the cottages (apparently members of the resistance, but a lot of magic also kept them mostly dust free and kept a lot of the food fresh for longer than usual). Then, Pitch had given him a larger dose of the serum, and Jack had fallen asleep in the middle of Pitch stroking his hair and telling him a story of how Seraphina’s first word was either ‘no’ or ‘Papa’ which meant that her first sentence was: ‘No, Papa.’

Jack could hear his love for her in every word he spoke.

Now, he cleaned himself off in the shower and found himself thinking of all kinds of things. Of wanting Pitch to touch him, of hating being teased and kind of loving it at the same time. Thinking
about the fact that no one had communicated with them yet and he didn’t even know how they’d be in touch. Was someone going to visit? Would that be weird? Could they even trust them?

He tried not to think about the gnarled skin on his back or the places where it was papery thin, and he tried not to think about the sound of the whip striking him mercilessly, or Bunnymund’s anger when Jack wouldn’t pass out, or die, or whatever.

The thoughts still came, and they still made him feel short of breath, but he could wash himself. He could still dress and have clothing touch his back. Talking about it hadn’t fixed him, but it had helped. He resented it, because he didn’t really want to talk about anything that hurt so much, ever again. But…he’d probably have to.

It wouldn’t be so bad though, if Pitch did it with him.

*

Jack flew down the stairs, startling Pitch, who was serving up oatmeal, along with apples that had been cut up and drizzled with honey and spices. Simple fare. Even – depending on where one lived – peasant fare. He was grateful for the plainer food.

It felt weird now, knowing Sharpwood was literally in the room across from them. Had he heard Jack’s total breakdown? How much could he hear? Jack tried not to think about it, and failed.

He and Pitch didn’t talk much at all downstairs, as though they knew Sharpwood could hear everything.

‘Are you still hungry?’ Pitch said as Jack cleared away the plates automatically, washing them in the sink.

‘No,’ Jack said. ‘Should I be?’

‘No, it’s… A normal thing to ask,’ Pitch said, squinting at him.

‘I’m good,’ Jack said, drying his hands on the dish-cloth, and looking across to the doorway that led to Sharpwood.

‘We’d best get this part out of the way,’ Pitch said. He picked up a notepad, a pen, and walked into the lounge. Jack followed, making a point of floating in the room, because he kind of wanted Sharpwood to know that if he tried to get away, Jack could fly after him. Except Sharpwood knew that already, because Sharpwood had shot him out of the air with a magical arrow.

Jack glared at Sharpwood, who stared back impassively.

Pitch removed something from his pocket, bent over Sharpwood, and then there was a clicking sound, and the manacles were open around his wrists.

‘What-’ Jack managed.

‘I don’t think we need to persist with this charade anymore,’ Pitch said.

‘What-’

‘He won’t escape,’ Pitch said. ‘Nor attack us. Will you, Sharpwood?’

‘No,’ Sharpwood said. He removed his wrists slowly from the manacles, and then picked up the chains and made a faint expression of distaste. After a long moment, he dropped them to the floor.
and then leaned back in the chair. ‘I will require sustenance in about twelve hours, if you want me conscious.’

‘Fine,’ Pitch said.

‘You can’t just let him go,’ Jack said. ‘He- He attacked me, and he-’

‘There’s some things you need to understand about Sharpwood,’ Pitch said carefully. ‘A lot of people assume his loyalty to the Tsar, because-

‘-Because he’s totally loyal to the Tsar?’ Jack said loudly. ‘Because he is?’

Sharpwood sat there and stared ahead, as though unconcerned that they were arguing about the fact that Pitch had just let him go.

‘Jack,’ Pitch said, a stern undertone in his voice that made Jack’s voice die in the back of his throat. ‘If you want to learn more about what is happening, you’re going to have to listen to me. To the both of us. I know this doesn’t look like what you’ve expected and assumed, but can you at least try and listen to what I’m saying?’

Jack folded his arms, his staff across his body, but he stayed silent.

Pitch nodded to himself, and then dragged the larger couch closer to Sharpwood, moving the coffee table out of the way. He sat on the couch, gestured for Jack to do the same. Jack floated over and sat reluctantly, amazed that Sharpwood’s hands were now free, and he could attack them at any point. Or escape. Or teleport back to the Tsar.

‘He can get back to the Tsar,’ Jack said. ‘Right now. And tell him where we are.’

‘Yes,’ Sharpwood said, looking at Jack. ‘I could have done that at any point.’

‘But the manacles – Pitch made sure you couldn’t, with the Light, and-’

‘It didn’t mean anything. That was more for your comfort,’ Pitch said, a faint look of apology on his face when Jack just stared at him. ‘No one knows Sharpwood’s true allegiance, except for me. It seemed easier to simply…do what has always been done. Sharpwood can teleport back at any point, and he still might if he decides he has a better chance of getting what he wants from Gavril. Right now, he knows he has a better chance of getting what he wants from us. Don’t you?’

‘Yes,’ Sharpwood said. After a moment, he stretched out his legs.

‘What’s that?’ Jack said.

‘The orb,’ Pitch said. ‘In the mountain. Grisaille’s locus of power.’

‘Its heart,’ Sharpwood said calmly.

‘Until now, Sharpwood has suspected that the best way to get the orb back was to continue to support the Tsar. Especially since the Tsar has been feeding it with powers from other nations. The Tsar seeks to use that only for himself, but Sharpwood has always desired to return it to its rightful place. Now, I believe he suspects he has a better chance of accessing the orb through us, since he knows we might need it to defeat the Darkness, and Gavril.’ Pitch turned to Sharpwood. ‘Yes?’

‘Yes,’ Sharpwood said.

‘Did you know Gavril was considering taking the orb and using it directly, to defeat more planets
‘Will you give me the orb?’ Sharpwood said sharply. It was the most life that had come to his face and voice since he’d been captured. Maybe even since before then.

‘Perhaps.’

‘Then no.’

‘I’ll not give you the orb until I have an assurance that you won’t try and harm the citizens of Lune with it further.’

‘I’ll not give you that assurance,’ Sharpwood said placidly. ‘You cannot steal the heart from a planet, and expect nothing to happen.’

‘Has nothing happened?’ Pitch said, sounding just as calm now. Like it was a philosophical conversation. ‘Are the citizens not suffering?’

‘One wonders if it will ever be enough.’

‘And would it?’

Sharpwood was silent then. After a while, he turned to Jack and said: ‘You were crying.’

Jack had no idea what to say, how to respond. After a while, he just shrugged uncomfortably. It was mortifying now, imagining Sharpwood downstairs, listening to him bawling like a child into Pitch’s arms.

‘Did you even care?’ Jack said. ‘That you had to watch me die?’

‘No,’ Sharpwood said, and it was clear he wasn’t lying. ‘I don’t care about most people’s deaths. Except perhaps my own and those I might care about. And even then; not very much.’

‘What’s wrong with you?’

Pitch held up a hand, and when Sharpwood didn’t speak, he said: ‘He doesn’t think like us. He’s… Sharpwood, would you tell him what you told me, once? About how the orb is used in Grisaille?’

Sharpwood tilted his head, and then moved his legs back so that his shoes were flat on the floor again. He still had dried blood on the side of his head. He folded his arms, looking at Jack thoughtfully.

‘Grisaille is a planet of light and dark, and all in between,’ Sharpwood said, in the manner of someone who had said this before, many times. ‘When we come of age, we visit an orb and choose what will fill us and contain us – the light, or the dark. There are many orbs on Grisaille, but they are all anchored to its heart. Which now lies in a mountain, on an alien planet.’ Sharpwood looked at Pitch, calculating, and then looked back at Jack.
‘We do not struggle with the darkness like you do. Or the light. We are made for it, have evolved with it. The darkness can consume things, yes, but not like it does now. And the light was never intended to destroy it. These are things that Lune citizens have done to the powers of Grisaille over time. But imagine that once, the darkness and the light were nothing to do with war, and simply a part of our lives. Those who choose darkness are not possessed by it, and those who choose light are not possessed by it. We simply live as we are.’

That was almost impossible to imagine. Except that Sharpwood sat right there, with his opaque black eyes, and called himself self-possessed.

‘I chose the darkness,’ Sharpwood said. ‘Citizens of Grisaille already live life more slowly and less…aggressively, than many on other nations. I became a Professor of philosophy, specifically focusing on life and death. I came not to mind very much that I would die, or that others would die. A true death is a rare thing, but nothing to fear. The darkness helped me to understand my fear of it, though I never feared it very much. Grisailleans are not…so full of emotion and abreaction, as you are.’

‘Then why do you care about getting the orb? If you don’t care about dying? Why not just…kill yourself, and stop hurting innocent people? How many people has the Tsar gotten you to hurt? To kill?’

‘Many,’ Sharpwood said. ‘You all mean nothing to me. You are not my people. This is not my home. I do not care how many people here die if it means I get the orb back. If I can return it.’

‘Then why not just steal it and leave?’ Jack said, exasperated.

‘I am not a pilot,’ Sharpwood said. ‘And there was a time when no one would help me. One day, Pitch offered to help me. I had not realised how much I’d shared with him, that he saw my motives.’

Jack frowned. That was weird. How come Pitch saw it, and the Tsar didn’t? It wasn’t like the Tsar was clueless, he must’ve realised that Sharpwood wanted to get back to his planet.

‘Then why didn’t you steal it then?’ Jack said.

‘Because at the time, I believed I would be better served assisting the Tsar. While he has been in power, Grisaille’s heart has grown stronger than ever. Repatriating it now would give our small planet a huge advantage over others. It may do much for Grisaille’s greatness, and Grisaille was already great.’

‘So you basically stuck all of this out, the betrayal of your people or whatever, so you could…what, make Grisaille more powerful?’

‘I am mildly strategic in nature,’ Sharpwood said. Pitch rolled his eyes, and Jack turned his staff slowly, staring at him.

‘Why does the orb give powers to people?’ Jack said. ‘When it doesn’t even belong to us. Like the Guardians? What’s that about?’

‘In times of strife, the heart can be used to send out what you call the Living Darkness, and destroy those who would hurt us. It absorbs all magic and power it comes in touch with. Now, it is the strongest it has ever been, and it decides things on its own. We call it the heart because we believe it has some measure of…passion within it. I cannot fathom what it truly is, and I do not know how Grisaille has managed without it. But you have your powers, because the orb has eaten the powers
of ice and snow from other planets over time, and it chose to give them to you.’

Jack thought back to that foggy time in the mountain, drugged out of his mind and half-convinced he could hear his sister and-

‘It was her,’ Jack breathed. ‘It was her, wasn’t it? That I heard, in the mountain. Because the orb—because the Darkness had what…eaten her?’

‘Who?’

‘My sister! Don’t say ‘who’ like you don’t know.’

‘It is rare,’ Sharpwood said, the words coming slowly, like he wasn’t sure of himself. ‘Perhaps that is what happened, but… Perhaps it didn’t.’

‘It was her,’ Jack said. ‘Except she was different. She said- Sometimes she said things that were so… It was like she’d been corrupted, by evil. It was- Why would anyone choose the darkness, or whatever, when it’s so awful?’

‘Because it wasn’t, always,’ Sharpwood said, looking to Pitch, his dark blue eyebrows pulling together in something that could have been confusion. As though he still wasn’t sure it was awful now. ‘It wasn’t intended to simply…be used as a defensive mechanism against our enemies. It wasn’t ever intended to be used as an offensive weapon. It was that by which we gained our maturity, and it could also offer us great healing. There is a Living Light, too. Though I wonder if the Golden Warriors have taken it all now. Maybe this is why it seems so awful. It has been sickened.’

‘You know what I think of that,’ Pitch said.

‘That benefits you, does it not? To believe that the shadows in the mountain are what keep the Light quelled. So you do not have to think of giving it back. What you’ve taken.’

‘The orb gave it to us.’

‘Unnaturally,’ Sharpwood said, and then his lips thinned. ‘Though I do not profess to know how the orb behaves. Perhaps it was the only way it knew how to try and achieve equilibrium.’

‘Sharpwood wants the orb,’ Pitch said to Jack, ‘but it’s more complicated than this. He also wishes to see if he can get the Light back from the Golden Warriors. Since that is the only thing that gives us our unnatural lifespan, it will possibly kill all of us, at once. All of us who have lived beyond a regular lifespan, at any rate.’

‘Citizens of Lune do not enjoy dying,’ Sharpwood said calmly.

Jack stared at him. Stared at Pitch.

‘You’re going to give him the orb?’ Jack said.

‘It was never ours to begin with,’ Pitch said soberly.

‘You’re going to condemn like, all of those Golden Warriors to death?’

‘Pitch has seen them die many times before,’ Sharpwood said. ‘I doubt he’ll care.’

Pitch stilled, like he’d controlled a flinch. He glared at Sharpwood, who stared back for a long time, and then his eyebrows twisted up again, like he didn’t understand why what he’d said had
caused that kind of response.

‘You still care,’ Sharpwood said. The statement was flat, but Jack wondered if it would sound disbelieving if he behaved like a regular Lune citizen.

‘I have always cared,’ Pitch said, his voice tense.

‘Oh,’ Sharpwood said. ‘How bizarre.’

‘Sharpwood,’ Pitch said, the same stern tone he’d used on Jack before.

‘You’ve lived so long now,’ Sharpwood said slowly. ‘You still care?’

‘You still care about the orb?’ Pitch said, and Sharpwood blinked once.

‘I suppose, if your planet has no heart like Grisaille does, you must find it in all of the people around you. But still? Is that not tiresome?’

‘It’s incredibly tiresome,’ Pitch said, a half-smile appearing on his face. Watching Pitch and Sharpwood talking like they were almost friends was one thing, but watching Sharpwood smile back – only small, only slight – made Jack feel like he’d somehow split off into an alternative universe.

‘Oh,’ Sharpwood said. ‘How tedious.’

‘Do you not find it the same, wanting to repatriate the orb after all this time?’

‘Yes,’ Sharpwood said.

‘I think then, we have found some more common ground.’

‘It seems so,’ he agreed.

A long silence then, and Pitch turned his attention to Jack, as Jack’s mind raced with questions. He could barely get them in order, when Pitch said:

‘The Tsar told Jack that he could remove the Darkness from everywhere, if he chose.’

‘No,’ Sharpwood said calmly.

‘Was he just like bragging or something?’ Jack said.

‘He didn’t say that.’

‘Yeah, except he did. I didn’t misremember. I might be more emotional than your people or whatever, but I remember what I heard.’

‘I thought the orb perhaps…’ Pitch added. ‘Now that it’s stronger.’

Sharpwood looked uncomfortable then, like he’d stumbled across a thought that he’d never wanted to entertain. After a moment, his hand twitched and then twitched again.

‘He said this?’ Sharpwood said. ‘He did not say he probably could do it, but that he could? He did not tell you how? The orb should not…be capable. And he cannot even- He is scared of it.’

‘Still?’ Pitch said.
'He believes it knows him now. That it would exact revenge upon him. But I do not think he’s correct. He projects his own nature onto the orb, and expects to be treated as he treats with others. But it functions as it always has. Poorly though, given none of you are made to house either the light or the darkness inside of you.'

Jack turned it over in his head. He couldn’t think of what else the Tsar would have meant, if he couldn’t already control the Darkness everywhere. He didn’t seem like he was bluffing. He seemed like the kind of person who was confident enough – triumphant enough – that he could reveal truths to people he was about to kill. He’d probably done it to Fyodor. Jack looked at Pitch covertly, and then looked at Sharpwood again.

‘Why did you tell me you were a Professor of Lune?’

‘No one understands this world or these citizens better than I,’ Sharpwood said. ‘When I return home, I will make use of my knowledge.’

‘To destroy us?’

‘To protect Grisaille. To ensure no incursion like yours can happen again.’

‘It’s like he’s forgotten that he aided us,’ Pitch said to Jack casually, as though this was an easy conversation. ‘He does this. He lies easily, and if he changes his mind about something, he’ll sometimes lie about ever believing otherwise. For someone who can be transparent most of the time, it’s times like now when he’ll fabricate truths because they sound better.’

‘I underestimated your canniness,’ Sharpwood explained. ‘Especially Gavril’s. You know this. I have not forgotten, and I did not lie. I made a mistake. I will make sure it never happens again.’

‘By destroying us?’ Jack said insistently.

Sharpwood’s eyes narrowed, and then he tilted his head. ‘I hope it will not come to that.’

‘Right,’ Jack said, frowning. ‘So, basically, we have no plan, Sharpwood wants the orb back and might kill all the Golden Warriors in the process – sorry, let me just...he might kill all the ones that should’ve died by now, my bad – and then *maybe* destroy Lune also? But he just *hopes* it won’t come to that. And if he thinks he has a better chance of getting the orb back through Gavril, he’ll just what? Whoosh through the shadows and that’s that?’

‘That is not a terrible summation,’ Sharpwood said.

‘Yeah,’ Jack said. ‘I’m going to put a vote in for like – Pitch? Did you think any of this through? When you took him?’

‘Did you?’ Sharpwood said, looking at Pitch curiously.

‘There’s parts missing to this story,’ Pitch said, leaning back against the couch – practically sprawling now – and tapping his fingers slowly against the back of the cushion as he looked Sharpwood over. ‘Isn’t there, Sharpwood?’

‘Oh,’ Sharpwood said. He tensed. ‘I suppose there is.’

Jack looked between them, and felt the weirdest sensation rush through him. Something like goosebumps and a shiver and remembering how the Tsar had compared whipping Jack to death with what Pitch did.
‘No,’ Jack said slowly, staring at Pitch.

Pitch didn’t look away from Sharpwood once.

‘Sharpwood likes me,’ Pitch said. ‘He doesn’t really care for any of us as we understand care, but he’s intervened on my behalf before. Haven’t you?’

‘Yes,’ Sharpwood said solemnly. ‘I suppose I have.’

‘Here’s what I’ve learned,’ Pitch said to Jack, looking at him briefly, before turning back to Sharpwood. ‘On Grisaille, there are not as many citizens who choose the darkness at initiation. It changes the way they think. Those who take it in, tend to become celibate, and Grisailleans in general are not particularly given to sex for pleasure in the first place. I didn’t know any of this, the first time we met, seeking to make diplomatic alliances. So I made overtures towards him. He rejected me, and that was it. So I assumed.’

‘I needed time to think about it,’ Sharpwood allowed.

‘Sharpwood means he needed a few years to think about it. Something else about those who take in the darkness on Grisaille… they become receptive to being told what to do. Don’t they, Sharpwood? Isn’t that why you’ve been such a good servant to Gavril for so long?’

‘Yes,’ Sharpwood said. ‘The darkness always surrenders to the light. Always.’

Jack was reeling. ‘You guys slept together.’

‘About once every decade or so, he seeks me out,’ Pitch said. ‘How do you think I came to learn his true motives in the first place?’

‘Does the Tsar know?’

‘No,’ Sharpwood said. ‘When I first came here, I told him that a few times a year I would need to leave and be with the darkness in order for my energies to stay charged. This is a lie. The darkness is in me always. But it gave me leave to take time away from him. On Grisaille, we took time to meditate, so it was already a part of what he understood of our way of life. He would have offered it, had I not asked, I think. The lie was necessary, and did not harm my being loyal to him. At least not at first.’

‘Surely…someone noticed…’

‘No,’ Sharpwood said. ‘I have been very sure. I am protective of my private life. I am not allowed much of one since I arrived here. I am practiced in the arts of subterfuge and deceit. It was why I thought it would be easy to repatriate the orb. But I am not a pilot. I did not think that through.’

‘Can you use your darkness to force whatever Gavril’s got inside of him just…out? Can’t you do that?’

‘No,’ Sharpwood said. ‘Living Darkness and Living Light are different to the light and dark Grisailleans take into themselves. I cannot interact with Living Darkness like Gavril can.’

‘Anyway, getting back to the point,’ Pitch said. ‘Sharpwood likes me. I’m about the only person on this planet he doesn’t want to see dead. What was it you called it? A debt beyond imagining?’

‘He’ll still kill you with the orb,’ Jack said pointedly. ‘Like, that’s the most romantic thing ever.’
‘Kozmotis suggested it,’ Sharpwood said. ‘If he wants something different, he will tell me.’

‘Wow,’ Jack said, glaring at Pitch. ‘So that whole thing about sometimes thinking about killing people in order to save them from something worse—’

‘No,’ Pitch said. ‘How many options do you think we have, Jack? Have you ever applied your mind to the immensity of the problem before us? Believe me when I say that the Golden Warriors dying and everyone else surviving is one of the better plans I came up with. The Guardians didn’t ever do much better. Do you really think no one will be sacrificed?’

‘But Seraphina—’

‘Will not be a Golden Warrior, and will survive us all,’ Pitch said calmly.

‘Yeah, unless Sharpwood decides to get revenge on Lune when you’re not there anymore, and you know, just kills everyone.’

‘That’s true,’ Sharpwood said.

‘Sharpwood,’ Pitch snapped.

Sharpwood blinked slowly a few times, then crossed his legs and was silent.

‘What magic protects the Tsar?’ Jack said. ‘And how long does your protection of him last? What are you even protecting him from?’

‘Because my people are slow to think and slow to respond, we have compensated with a magical ability that allows us to sense changes in the ether. This etheric sense I have shared with Gavril, and that allows him to be attuned to a very great deal. While he has this sense, he can never be taken by surprise, no attack will fool him. He has grown very dependent upon it. While he has other magic upon him to protect him, I believe he no longer remembers how to live a life without this sense. It will fade completely within a week or so.’

‘That’s… that could be a good thing,’ Jack said slowly.

‘Yes,’ Sharpwood said, nodding once. ‘For you and Kozmotis, yes, this is true.’

‘You could’ve told us that earlier?’

‘Jack,’ Pitch said, and Jack heard the censure there. Jack didn’t get it. But maybe it was because Sharpwood really just didn’t think like they did? And all the stuff Sharpwood had just left out, was it really because he hadn’t been asked directly about it? Was he really so passive? Was that why he was always so taciturn?

Except Jack figured he also just hated being a servant, even if he was good at it. He never seemed to like collecting Jack from anywhere. He was a Professor, he didn’t want to be on Lune, he was ordered around all the time, and once a decade he spent his spare time surrendering to Pitch. Sharpwood didn’t seem that sad about his life, but it was obvious he wasn’t happy, either.

‘We’ll need to talk with you more,’ Pitch said to Sharpwood. ‘Over the next few days.’

‘Of course,’ Sharpwood agreed.

‘Do you like The Tsar?’ Jack said, unable to help himself.

‘I admire him,’ Sharpwood said. ‘I am curious about how he contains the Living Darkness and
Light, and can make it do things no Grisaillean has ever been able to do. I am fascinated by his ambition. But no. I do not like him.’

‘Or me,’ Jack added.

‘Or you,’ Sharpwood said.

‘But Pitch is okay.’

‘Kozmotis is someone I like,’ Sharpwood said, looking faintly confused now.

‘Just… checking I’ve got everything in order. You were always pretty short-tempered with me. You seem nicer now.’

‘I am a captive and I have spent several days unconscious. I haven’t eaten. But I am here with Kozmotis, and he will make sure I know what to do while Gavril isn’t here. It is not in my best interests to offend Kozmotis by offending you. But if you wish, I can be short-tempered with you again.’ Sharpwood smiled a little. It was a cold, daunting expression. ‘If Kozmotis orders it, I will be very short-tempered with you.’

Pitch only sighed, rolled his eyes, and stood up. ‘I think we’re done for now. You may make yourself something to eat in the kitchen, but you’re only to stay on the first floor, and you’re not to leave for any reason. Feel free to read some of the books around here, if you’re interested.’

Sharpwood nodded. He looked around the lounge at the bookshelves. Jack floated off the chair, and saw the way Sharpwood’s eyes moved to him immediately. Jack stared back, but Sharpwood looked at the point where Jack’s feet weren’t touching the floor.

‘The orb was generous with you,’ Sharpwood said. ‘No wonder Gavril doesn’t like you.’

‘Neither do you,’ Jack said. ‘I’m pretty used to people not liking me.’

‘Yes,’ Sharpwood said, smiling a little. ‘So am I.’

‘Just quickly, do you know why the Tsar could listen to us in the mountain? During the initiation? How does he do that, if he can’t like…control the Darkness everywhere?’

‘Oh,’ Sharpwood said, eyes widening. ‘That’s complicated. I helped him. So he can’t do it anymore, now that I’m not there.’

‘Can you do it?’

‘I cannot do it without him,’ Sharpwood said, his eyes still wide. ‘He has an ability to connect with the Living Darkness that I do not, and I have an ability to sense the orb and – I have never understood it. We experimented for a long time, with our abilities. We amplified each other’s strengths and mitigated each other’s weaknesses.’

‘Except he expected you to spend most of your life drained, on his behalf,’ Pitch said quietly. ‘Didn’t he?’

‘Gavril likes to see how he makes people weak,’ Sharpwood said, nodding.

‘So you’re saying Gavril has no more reach in the mountain?’ Jack said, ignoring Pitch. ‘If you’re not there?’

‘Yes.’
‘And if we went to the mountain, he’d have no idea? Like, no…red flag system? No warning system?’

‘He’d only know if he was there, or if he was in the radius necessary to feel out the Darkness.’

‘Cool,’ Jack said. His mind was racing. But he decided to leave it there. He was still alarmed by the fact that Pitch kind of trusted Sharpwood while not really trusting him, that they’d slept together and apparently, Sharpwood was the one who liked to take orders – which sort of made sense but was also completely weird – and Sharpwood liked Pitch. But no one else. Except for people on another planet Jack hadn’t even really heard of until he’d started finding out about the origins of the Light and the Dark.

Upon which the entire foundation of Lune was based, and it was a lie.

*I’m not having a breakdown. I did that yesterday. I’m just…*

‘Cool,’ Jack said again. ‘Bye.’

He flew out of the lounge, through the kitchen, and raced up the stairs. He ended up in Pitch’s room – their room? Jack didn’t even know. He landed lightly on the chest of drawers, and then sat on it, a rush of thoughts making things too tangled. He couldn’t even focus on anything, he just stared ahead, trying to work out what he’d heard. There was something there… Was he just realising what everyone knew? Or was it something else?

He wanted to speak to the Guardians, even if he didn’t trust them. Well, he didn’t want to speak to Bunnymund, or even see him. But maybe North, and maybe…Sandy?

Where did Sandy fit in? How did he have the power of the Living Light? Was it even living? Or was it passive, like what Sharpwood had? And if that was the case, then could the priests amplify the powers of those with the Living Light?

He needed to speak to Sandy.

‘I should’ve just asked Sharpwood,’ Jack muttered to himself.

He didn’t even know if Sandy was still alive. They were still waiting. The twenty four hour window was closing on them, and with it, hope that anyone had escaped. Pitch and Jack had left on their own because they’d theorised that the Tsar would be expecting Pitch to step into the role of Admiral, as he had last time. Jack’s snow had headed off anyone who wanted to follow, and then the snow had fallen even without Jack’s assistance.

He felt antsy, and the calm he’d found the day before was gone.

When Pitch entered the room, closing the door behind him, Jack was banging his heels on the dresser.

‘I don’t get any of this,’ Jack said. ‘Also, the Guardians aren’t going to want to trust him, are they?’

‘They won’t trust any of us,’ Pitch said. ‘Sharpwood for obvious reasons. Me, because of my history with the Tsar. You, because of your age and your connection to me.’

‘We can steal the orb though, it’s doable right? Hey, how do the Priests of Lune get their powers? Is it Living Light? Or is it just…like what Sharpwood has? Because it’s different to what the Golden Warriors have, right? That’s… I mean I remember that in the hymns and history, but who
knows if that’s true. So you fucked Sharpwood, huh? Does he have a first name? I should’ve just asked him, right? Also why are we trusting him again? Like, just…I want to get behind that. I do. But talking to him didn’t sort of generate a whole lot of confidence in his motives or like…him in general.’

Pitch stopped and stared at Jack as he kept talking. Then, after a moment where Jack considered apologising, Pitch sat on the edge of the bed. He looked tired, and Jack wanted to give him something, pet him on the shoulder maybe, or do the kind of thing that people did for tired and super intimidating Admirals.

‘We can potentially steal the orb,’ Pitch said carefully. ‘It’s much more powerful than it used to be, and I doubt many people could touch it now, except for you and perhaps some of the other Guardians. I don’t quite know the nature of the Light that the Priests of Lune possess, and that’s… salient. We’ll talk to Sandy about it. Sharpwood has no first name. I trust Sharpwood less because of his motives and more because of his nature. It is not his way to execute plans of his own, for his own reasons, without the assistance of someone else. We already know the only plan he wants to execute is getting the orb back, he wouldn’t have even come to me on his own, if I hadn’t taken him. Even if he did think his chances were truly better with us.’

‘It’s…like… I’m not like going crazy, but I kind of am,’ Jack said. ‘All of this is- You and him are a thing, and like… Also everything I believed is wrong. All of it.’

‘Not all of it,’ Pitch said. ‘Lune is worth fighting for. Even if the principles of the Tsar are not. Matters with Sharpwood are complex. He’s not the type to want a relationship. I doubt he even knows what one is.’

‘Yeah, but-’

A shrill chattering sound – like an angry snow-swallow trying to chase something away from her nest – started up. Pitch leapt up, running across the room, and Jack felt his chest lock up in panic. He watched, tense and floating somewhere above the dresser, as Pitch opened up his pack, pulled out a metal box, and opened it.

A tiny, bright violet mechanical bird, accented in vivid green, flew out immediately, still making its chattering noise. Its small wings buzzed, its long beak opening and closing several times. Jack watched as it flew around the room, hovering briefly in front of Jack, before returning to Pitch.

Then, in a tinny rendition of Toothiana’s voice, it spoke:

‘Some expected delays but we arrived safely, everyone is accounted for, though can only…’ the voice became garbled, and when it returned, the clarity was better. ‘I can only vouch for ship two via continued communication as it hasn’t yet landed. We are well-resourced here and we are ready to begin strategizing, though we have faced several on-site chaotic attacks from the Darkness, they don’t seem to be Tsar-directed.’

Pitch had sagged back onto the bed as soon as he’d heard that everyone had been accounted for. He closed his eyes as the rest of the message continued, and Jack made his way over to the bed, kneeling by Pitch’s side, listening in amazement. Was this more of Bunnymund’s magic? Or North’s? There were several other tiny figurines in the box. A decorated pine tree, a rabbit, a crown, a golden star and a sword.

‘Give us…three days to make sure we weren’t tracked or followed. North has indicated that the boy has significant worth as a weapon.’
‘Great,’ Jack muttered. Pitch held up his hand to silence him.

‘Three days and then come to Stronghold Four. From there, we will mount rescues to the Asylums. There have been attacks in the City and attacks in the outreaches. The Tsar is saying…that betrayals of those close to him has upset the Darkness and—’ More garbled speaking, then another voice, but Jack couldn’t make out who had interrupted. There was too much static. ‘…More resistance in the City than we were aware. We have received your accounting. Will be in touch. Expect a direct communiqué from Seraphina as soon as ship two has docked. She keeps…’ More static. ‘…messages to us. For you. While I’m not particularly fond of running errands, if you and Jack have something to pass on to her, let me know. Keep it down to one sentence if you can. Respond within six hours. Advise on the timeline.’

The bird stopped transmitting voice and started twittering again, and then after some particularly musical chatter, its wings stopped working and it fell to the floor, where it bounced on the rug, like a toy.

Pitch stared up at the ceiling, placed both of his hands over his eyes. They were shaking, even resting on his skin like that. Jack stared at him, and then carefully placed a hand on Pitch’s chest.

‘She’s okay,’ Jack said.

‘They haven’t docked yet,’ Pitch said. ‘It means they came under attack.’

‘But she’s okay, and like…trying to send you messages.’

Pitch’s hands curled into fists and then flexed out again, as though he was consciously trying to make himself relax. Jack didn’t know what to do, and frost was inching out over Pitch’s clothing, making pretty, furling patterns over the black cloth.

Mounting a rescue to the Asylums. Did that mean they were going to break out Flitmouse? Was he still alive? Would Jack get to see him again?

‘She’s okay,’ Pitch whispered, staring up at the ceiling as he lowered his hands.

‘I’m just like…imagining her passing on messages to the Spymaster all the time,’ Jack said, smiling haplessly. ‘Like, there’s everyone else trying to pass on official messages and…’

‘…She probably stole it,’ Pitch laughed. ‘The communication device. She’s done it before. She finds them very novel. I once thought I’d misplaced North’s, and it turned out she’d taken it and was chatting to him every night before bed for a week. North never told me, because apparently it was ‘full of charm.’

Jack lay down beside Pitch and leaned into him.

‘It explained why she was so excited to retire early for that entire week,’ Pitch said. ‘I’ve learned that if Seraphina decides she wants to go to bed early, trouble is brewing.’

‘Yeah,’ Jack said. ‘No idea where she gets that from.’

‘Her mother,’ Pitch deadpanned.

‘That’s…not where I was going with that, but whatever.’

Pitch took a huge breath, and when he exhaled, it shook heavily. ‘She’s okay,’ he said. ‘He didn’t get to her.’
Jack nodded, and thought about how good Pitch was at hiding this kind of thing. How he’d talked
easily with Sharpwood, even smirked and lounged. How he’d flirted with Jack, and the day before,
how he’d listened and made sure that Jack felt… Jack didn’t really know what he felt – closer to
Pitch? Better about some of the things he thought? Like he mattered? Whatever it was, it was
terrifying, and he wanted more of it.

And all along, Pitch was this person too. The one whose voice shook and trembled. Whose hands
kept twitching, as though only now could he experience the fear he’d been holding back. Jack
realised why Pitch hadn’t been able to calmly explain to Seraphina why they had to be separated.
Why it had devolved into yelling. Because Pitch couldn’t stand it either.

They’d both just started throwing a tantrum at each other until Jack had intervened.

Jack studied Pitch, worried for all the things he missed, that he’d continue to miss.

There was no way he was going to watch Pitch sacrifice himself and the other Golden Warriors for
Lune. Pitch could talk eloquently about how necessary it was, but he could talk eloquently about
anything. Even things he was wrong about. Jack rubbed Pitch’s chest, feeling the shape of muscles
layered over his ribs, and thought that maybe there was a reason the orb gave him so much power.
Maybe it was because of Pippa. Maybe the orb wanted to do it. Or maybe it was to give him a
chance to see this through and make sure the people he cared about would make it.
The next morning, Jack flew downstairs and saw Pitch and Sharpwood eating breakfast at opposite ends of the table. There was only one frying pan, and they were eating scrambled eggs, which meant one of them had cooked for the other one. A third plate of scrambled eggs waited on the counter.

‘This is weird,’ Jack said, not even bothering to hide it. ‘This is really weird. He shot me with an arrow? And you’re cooking him breakfast?’

‘Tell him,’ Pitch said. ‘He’s right there.’

‘Yeah, he’s not the only one being weird actually, right now. Pretty sure you’re doing a super job of it. Like, I expect him to be weird.’ Jack sighed. He hovered over to his eggs and touched them with the tip of his finger. Still warm. He ate not so quickly that he’d burn his mouth, but quickly enough that he didn’t feel they were all some bizarre family unit.

Then he crouched on the countertop and ignored Pitch’s reproving look. If Pitch got to unchain the Tsar’s right hand man, Jack could crouch on a counter.

After Pitch was finished, he stood, took his plate to the sink and stared at Jack, unimpressed.

‘You’re a soldier,’ Pitch said.

‘I know,’ Jack said, smiling. ‘Your point?’

‘Soldiers do not…’ Pitch paused, shook his head, and after wiping his hands simply turned away. ‘I’ll be upstairs.’

Jack watched him go, and then stared at Sharpwood. He expected Sharpwood to return his gaze, but instead Sharpwood kept slowly, methodically eating his eggs. Every mouthful he chewed for far too long, and he never loaded up his fork until he’d swallowed. He looked wholly absorbed in the activity.

Once he’d finished, he placed his fork precisely in the centre of the plate, and turned to look at Jack.

‘If you want reassurance that I will not try to kill you, abduct you, or in some other way hurt you while I am here, I can give you that reassurance. Would you believe it?’

‘Would it be true?’
‘Yes,’ Sharpwood said.

Jack stared into those black eyes, thought that the darkness was just in him, even now. But Pitch trusted him. Or at least, trusted him in certain circumstances? Jack wanted to find it as easy as Pitch did. They’d both slept together! Jack wasn’t jealous, but he didn’t understand it. He could totally get behind Anton and Pitch together, even thinking about that was kind of hot. He could get behind Pitch and Eva, even though he couldn’t think about Eva in that way. But…Sharpwood? All Jack could imagine was Sharpwood standing there expressionless while Pitch touched him, followed by the image of Pitch then giving up and walking out.

But they’d liked it enough for it to happen for centuries. It might not happen much, but Sharpwood enjoyed it enough to keep coming back.

How could Sharpwood not care about anyone except Pitch? How did that even work?

‘Are you just not able to empathise with other people?’ Jack said. ‘Is that why you don’t care for anyone here except like, Pitch? Anyone not from Grisaille is just, what…nothing? Even children? Kids?’

Sharpwood stared at him, unblinking, for so long that Jack eventually looked away briefly just to cut the tension. He didn’t answer, and so Jack continued.

‘You don’t think kids, like I dunno, babies, from every place, deserve some kind of protection? Just because they’re small and vulnerable? You’re a Professor of Philosophy right? You must have had some thoughts about it, seeing how we live on Lune.’

‘Yes,’ Sharpwood said. ‘A nation that removes its small and vulnerable children from the ones meant to protect them and keep them safe. A nation that uses chemical agents to control the biology of its citizens to convince the small and vulnerable children that they exist for an abstract concept that was invented from nothing, and means nothing. I do have thoughts about it.’

Jack swallowed, and then eased down so that he was sitting on the counter. He moved his legs back and forth, his heels tapping against the cupboard. Sharpwood stared at him still, and Jack wished he could read his face, his expression. Even Pitch gave more away when he was doing ‘blank face’ and that was saying something.

‘A nation that removed the heart of another nation, because it chose not to believe that the small and vulnerable of other nations warranted protection,’ Sharpwood said.

‘You kind of sound like you don’t approve,’ Jack said, ‘but you helped Gavril steal it.’

‘I did,’ Sharpwood said.

‘And you’ve been his servant ever since. No one made you. No one made you leave Grisaille. No one made you steal it. Pitch didn’t seduce you here. You chose it.’

‘Yes,’ Sharpwood said. ‘I have made many mistakes, in my time. I will make many more.’

Jack felt strangely relieved, to hear Sharpwood talking about Lune the way he did. He talked without passion, but his words weren’t neutral. It was good to hear he had opinions about things other than just getting back to Grisaille.

‘I have made an inference,’ Sharpwood said. ‘You accuse me of shooting you with an arrow. Then you accuse me of lacking empathy for non-Grisailleans. Then you talk of children. Do you feel you are small and vulnerable?’
‘No,’ Jack said quickly. ‘I wasn’t talking about me.’

‘Interesting.’

‘I wasn’t!’

‘You are so powerful,’ Sharpwood said. ‘Do you not even see-’

‘You don’t get to play this game with me,’ Jack snarled, sliding off the counter and landing square on his feet. ‘You don’t get to talk about how I have all this ice and stuff, and build up that side of me, when you know that the Tsar disabled me with a fireplace, and you can both use your darkness to stop me from accessing my power. You know it doesn’t mean anything.’

Sharpwood blinked at him, and then frowned. ‘You can learn to bypass that.’

‘What?’

‘The quelling power of the darkness. The fear it inspires. How do you think Kozmotis was able to attack Gavril with the Living Light? If the darkness – even the Living Darkness – had the capacity to permanently incapacitate, it would be impossible. It’s not.’

‘I can’t even… I can’t even- I can’t…’ Jack stared at him. ‘I can’t even feel what the darkness did to me when I’m around you. Or him. I can’t even get to the feelings that let me make the offensive ice in the first place. Don’t you think I would’ve fought? With the Disciplinarian? You know I can’t do that.’

‘Kozmotis is not incapacitated around me.’

‘Yeah well he’s the Royal Admiral, isn’t he? He’s lived forever and he’s got all the experience. I don’t even know why I’m telling you this. Wait- That’s right, I see through you trying to build up my ego through telling me how powerful I am. I know I have a lot of ice and snow and crap, but I’ve never been able to use it around Gavril. So whatever strategy you’re playing, you can cut it out.’

‘You are paranoid,’ Sharpwood said, then tilted his head. ‘It is a fact that the orb gave you immense power. If you can use it or not is another matter. But I take your point. I can see why you see yourself as small and vulnerable.’

‘I never said that I see myself like that.’

‘You implied it.’

‘Well, I didn’t say it,’ Jack said stubbornly.

‘You could use it,’ Sharpwood said. ‘Instead you behave as though it is a truth you don’t want. That is strange. Gavril underestimates you, because in many ways you are like a child. Didn’t Kozmotis also underestimate you? Is that not what people do, when they meet you? Jackson Overland, I am currently bound to Kozmotis’ wishes, but one day people will tell me I chose this too. I am not using the darkness to attend Gavril. I am attending to you instead. If you have not realised how important it is to be underestimated in a war, it might benefit you to spend some time thinking about it. Also, you must learn how to bypass the quelling fear of the darkness. In all its forms. It can be learned. You don’t need hundreds of years to learn it.’

Jack stared. Because it all sounded really helpful, and it all kind of made sense. Was this the kind of thing Sharpwood would offer to the Tsar? Or to Pitch?
‘You’re different today,’ Jack said.

‘Today I have eaten, and I have considerably more freedom than I did yesterday, and I have had
time to reflect on my circumstances with a clearer head. Additionally, I am not a blank slate, just
because I do not communicate the way you do when asked direct questions.’

‘You’re helping me. Do you even think the Tsar can be defeated? Taken down? Do you think
about that? You know that if we can’t get rid of him, he’ll just fly back to Grisaille and take the
orb by force, right? Do you think he’ll let any of you live? If you’re changing sides, you have to
know that…this side can’t let him live. Pitch has never been able to defeat him. You think anyone
else stands a chance?’

‘Yes,’ Sharpwood said.

‘Really?’ Jack said.

‘I don’t like to repeat myself.’

Jack knotted his hands together. He did feel small and vulnerable sometimes, but he thought he had
pretty good reasons for that. Sharpwood had stood by and dispassionately watched one of those
reasons until Pitch knocked him out. He thought of his ice as inextricably tied to the darkness
inside of him. He’d not even begun to properly explore his relationship to it, he’d been too focused
on making the Light instead.

But they weren’t going to defeat the Tsar with the Light.

‘I’m not going to let you kill the Golden Warriors for that orb,’ Jack said steadily. ‘I’m not going to
let you hurt Pitch.’

‘I have given this some thought myself,’ Sharpwood said, looking down at his plate, finally
breaking the eye contact between them. ‘It occurred to me that I still do not have a pilot. I shall
need allies, to return to Grisaille. Does that help you?’

‘A bit,’ Jack said. ‘Yeah. Hey, could you…teach me? How to separate- how to…make my ice
properly, consciously, while I’m around you? So I could do it around Gavril?’

‘Yes,’ Sharpwood said, looking up.

Jack didn’t know if he trusted that either.

‘Why do you like Pitch so much?’ Jack said.

Sharpwood stared at Jack for a long time, and then his eyes drifted away. He didn’t reply.

‘It can’t just be that whole ‘darkness surrendering to the light’ thing, because there are a whole lot
of Golden Warriors and I don’t see you sneaking off to get laid with them. Or take orders from
them. Or anything like that.’

‘Kozmotis is very tired,’ Sharpwood said eventually. ‘He is bitter but proud. He is cruel but in a
kind way. And I am very tired. I am bitter but proud. I can be cruel. Though not in a kind way. I
think that were I still on Grisaille, with my people, in the right place, I would still enjoy his
company. As for the sex, it reminds me that even if I am not home, there can be times that feel like
home. Odd, given I never had sex on Grisaille.’

Jack’s mind raced. If Sharpwood wasn’t wholly loyal to the Tsar, and if he knew he’d made a
mistake bringing the orb over here, then he’d spent centuries living the consequences of that mistake and doing whatever the Tsar told him to do. Pitch, too, lived in regret, the things he’d done, the things he’d been made to do, carrying the weight of his mistakes and despairing that he would ever see the Lune he remembered. A sharp pang in Jack’s chest to think of it then, the two of them, the things Sharpwood and Pitch had in common, and worse, how much hurt Pitch had. Did Sharpwood feel it too? Was that his whole experience of Lune?

Did it just hurt for years on end?

‘Do you mind that Pitch has sex with other people?’

‘No,’ Sharpwood said, shaking his head once.

‘Did you ever…see Pitch possessed by the Darkness? Like the Living Darkness?’

‘Yes.’

‘And when- And after? Did you ever see him when he came out of it? Did he really have no memory of what he’d done?’

‘The first time, Gavril wasn’t certain how much he’d remember, and nor was I. Gavril told him in great detail what had happened. Then Gavril bade me to stop Kozmotis from killing himself.’

Jack looked towards the doorway, towards the staircase. Then he looked up at the ceiling, to where he thought Pitch might be. He felt colder than usual, just to think about it. Jack would bet money that no one else knew that, except Pitch, the Tsar, and Sharpwood. His breath was caught up in his chest, tangled up in a knot. Jack couldn’t really understand it. He’d been so exhausted he’d wondered if death was a better option, but he’d never tried to do anything about it. If he gave it enough time, he would always find something worth living for.

What did Pitch have to live for, before Seraphina was born? Slowly, Jack looked down and wondered if Pitch found the same things in Sharpwood, as Sharpwood found in Pitch.

‘If we give you the orb, if we find a way to make that work… You’ll go back to Grisaille, and you won’t see him again.’

A very faint shift in Sharpwood’s expression then. Not quite happiness, not quite longing, and Jack didn’t know how to interpret the slight lines at the corners of Sharpwood’s eyes, the tiny smile he could see.

‘Yes,’ Sharpwood said. ‘I am looking forward to the day when my time with Kozmotis will be a memory, and Grisaille is my present once more.’

It answered a lot of the questions Jack had, a lot of his suspicions. He felt himself settle, and for once without the help of that sleep serum that he was using to get a full night’s sleep. Nightmares still came, but they were easier to shrug off, and since he and Pitch were resting in the same bed, Jack didn’t want to constantly be waking him. Just because he could wear clothing again without feeling the whip striking him, didn’t mean everything else had magically disappeared.

He wished it would.

‘Okay,’ Jack said. ‘Cool. I guess. I’m gonna…go upstairs now.’

‘I shall be reading in the living room,’ Sharpwood said, managing to make ‘living room’ sound like some alien destination instead of just…the next room.
Jack turned his staff a few times, thinking he should say something else. Instead, he left, floating back up the stairs.

When he got to the landing, he drifted down so that his feet met the floor. Walked past the other rooms, towards the one right at the back that he and Pitch occupied. The door was closed. Jack knocked on it with the staff, and it swung open only a few seconds later. Jack couldn’t tell what Pitch had been doing, there was only the notepad he used in its traditional position beneath the lamp, and his pack was closed.

‘Hi,’ Jack said.

He’d still not really gotten the hang of what he was supposed to say. Or if he needed to knock before coming in. But Pitch stepped backwards, and Jack walked in, thinking that he was surrounded by weird, taciturn people.

Jack blinked when Pitch’s fingers curled around his staff. He opened his mouth to protest, even as it was moved out of his grip and tossed onto the bed.

‘Hey, what-’

The door thudded as he was pushed against it, and Jack stared up in shock, heart beating faster as Pitch leaned down and brushed his lips over Jack’s. His mouth was warm, his breath was warm, and Jack opened his mouth to it, only for Pitch to tip Jack’s head back with the hand not pinning him to the door. Pitch licked beneath Jack’s jaw, and then bit into the sensitive skin, Jack’s breath hitching.

Pitch reached into his pocket, drew something out, and then pressed closer with his whole body – keeping Jack in place while freeing both of his hands. Jack felt a little dazed, and then stiffened when he felt the strip of cloth descend over his eyes. A blindfold?

‘Um, you-’

‘What are the words, Jack?’

They were doing something now? Sure, things had been revved up the day before, but then conversations with Sharpwood happened and Jack had sort of forgotten all about it. Mostly. He did spend some of the night aware of Pitch’s warmth and wanting to press himself alongside Pitch in a way that wasn’t subtle. The serum stopped that from becoming anything more than Jack sleepily pawing at Pitch’s side before he fell asleep again.

‘Shadow to stop,’ Jack said. ‘Lumen to slow down.’

‘Oh, very good,’ Pitch said, and Jack could hear the smile in his voice. He shivered.

‘Sharpwood’s downstairs,’ Jack said. ‘He’ll hear.’

‘Will he?’ Pitch said, his fingers moving to the ties of Jack’s frost covered cape and undoing them slowly. ‘Will he hear you mewling for me, do you think? Are you shy, Jack?’

The cape fell to the floor. Jack didn’t know what to do with his hands, and pressed them to the door. Pitch was unbuttoning Jack’s embroidered vest. It was all clothing Flitmouse had made for him. The uniform for Jack Frost, not training clothes. Three heavy buttons popped through navy blue brocade worked in silver and pale blue. Pitch carefully slid it over Jack’s shoulders, encouraging it down, until it fell from Jack’s hands.
'Not in a mood to answer my questions, hm?' Pitch said, his voice low.

‘You’re- I thought you’d be working.’

‘I was,’ Pitch said.

The bottom button of Jack’s navy shirt was undone. Then the next. Jack was reminded of the first time they’d done anything like this. Pitch had Jack up against the wall. It did things to him, being crowded like this, but he couldn’t stop thinking of Sharpwood downstairs. He would’ve heard the thud. He’d know.

‘But Sharpwood,’ Jack said, his voice weaker than before. Pitch’s hands had slid beneath the shirt, broad hands resting on the expanse of Jack’s stomach. Fingertips rubbed softly at his skin, and then dug in hard and pushed him even harder against the door. Jack turned his head, couldn’t see, hoped he didn’t look stupid. It was getting hard to control his breathing. ‘He’s going to hear.’

‘Some of it, yes,’ Pitch said warmly. He leaned in, his voice by Jack’s ear. ‘Is that such a problem? You don’t want him to know how good I’m about to make you feel? He very likely won’t care.’

More buttons were undone, until Pitch could smooth apart the sides of his shirt and trail his hands from Jack’s collarbones to his waist. Jack shuddered, tried to remember that there was something important…

‘How much privacy do you think we’re going to have, from here on in?’ Pitch said directly into Jack’s ear. It made it hard to concentrate on anything at all. ‘How much privacy do you think exists in a safehouse? Any safehouse? What do you think they’re going to hear? You find it terribly hard to stay quiet, and I must say I quite like it, the idea of others knowing what I can reduce you to, when you spend the rest of your time giving me lip.’

A hand between Jack’s legs, cupping him. Jack could feel the warmth immediately, leeching into him, melting the cold inside of him. It made him feel weaker, but maybe that was everything else too. Then Pitch’s hand tightened, slowly. Jack opened his mouth to groan at the increased friction, and then gasped roughly as the sensation crossed over into something uncomfortable.

‘Pitch,’ he whispered.

‘No,’ Pitch said at the same volume, except when he spoke, it sounded way more sinister. ‘That’s not how you address me at times like this, is it?’

‘S-Sir?’ Jack said, and then stood on his tiptoes, trying to ease the pressure. It wasn’t outright pain, but there was an ache. Jack thought of Sharpwood saying that Pitch was cruel, in a kind way. He thought of Sharpwood downstairs. Then, Pitch’s hand tightened a fraction more and Jack bit down on the cry that sounded in his throat.

Pitch eased the grip, and then moved his hand away, and Jack tilted his head back as the sensations shifted in his cock, in his balls even. He locked his knees, thinking Pitch was about to do something else to him. When nothing happened, Jack wished he could see the expression on Pitch’s face. He could feel Pitch’s eyes on him.

‘What do you want, Jack?’

*You? Is fucking on the table? Can we just put Sharpwood outside on a chain or something?*

‘Um-’
‘How is it,’ Pitch said, tracing his fingernail down Jack’s chest, ‘that you can run your mouth endlessly the rest of the time, but when I ask you a simple question, you give me nothing?’

Jack’s head moved down, like he could see Pitch’s finger reaching his pants, even though he couldn’t. Then, it slipped between skin and fabric. Pitch lowered his hand and deftly undid the fastening. Pitch’s hands made him feel tiny. He wasn’t tiny. But something about Pitch being tall, and intimidating, and the Royal Admiral…

‘You don’t even know your appeal,’ Pitch said. ‘Anton would give anything to be a fly on the wall, right now. Or Eva. Sharpwood won’t care, but there are others who might even press their ear to the door, if they knew. But they don’t get to see the expressions you make. Or hear the way your breathing changes. Or know that the impetuous firebrand becomes sweet and obedient in seconds. I’m sometimes curious to see how it would differ, were it Anton, or someone else. Would you yield to them as easily? Or do you save that for me?’

There were times when it was easy to talk back to Pitch, and other times where words vanished and Jack was left standing there, Pitch’s hands on him, thinking that he hadn’t actually come for a really long time. Not when Pitch teased him the day before. Not the time when he’d given Pitch the blowjob. Jack didn’t know what he wanted though. He’d enjoyed everything they’d done. He didn’t even know what they could do here.

Pitch dragged one of his hands up Jack’s torso, then caressed his thumb over the blindfold. Jack’s mouth opened. As though reading it as an invitation, Pitch’s thumb moved down and slipped into Jack’s mouth, pressing down on his tongue.

Jack sucked on it absently. His hips canted forward, and Pitch pushed him back into the door. Jack made a sound of frustration. Sharpwood was downstairs, sure, but it was becoming less important. He probably really didn’t care. And Pitch was weirdly into it?

When Pitch removed his thumb, Jack said:

‘What can we even do?’

Pitch hummed as though amused, and began to rub Jack’s sides, the motions half-soothing, half-stirring. Jack swallowed, could taste the salt from Pitch’s skin in his mouth, remembered other things they’d done and felt weak to consider that they might be able to do those things again. Mostly though…

‘Will I get to come this time?’ Jack said.

‘Do you want to?’

‘No, Pitch, I hate it. No one in the right mind would ever want to- mmph.’ A hand over his mouth, and Jack’s nostrils flared on a sharp breath.

‘Yes, very funny,’ Pitch said, in a way that made Jack feel about two inches tall. ‘But what if I take your sarcasm seriously, Jack? What if I make-believe you hate it? Is that what you want?’

Jack shook his head hurriedly, though the movements were stilted with Pitch’s hand pressing his head back against the door.

‘I thought you wanted to be good for me,’ Pitch said, sounding disappointed then. ‘In the past, you’ve always listened, obeyed, at least to the best of your ability. Now I think you’re treating it like a game.’
Jack shook his head again, growing alarmed that Pitch would stop, like he did the day before.

‘I think you’ll call me Sir,’ Pitch said, his voice growing colder. ‘Any time you have something to say, so that you’ll remember that I might be cruel enough to take your sarcasm seriously and never let you come again.’

Jack nodded, eyelashes fluttering against the blindfold. He was still hard. He thought he might even be harder than before. It wasn’t fair.

‘And I think you’re going to make a serious effort to answer my questions, aren’t you, Jack?’

Jack nodded again, meekly pressing his tongue to Pitch’s palm.

‘Because I don’t like to fuck immature upstarts,’ Pitch purred against Jack’s ear, ‘and I certainly don’t like to let them come. So have a good think about what you want today to be, because I will just as happily send you on your way. Understand?’

Jack nodded sharply, swallowing, his breaths fast against the top of Pitch’s finger where it brushed against the underside of his nose.

‘There,’ Pitch said quietly, his tone changing again. ‘That’s better. Are you going to be good for me now?’

Pitch eased his hand away.

‘Yes, Sir,’ Jack said shakily.

For all that it was scary, there was something grounding about it. Something that helped him move from…whatever headspace he’d been in before, to something more focused. It was intimidating, not just being around Pitch, but having to slow down, having to be more present in his body, his surroundings, in the way Pitch demanded at times like this. But it slowed down the thoughts that tumbled over in his head, and he felt himself calm a little.

Though not much, given he was half-undressed and had a blindfold on and still had no idea what was going to happen.

‘Let’s try this again,’ Pitch said, sliding both of his hands around Jack’s wrists and drawing him away from the door. Jack stepped uncertainly, knew they were heading towards the bed, but seemed to have no proper sense of where everything was. ‘Do you want to come?’

‘Yes…Sir.’ The Sir was weird. Not bad, but weird. It highlighted how he was supposed to talk to Pitch every day and didn’t. It made him aware of how much respect he was supposed to award Pitch’s position, and despite worshipping him for so long, he didn’t. It made him want to be better.

‘Good,’ Pitch said, his voice softer. ‘Sharpwood downstairs, he is going to hear. Unless you’re very quiet, and I won’t want you to be. Is that a problem?’

‘Um,’ Jack said, stumbling a little. Pitch moved closer then, made sure that Jack didn’t fall. How far away was the stupid bed? ‘I…don’t think so? But I’m going to try and be quiet, Sir.’

‘You do that,’ Pitch said, sounding smug. Jack’s cheeks grew warmer.

Pitch turned Jack so he was facing away from Pitch and grasped his shoulders from behind, then took the open shirt and removed it, dropping it to the floor. Jack felt his knees bump up against the bed, then Pitch’s hands flat on his naked back. He tensed in alarm, unable to parse that Pitch was
just touching his scars.

‘Wait-’

The hands didn’t move, and Jack had to force himself to stop from bending forwards to escape the touch. His whole body locked up. A flash of anger, because he should’ve expected it, that was chased by fear and doubt and some other huge emotion that reminded him that Pitch was the only one allowed to do this, and Pitch understood what he was doing, the gravity of it, and that was why he did it. He played with the idea of saying ‘lumen,’ and then decided to wait and see what happened.

‘Do I have to keep calling you Sir?’ Jack said.

‘Yes,’ Pitch said calmly. His hands still didn’t move. They were so warm. Didn’t Pitch hate it? Resting his perfect hands on all that ugly skin and scar tissue?

‘I don’t like this, Sir.’

‘I know,’ Pitch said. ‘But I do.’ Pitch’s hands moved up to the top of Jack’s shoulders, and pulled him back until Jack was leaning against Pitch’s chest. Then he moved one of his hands between them and touched the scars at Jack’s lower back, where the skin still felt normal. In fact, it only felt normal now, because Pitch had healed him in the first place. There was no imagining what scars Jack would’ve had otherwise, though there was no real chance he was supposed to survive the wounds Bunnymund inflicted on them.

‘You wear your strength here,’ Pitch said, his head ducking down beside Jack’s, so that Jack began to feel increasingly surrounded by warmth. His fingers danced up to some of the worse scars, before moving back down to his lower back. ‘All those times you were forced to endure something you should never have been made to endure, all those times you healed and told no one about it. But I like that you also wear your weakness here too. The way your breathing changes, your shoulders hunch. All those memories etched into your skin. You don’t like any of us seeing that, do you?’

Jack shook his head. Eventually, thinking that he should, he managed a weak: ‘No, Sir.’

‘Only the worst criminals have scars like this, after all. The rapists. The murderers. The ones who only just missed out on going to an Asylum, because the Tsar would rather keep those people in society than those who speak their minds.’

It wasn’t a question, so Jack didn’t answer. He had a suspicion this wasn’t meant to turn him on, which was good, because it really wasn’t. But he was still captivated by it. Like Pitch was weaving him into some kind of spell, disarming all these other parts of Jack, before they did anything more.

‘Here you are,’ Pitch continued, ‘and you’re mine, aren’t you, Jack?’

Jack bit his bottom lip, even as Pitch’s hands moved down and grabbed his hips hard enough to ache.

‘Yes,’ he whispered. ‘Yes, Sir.’

Pitch grasped Jack’s wrists and moved his arms behind his back, crossing the wrists and gripping them with one hand. Then, he pushed Jack down, pressing into him at the same time, so that Jack’s chest hit the bed hard. His head turned to the side automatically, his shoulders aching, excitement thrumming through him.
With his free hand, Pitch dragged his fingers over the seam of Jack’s ass, through his pants. Then he tapped none-too-gently at the side of Jack’s thigh, making him remember what it had been like to be spanked there. Jack shifted, spread his legs a little.

‘I had planned to take my time with you,’ Pitch said speculatively. ‘But I’m beginning to think I want to know what the second time is like, when you’re sore and tired, yet still yield to me. What do you think?’

Jack was finding it hard to concentrate. He was stuck somewhere around the words ‘sore’ and ‘yield’ and the grip that Pitch had on his wrists. His cock was hardening again.

‘I think…uh- Sure, Sir. Whatever you- Whatever…works.’

‘Excellent.’

Keeping his grip on Jack’s wrists, Pitch side-stepped, opened a drawer and picked up some items. They landed on the bed. Then, Pitch moved behind Jack again, lifting Jack’s arms carefully and lacing rope around his forearms and wrists, binding them together. The rope was strong, but wasn’t the kind of stuff that would be used on a ship. Jack wondered if Pitch had packed it especially, but he got distracted by those repeated loops, each one moved precisely into place, Pitch’s fingers checking the tightness.

‘You are to tell me if you get tingling in your arms or fingers,’ Pitch said firmly.

‘Yes, Sir,’ Jack said.

‘This is very nice,’ Pitch said, pausing to stroke his hand gently through Jack’s hair. ‘You’re being so obedient now, aren’t you? Who would have guessed? It’s lovely.’

Jack shivered, pressed his lips together. Pitch went back to securing Jack’s forearms, his wrists, then with both of his hands freed, he slid his arms beneath Jack’s torso, lifted him onto his tiptoes, and roughly pulled Jack’s pants and underwear down to his ankles. A touch at his right foot, his left foot, and Jack lifted one at a time so Pitch could remove his pants completely.

Then, Jack was naked, face forward on the bed, arms tied behind his back and blindfolded. He knew his staff was somewhere on the bed too, could almost sense it out, but he couldn’t touch it. Absently, his shoulders and arms shifted, and he realised that even though it hadn’t felt too tight, he really couldn’t move.

Pitch’s hands touched him generously – his thighs, the curve of his ass, his lower back, his sides, his shoulders, even sneaking underneath his forearms and finding all those cold-hot-wrong places where his nerves couldn’t interpret sensation properly. Pitch never stayed anywhere very long, seemingly doing it for his own satisfaction. At one point, one hand pushed hard into Jack’s lower back, while the other grasped Jack’s neck and pushed down, Jack grunting softly and squirming a little.

It was impossible not to imagine Pitch holding him down like that, while fucking him. Jack’s impatience grew, but he kept quiet, silenced by the way Pitch touched him.

Pitch knelt behind him, grasping his hips again, and Jack’s forehead furrowed. Then his eyes flew open behind the blindfold when he felt Pitch’s breath between his legs. His toes curled into the ground, he gasped before Pitch even made contact, and then he turned his head and pressed his mouth against the blanket when he felt Pitch’s thumbs press into the rise of his ass cheeks and spread them. If he had his hands free, he would have covered his head, and his fingers twitched and
The first touch of Pitch’s tongue started at his perineum, then moved smoothly upwards, and Jack squeaked and his arms jerked, his back arching as he tried to get enough room to free his mouth so he could suck down a breath before pushing his face back into fabric again. It was...he didn’t know what it was. It was good. It was somehow too much and not enough at the same time, even as Pitch repeated that long, languid stroke. There was no ounce of body shyness there, Pitch obviously had no issues with it, but he was still wearing all of his clothing and Jack was rubbing his face against the bed and thinking that it’d be really nice if he felt less embarrassed because by the Light, it was good.

He moaned thinly when Pitch scraped his teeth at the base of Jack’s spine, sucking hard on the skin there, and then he spread Jack even wider and began lapping directly over Jack’s entrance.

Jack absently did something with his arms – some jerk or twist – that hurt, and he tensed and then couldn’t relax when it was chased by the sinuous pleasure of what Pitch was doing. The Royal Admiral, rimming him. Him!

It all made him dizzy to contemplate, and he’d gotten so hard that he ached with it. He tried to stay quiet, but couldn’t help but press faint whimpers into the bed, his hands opening and closing.

The tip of Pitch’s tongue, pushing inside of him. It seemed impossible that something soft and wet could feel so intense, but Jack swore that it was getting hard to remember to breathe. And when Pitch started fucking him with his tongue – Jack spread wide enough that his sensitive skin felt stretched and stung – Jack’s whole body went rigid, his hips pushing forward into the mattress.

Pitch withdrew his tongue, planted a wet kiss there, and then dragged his lips down and licked at sensitive skin before drawing one of Jack’s balls into his mouth. At that, Jack’s head snapped up. He gasped for several breaths, then groaned into the bed. Quiet. He had to be quiet. It was becoming impossible to remember why. Especially when he felt the hum of Pitch’s quiet, self-assured laughter against his body.

When Pitch drew back, Jack wanted to beg him to keep going, to never stop. His arms kept shifting in the ropes, though they stopped at once when Pitch kneeled up and touched one of his hands with two fingertips.

‘You’re very tense,’ Pitch said. Jack could hear the smile in his voice. ‘Wouldn’t you be...happier, if you simply expressed yourself?’

Jack turned his head to the side, his feet shifting on the ground. He could feel Pitch’s saliva there, warm and wet between his legs, and it was slick and intense and promised more. It was so tempting to make some quip, but instead:

‘You don’t...think I’m already expressing myself, Sir?’

A finger pushed into him, and Jack cried out, not expecting it. Without lube, the saliva was enough to ease the way initially, but Jack could feel the way his skin grabbed at Pitch’s finger, the friction of it. Pitch withdrew a little, then pushed deeply enough that Jack felt the rest of Pitch’s hand against his ass, pushing into his skin.

‘Do you think Sharpwood heard that?’ Pitch said.

Shit. Shit, shit, shit. It's not hot. There’s no way that’s hot. He’s just- Nope.

‘No, Sir,’ Jack whispered.
‘No? That sound you just made? I think he heard it.’

‘You said he didn’t care. Ah…Sir.’

Pitch’s finger curled inside of him and Jack shuddered. Pitch’s other hand rested against the curve of his ass, and another fingertip from the other hand prodded idly where Pitch’s index finger was sunk deep. Jack thought how Pitch had said he wanted to take his time but wasn’t going to, so what in the Darkness was this?

‘No, he really doesn’t,’ Pitch said. ‘But perhaps I like the idea of showing you off to others. Ah, you see, you weren’t the only one who imagined what we’d do, and you’re not the only one who has fantasies.’

Jack was half paying attention to what Pitch was saying, but more distracted by how warm he was beginning to feel alongside the antsy, frustrated feeling of wanting more, and not knowing if he could handle more.

Pitch withdrew at once, and Jack’s knees wanted to buckle. Instead he pressed himself against the bed, catching his breath. So…Pitch had a thing for showing him off? Displaying him? But everything he’d done so far had been totally private. Jack knew what that was like though, fantasies about things that might not become reality. For some reason he hadn’t expected Pitch to be the same.

Didn’t Pitch just do everything he wanted to do?

Jack tensed, hearing Pitch undo the fastening of his pants, the sound of lube being slicked on skin. It was happening. It was actually going to happen. Jack’s hands clenched into fists, then relaxed, then tensed again.

Pitch had once asked him if he was a virgin, and Jack had made some joking response and it’d never really come up again. Jack’s experience of sex before now had been handjobs, frotting and blowjobs, because he never wanted Crossholt to catch him with a dick up his ass, pretty much ever, and it was hard enough to find the time to get someone off in the first place. Handjobs were the fastest, the easiest to hide. Blowjobs were still fast, but harder to brush off as something else. Someone kneeling in front of someone’s dick was pretty much a dead giveaway.

He wondered if Pitch knew. If Pitch even cared. Jack just knew that he wanted it, but now that it was about to happen and he couldn’t move, he realised he was a little apprehensive. It wasn’t helped when Pitch reached for something and then lifted Jack’s hips, stuffing the pillow beneath his belly, so that Jack’s feet no longer touched the floor.

‘Um,’ Jack said. ‘This…’

Pitch standing behind him, pressing his cock – like a hot brand – against his skin, as big as Jack remembered from when he’d had it in his mouth. Not trying to enter him yet, just painting slickness against his ass.

‘Anything to say?’ Pitch purred.

‘You know I haven’t done this, ah…’

‘Haven’t you?’ Pitch said. His hands smoothed up Jack’s sides, until he could bury both of his hands in Jack’s hair. Jack bit his lower lip. It was hopeless to try and control his breathing. He could feel Pitch’s war coat, the black one with the embroidery along the edges, brushing his legs. ‘I thought it was tons of people.’
‘About that…’ Jack said, laughing nervously as Pitch stroked the back of his head, the back of his neck, and then moved his hands and pressed his knuckles down into the base of his spine, which had the side effect of pushing Jack’s cock half into the pillow, half into the bed.

‘Are you nervous, Jack?’

‘I mean…’ Jack pressed his forehead against the bed, and tried not to laugh again.

Pitch leaned over him. ‘I like it when you’re nervous. If you wanted to be deflowered by someone who was going to shower you with the petals of a sun-rose, you certainly didn’t set your sights wisely now, did you?’

‘Uh huh,’ Jack said into the blankets. He didn’t want that. He’d never really wanted that.

‘You’ve been asking me to fuck you for some time now.’

Jack turned his head to the side. ‘Yeah, maybe it’s just been built up into something that’s- Like, y’know when you’ve been waiting for something for so long, and then you get it, and then you’re disappointed so-’

Jack’s words strangled off when Pitch shifted swiftly, one of his hands leaving Jack’s back and then Jack’s eyes widened behind the blindfold when he felt Pitch’s cock pressing against him.

Pitch moved forward, and Jack’s mouth fell open. It wasn’t like there’d been a ton of preparation, and the stretch was sharp. Jack wanted to plant his feet, brace himself, but instead his toes could only scrape against the ground.

‘Tell me afterwards,’ Pitch said, ‘if this is disappointing for you.’

The head of Pitch’s cock bullied its way into him, and Jack’s forearms chafed in the ropes. He felt like he was hanging in the moment, senses locked into what was happening. Pitch keeping Jack’s back in a sharp arch even as his hips were lifted by the cushion, the ropes holding his arms tight behind his back and the way his shoulders ached now, the black in front of his eyes that made him see the pings of white and red firing off in his body. The sharp ache that was Pitch inside of him, and how Pitch had said that he’d wanted Jack to be sore.

‘That’s not even as cold as I thought it would be,’ Pitch said, almost to himself, except the tone was teasing.

Then he withdrew what must have been a tiny amount, but for Jack it felt huge, stealing his breath. He gasped, then cried out when Pitch pushed deeper, the ache pushing further inside of him.

Pitch’s movements weren’t rough, but they were sure. His hips rolling forwards on each stroke, finding more space for himself each time. The fingers of the hand not at the base of Jack’s spine now playing over the hypersensitive skin where Pitch was entering him, making Jack all too aware of that stretch, even as Jack felt heavy and full already.

He absently tried to stay quiet, but it was impossible. He turned his face into the blankets and cried out as Pitch went past the point that his fingers could reach. Except Pitch kept rocking into him, and Jack’s shoulders shook, he thought that he’d not really expected it to be this intense even though he’d always known it was going to be intense.

They were in a safehouse, it was Pitch, and somehow – up until this point – Jack had sometimes wondered if Pitch would ever do this with him. If he even wanted to. Which was absurd, because it wasn’t like the other things they’d done hadn’t been amazing.
Jack was sharply aware that this was edging towards too much. Not enough preparation, only *just* enough lubricant, and he knew Pitch did it all deliberately. Wanted Jack on that edge of…whatever Jack was on right now, where everything was sharp with edges of pleasure and pain, turning his body into something that Pitch owned.

He trembled, one of his legs kicked up absently, and Pitch only grasped Jack’s ankle and bent his leg until the heel of his foot touched his hip. Leaned in, pushed deeper. It made Jack feel even more out of control, and he keened into the blankets.

When Pitch was seated inside of him, when the fabric of his clothing sandwiched tightly against Jack’s ass, Jack didn’t even feel like he could settle then. He breathed around the hugeness of it, the grip that Pitch had on his ankle, the heavy bruising pressure of knuckles at his lower back, and Pitch’s cock inside of him – thick and dominating, warming him from the inside out – making him feel like he only existed for this moment.

‘And here I thought you’d kick up more of a fuss,’ Pitch breathed. Jack moaned thinly. ‘No? Perhaps you’re just contemplating the profundity of how disappointed you are?’

Pitch’s hips ground into him, and it wasn’t like Pitch could get deeper, but it turned out his cock could move when it was already lodged that deeply. Jack made a thick, helpless sound and Pitch laughed quietly behind him.

‘Do you hate it, Jack?’ Pitch said, his voice sleek and sure and far too composed given Jack was falling apart. The hand at his ankle let go, and then slipped beneath them, touching Jack’s balls, then finding his cock, which twitched as Pitch stroked what wasn’t pushed against the bed. ‘Hm? Jack? Have you turned *shy* again? You’ve stopped answering my questions. Are you so disappointed you can’t speak?’

*Note to self: don’t tease Pitch before he fucks you. Not once. Ever again. Don’t do it.*

‘I suppose if you aren’t going talk to me, I must find another way to communicate with you.’

Pitch withdrew only a couple of inches, then shoved back in, and Jack’s breath was forced out of him. He cried out belatedly, as Pitch began fucking him like that – short, almost vicious movements where he hardly withdrew. It was an ache deep inside of him. Like being spanked past that point of wanting more, except his cock throbbed and he could feel the heat of it curling through him, spreading itself to the corners of his body, until he swore he was exhaling warmth.

Pitch’s hands shifted, grasped Jack’s hips, drew him up even higher. The strength of it would’ve taken Jack’s breath away, if he wasn’t already fighting for air. Pitch’s thrusts lengthened until he was nearly pulling all of the way out, and Jack couldn’t keep shouting into the blankets, because he needed to *breathe*. Every time Pitch pushed now, he was sliding right over Jack’s prostate, the feel of it sharp and too much and somehow perfect at the same time.

Nothing more was said, after that. Jack wanted his arms free to scrabble at the blankets, to clutch at something more than air. He could hardly tell what sounds he was making. Tension wound up tight inside of him, he wanted a break, he wanted it to keep building him up until he came without a hand on him, which definitely wasn’t something he usually did. He’d beg, except he couldn’t form words.

After a couple of minutes of Jack becoming increasingly wound up in what was happening, whimpering, eyes stinging from overstimulation, Pitch paused deep inside of him.

‘I think,’ he said, finally sounding breathless, ‘you’ll get to come the second time.’
Jack made a desperate, fraught questioning sound.

_The second time?!_

‘Oh, does that sound too unfair?’ Pitch purred, rubbing Jack’s hips with his thumbs.

‘Pitch,’ Jack managed.

‘Not ‘Sir’ anymore?’

‘Please.’

‘The second time,’ Pitch said. ‘Unless by any chance you happen to come in the next few minutes, and then I’ll give you a gold star and everything.’

Jack began to gather together a pathetic argument in his favour – it would’ve mostly been indignant begging – when Pitch began to move again. These movements rougher, harder, and Jack’s gut twisted itself up into knots over the mix of sensations it stirred. It seemed like Pitch was stroking his prostate every second, the stimulation turning to a tense pleasure-pain inside of him.

All his life, Jack had needed a hand on his cock in order to come. He wasn’t one of those people who could just dry hump a pillow until he brought himself off – he’d heard stories of other people doing this and had no idea how they managed it, or _why_ they bothered when they could just touch themselves. But this was different. Pitch had said Jack would come the second time, but he hadn’t discouraged Jack from coming this time either.

And as Pitch’s movements picked up in pace again – Jack shouting in response, he realised that it was going to be enough. The friction of Pitch’s thrusts, the near-constant pressure against his prostate, the fullness of it all, like the only thing he’d ever had to do in his life was find a way to fit all of Pitch inside of him.

Bright lights pinged off like tiny fireworks behind his eyelids, his eyes squeezing shut, tears leaking free. He was so close. He was stupidly close. The same thing that had tipped him over during the spanking was somehow happening now, building and expanding in his gut, his balls, the base of his cock.

Jack focused on it, turning his head at the last moment and screaming weakly into the blankets when he knew he was going to come, that point of no return before the spasms started.

Pitch fucked him through it, made a soft, appreciative sound as Jack clenched around him from the waves of his release. Jack came over the blankets, the pillow beneath his hips, and Pitch didn’t even slow down, prolonging it, keeping Jack in an overwrought space he didn’t have a name for.

Then, as Jack began to come down from it, _everything_ feeling raw and whimpers breaking out of his throat as Pitch was relentless behind him, he shuddered violently. Nails scraped over the curve of his ass and he moaned, then opened his eyes behind the blindfold when he felt the unevenness in Pitch’s movements.

Jack wouldn’t say he loved it, that minute or so where Pitch was hammering into him and Jack had already come, but he didn’t hate it either. There was something spellbinding about being made to experience this, those hands holding him in place and Pitch’s breathing turning rough. He pushed his forehead into the bed and bit his bottom lip hard as he clenched his ass around Pitch’s cock. A flash of soreness, but Pitch cried out then, the sound hoarse and startled.

Pitch bucked several more times, then pressed deep, and Jack knew he was coming and thought
about Pitch’s general reluctance to come around others and didn’t even care about the aches and soreness. Pitch kept hold of one of Jack’s hips, and his other hand came up and grabbed Jack’s hair, pulling it tight, lifting his head up from the blankets so that Jack had no choice but to spill his tight, laboured breaths into the room.

A minute later, the grip at the back of his head turned soft, stroking his hair, ruffling it once, before both of Pitch’s hands came up to work at the knots at Jack’s arms. When Jack couldn’t stop his hands from shaking, Pitch paused, stroked Jack’s fingers. Jack’s hands were clammy, but Pitch’s were too.

‘You did very well,’ Pitch said quietly, and those words undid something inside of Jack’s chest, his exhale shuddering out of him. Pitch’s voice was way more strained than usual, and Jack hoped it meant that Pitch was still feeling it, because Jack was.

The ropes came away as swiftly as they could, but given the complexity of the ties and loops, it still took some time. Enough time for Jack to realise that he was sore and wrung out.

‘Are we…really going to do this a second time? Like, soon?’

‘Oh yes,’ Pitch said, pushing his hips forward even though he had to be oversensitive.

‘But that was…’

‘Disappointing?’

Pitch gently moved Jack’s arms so that they could rest on the blankets. But not before pressing a kiss against the back of Jack’s right hand.

‘Not the word I was going to use.’

‘Feeling well-used, are you?’ Pitch said, rubbing his hands over Jack’s shoulders.

Jack made a wordless sound of agreement, and then blinked rapidly as Pitch undid the knot of the blindfold and removed it. The whole room was too bright. Jack blinked at the pattern on the blanket, even as Pitch traced fingertips over Jack’s wet lashes.

‘We’ll rest first,’ Pitch said. ‘But you’d best expect to be staying in this room for most of the day. I’ve waited far too long, myself. If you think I don’t want to know what you’ll sound like, sleepy and sore and mine, then you’ve measured my character wrongly.’

Pitch slid out of him, and then pulled the pillow free, and Jack’s feet touched the ground again. He could see his staff on the bed in front of him. Could feel Pitch’s release leaking out of him, still hot. He was so warm now.

‘Yours,’ Jack said absently, thinking that Pitch had put his finger on one of the things Jack liked about all of this. After a minute though, he tensed, and Pitch – who had been turning down the bed – moved and placed a careful hand on Jack’s lower back.

‘We’re going to get you into bed,’ Pitch said.

‘I’m a mess. Shouldn’t I like…go…clean up?’

‘Should you?’ Pitch said, fingers moving until they could trail through the mix of lubricant and come. Jack’s eyes widened as Pitch painted it over Jack’s skin.
‘You…you like it?’

Pitch laughed slow, repeated the motion, touching sensitive skin in the process and Jack was unable to hold back the groan that followed. He then leaned down and pressed his entire clothed body to Jack’s back, probably making his own clothing messy in the process. Pitch’s mouth and nose rested against the back of Jack’s head, his warm breath moving strands of his hair, warming a patch on his scalp.

‘I enjoyed that,’ Pitch said. ‘And you? It seemed you did as well.’

‘It was intense,’ Jack said, his breathing still not back to normal yet. ‘Is it always like that?’

‘With me? Very likely. Did you want to say either of the words at any point?’

‘No,’ Jack said.

‘Excellent. All right, let’s get you under the covers, mess and all.’

‘Because you think I can move. Nice.’

It turned out Jack didn’t really need to move himself at all. Pitch stripped off efficiently, and then slid his arms under Jack’s and lifted him up onto the bed properly, laying him down and sliding into bed after him. He turned, picked up a glass of water, offered it to Jack, who took several sips before it was placed on Pitch’s side of the bed once more.

Pitch gathered Jack up into his arms, and Jack thought that once, Pitch would have turned him out of his rooms, and Jack would’ve had to deal with this part on his own. He was so glad that wasn’t happening anymore. He would never have been able to handle this otherwise. As it was, he still worried it somehow wasn’t good enough, even as Pitch had said it was enjoyable, that Jack had done well.

‘You’ve had sex with so many people,’ Jack said, his voice soft. ‘It’s hard to- It’s hard to think you’d enjoy yourself with me.’

‘Yet I did,’ Pitch said, sounding sleepy.

‘I can’t believe I came.’

Pitch chuckled, his chin resting on the top of Jack’s head. ‘Aren’t you tired?’

‘I just…this part is still weird.’

‘The part where I hold you?’

Jack nodded, didn’t know what to say. Pitch said it so boldly, like it was a normal thing. But really, Jack hadn’t experienced moments like this very often, and almost all of them had happened with Pitch. It made him feel fragile and contained at the same time.

‘I quite like this part too,’ Pitch said. ‘I should never have deprived us of it in the beginning. Obviously, I should never have done that to you. But it turns out I did myself a disservice too. I like having you close to me. It’s like I’ve caught my own bastion of hope. Someone like you – perhaps you should be with someone full of wonder and sweetness. But instead you come and join me in this strange darkness of mine, and make it something of light.’

Jack closed his eyes, smiled to himself. Sharpwood called him bitter and cruel and tired. But Pitch
was so much more than that.

‘You give me that too,’ Jack whispered.

That was strange, but it was true. There was something of balance in the way Pitch could play his emotions and body like a conductor, ruining him with pleasure and pain before bringing him back to himself. And it never felt tired, or cynical, or bitter.

‘Really?’ Pitch said, after a long hesitation. The word far more naked than those he uttered in smug, self-confidence.

‘I mean it helps that you’re not turfing me out of your room anymore,’ Jack added.

Pitch sighed, his arms tightened around Jack, and Jack lay his ear to Pitch’s chest and listened to it beating. Not quite slow, not quite steady, as though Pitch found his nervousness as Jack found sure ground inside of himself.

‘I hate this war,’ Pitch said slowly. ‘I hate that it’s taken so much time away from us. But I would never have met you, without it.’

‘Also there’s like a younger version of me that is super excited right now that I got laid by the Royal Admiral,’ Jack said, flashing a grin even though Pitch couldn’t see it. ‘Like, you know, there’s that.’

‘Ah, yes, always happy to please a fan.’

Jack giggled, unable to help himself. He felt tired, but also a little giddy. He pressed closer to Pitch and closed his eyes, realising that he would be able to sleep. He was messy, sweaty, his body much warmer with the blankets containing Pitch’s heat against him. It felt good.

‘I love you,’ Jack said, the words coming easily and costing him nothing, which was distantly surprising. Pitch tensed beneath him. ‘You don’t have to say it back.’

Pitch didn’t say it back, only held him close until Jack knew he was going to fall asleep. But Jack didn’t mind. Pitch’s actions spoke loudly enough anyway, when Jack chose to pay attention.
He was warm, but it was delicious to be overheated like this. His body ached, but it was welcome somehow, and he shifted in tiny movements to feel it beneath his skin. He groaned softly when he surfaced from a deeper sleep to the sensation of Pitch gently kissing the back of his neck, and went lax when he felt teeth scrape just beneath his hairline. One of Pitch’s hands had grasped Jack’s side and pulled him insistently back – so that Jack’s spine was against Pitch’s chest, so that his ass was against…oh.

Jack made a questioning sound, because he was still sticky, and naked, and sore. Pitch had said Jack was well-used, and he felt it. But he couldn’t help but angle his hips back into Pitch’s pelvis, sleepily biting his top lip to feel Pitch hard against him. *Pitch* didn’t feel sticky, which probably meant he’d gotten up at some point and cleaned himself up.

‘Round two?’ Pitch said, his voice just a rumble against his skin.

‘I’m kind of…’ Jack’s voice was a bit of a mess, like the rest of him. He didn’t open his eyes though, he didn’t do anything except let Pitch move him around, because it felt dreamlike, and the soreness had an edge of luxuriant pleasure to it. That he could fall asleep feeling the way he did, wake up feeling like this, and Pitch was still there. He sighed out a long, relaxed breath. ‘Mmkay.’

He stayed quiescent as he heard Pitch reach for the lubricant he’d brought with him. It didn’t seem like Pitch wanted Jack to do much anyway. Pitch’s nose moved into Jack’s hair, his breath so warm. Jack’s entire body – but especially his back – had taken in that heat, and it was like he was somehow Jack Frost and Jackson Overland at the same time, two halves united.

The lubricant was cold as Pitch pressed it between his legs, moving with a kind of familiarity that made it seem like they’d done this many times before. Jack winced as Pitch stroked it over his entrance, everything felt tender and swollen. Two fingers pushed inside of him, and Jack’s back arched, a broken sound falling from his mouth.

Pitch only made a pleased, low sound and rolled Jack forward onto his stomach, one thigh slipping between Jack’s legs and keeping him open.

‘Good morning,’ Pitch said, sounding devious and evil and too pleased with himself. Jack’s mouth was open on ragged breaths just from the feel of those fingers, those slow twists and turns, the way Pitch would press his fingers deep, then pull them back enough that his fingertips could play at stretching Jack’s hole.

‘Sore?’ Pitch whispered.

Jack only laughed, because Pitch knew the answer to that. It wasn’t like it’d all been sweetness and gentleness the night before. It’d been *amazing*, and it’d been full of sensations and feelings bigger than Jack had names for, but sweet?
‘You’re an asshole,’ Jack said, his voice muffled.

‘Mm. I know,’ Pitch said.

Some shifting, Pitch’s fingers withdrawing, and then more cold lubricant being pushed into him. Jack realised how much his body had warmed up, because the lubricant did feel cold. He shuddered into the bed, his cock going from vaguely interested in the events all the way to crushed against the sheets at an awkward angle and it still feeling good.

Pitch pushed his fist down between Jack’s shoulder blades – over his scars, rude – and Jack wanted to say it was super unnecessary, but he was focusing on breathing around the way Pitch played his body. It wasn’t comfortable. Like Pitch wanted the pleasure to have a sharp edge, or the pain to confuse his senses. One of Jack’s hands came up and clutched at the pillow, his forehead moving across it, even as his legs spread wider.

It seemed like only a minute or two had passed before Pitch withdrew his fingers and was pushing the head of his cock into Jack. And Jack’s legs tensed, his breath stuck in his throat, because even though Jack still felt kind of open from the night before, his tender skin protested the stretch, and he whined.

Pitch hushed him, a long syllable that was somehow both soothing and mocking, and Jack’s fingers dug harder into the pillow and his other hand raked into the sheet.

‘That’s it,’ Pitch said, pushing deeper. ‘That’s good, Jack.’

Jack didn’t really know what he was doing that was so good, as he writhed beneath Pitch and one second decided it was too much and the next decided it was fine, it was fine, because it was so much more on top of what he’d already had that it didn’t matter if he couldn’t contain it. He just wanted to let it wash over him.

Pitch’s breathing was heavier now than it had been the night before. He sounded undone already, as though doing this so close to waking had stripped him of his usual barriers. So he groaned as he thrust forwards, and he hummed out an amused sound as Jack whimpered beneath him. One of Pitch’s hands kept Jack’s hip still, pushing it into the mattress. The other moved from Jack’s shoulder to the back of his head, alternatively stroking his hair and then fisting his fingers into it, keeping a tight grip.

‘Pitch,’ Jack breathed, half-complaint, half-appeal.

Whatever it was in Jack’s voice, Pitch hips began deep undulations that made Jack feel the whole length of him. Root to tip, before Pitch pushed sharply back in again, followed by that slow withdrawal. They both ached. But Jack already wanted to come, tossed away the part of his mind that didn’t quite understand why he liked this, because didn’t he already know that he did? Wasn’t that the only thing that mattered? He liked that it was almost unbearable, he liked that Pitch wanted this and Jack could give it to him, he liked it on an entirely selfish level where his nerve endings could be made to do so much, and he would still be breathless with wanting to come, with feeling that heavy, thick pressure relentlessly glide over his prostate.

The rhythm shifted, picked up speed, and the painful edge became impossible to ignore. Jack didn’t know what to do with his hands. He almost thought he’d push Pitch away, but instead his fingers came up and tangled in his own hair, and then linked up with Pitch’s fingers, holding onto him.

Pitch gasped behind him, and Jack made a noise of agreement, because that just made it all so much more. Jack remembered telling Pitch that he loved him – he’d really done that? – and the
way Pitch was holding onto Jack’s fingers now. Jack didn’t care what Pitch thought about it, he knew Pitch felt something too. Almost love, actual love, something to the left of love, it didn’t matter. It was enough.

Jack held on for the rest of it, letting Pitch do what he wanted. Jack couldn’t even get his hips to move, Pitch’s legs spreading Jack’s too wide, and Pitch’s weight leaning low enough to keep Jack pinned and open. Jack could only gasp and whimper through it, unable to care about the noises he was making. There was only the endlessness of Pitch inside of him, mastering him, owning him.

Pitch’s rhythm turned uneven only briefly, then he thrust hard, and Jack almost choked on his breath to know that Pitch was coming inside of him again. It was dizzying.

Jack was stuck somewhere around a scratchy, overheated arousal, and a sore, insistent ache inside of him, when Pitch rolled Jack back to his side and got a hand around his cock, stroking him off with a brutal insistence that forced loud cries from Jack’s throat until he came.

Lips moving across the side of his neck, the underside of his jaw, the outer curve of his ear. Pitch’s breath warming him, even soothing him. Jack was shaking, he had no idea when that had started.

‘So,’ Jack said, his voice even more of a mess than before. ‘Ow.’

‘My favourite part,’ Pitch said happily.

‘You have so many favourite parts,’ Jack said.

‘I really do,’ Pitch agreed.

Jack winced as Pitch withdrew from him, and then stiffened when two fingers slid back into the hot, slick mess of come and lubricant, plunging deep inside of him.

‘Okay,’ Jack said warningly.

‘A little patience, please,’ Pitch said.

Then, Jack’s eyes opened in disbelief when he felt the warmth and brightness of Pitch’s Light, inside of him. *Inside of him.*

‘No,’ Jack said, incredulous, ‘you are not-’

‘Tch. So ungrateful,’ Pitch said.

‘You are not using the healing Light on my- on…in… I mean, come on.’

‘One would think you didn’t want to feel better,’ Pitch said, as the aches and soreness began to fade, Pitch’s fingers withdrawing. He pinched Jack’s ass cheek, a sharp sting, and then petted him gently. ‘As I said, so ungrateful.’

‘I didn’t even know you could do that,’ Jack said in amazement. ‘By the Light, I’m so sticky. This is so gross.’

‘It’s glorious,’ Pitch said, laughing. He slid out of bed and turned back the blankets in a single, cruel move that had Jack burying beneath what was left. He was tired. It didn’t matter if his ass wasn’t as sore anymore – or not sore at all – because of what Pitch had just done. He was sleepy and he wanted to keep resting. ‘Rise and shine, Jack. The early bird catches the Tsar, or- frankly, I don’t really care. You can invent your own proverb that you like the sound of more.’
‘You’re cheerful,’ Jack grumbled, as Pitch pulled all the blankets off the bed with a flourish, leaving nowhere to hide.

‘Oh no,’ Pitch said drolly. ‘I’m cheerful. How terrible. I happened to have a very fine evening, and a rather pleasant morning. Also, I think you may wish to take a shower.’

‘Really?’ Jack said. ‘Me? A shower? I’d never have guessed.’

Jack yelped when a hand descended sharply on his backside.

‘Hey!’

‘Shower,’ Pitch said crisply. ‘Or I’ll spank you enough that Sharpwood will eventually come and investigate the noise, and I won’t stop.’

Jack mumbled syllables into his arms that ended with the words ‘the worst’ and then forced himself to get up. He found his staff on the side of the bed, where it must have ended up at some point, and then waved it vaguely in Pitch’s direction and floated towards the bathroom, snickering to himself when Pitch said:


Jack turned on the taps in the shower and yawned hugely, got a look at his face and rubbed at his hair, which had decided that vertical was the only style that mattered. A shower. A shower and then a weird breakfast where he’d have to think about the fact that Sharpwood definitely heard them. Jack groaned softly, but admitted to himself that he still had a warm, indulgent feeling that he’d never had before, and he kind of liked it.

*  

Sharpwood didn’t bring it up. He ate the oats made with warm water, sugar and spices quietly, focusing on every mouthful. Jack looked between him and Pitch, and sometimes swung his legs back and forth while eating, thinking that at some point this had started to feel kind of normal. Also, maybe it was bizarre that Pitch had just lit up his butt like a street lamp, but it was nice to not hurt now. Because he was pretty sure if Pitch hadn’t done that, he’d hurt.

‘Sharpwood said he could teach me how to use the ice and stuff while I’m around him, so that maybe I can do that around the Tsar? Is that for real?’

‘Hm,’ Pitch put his spoon down and looked at Sharpwood, who hadn’t paused in any of his behaviours, and yet somehow looked like he was paying total attention to what was happening. ‘Did Sharpwood explain to you how he’d do this?’

‘Nope.’

‘It will involve induction, and hypnosis,’ Pitch said. ‘And Sharpwood would need to lead it.’

‘Yeah… Okay, maybe we’ll just skip that part? The whole part. I’ll find another way.’

‘I don’t think it’s a bad idea. A lot of the other methods I’ve tried just to help you access your Light haven’t worked or have been unduly traumatising. And though you didn’t enjoy my springing induction on you, it was effective. You are very susceptible to hypnosis. And I would be there, to make sure nothing was happening that shouldn’t be happening.’

Sharpwood put down his spoon, finished chewing, and then swallowed. Then he scowled at the
both of them.

‘I am trying to eat.’

Jack stared in shock. Pitch sighed. Sharpwood looked between the both of them and then went back to eating, and Jack wondered if the Tsar had to put up with this as well. It was hard to imagine.

‘All right,’ Pitch said, standing up and pushing his chair in. ‘Jack, let’s go for a walk.’

Jack stood, taking up his bowl, and watched Sharpwood for a few seconds longer, before putting his bowl in the sink and following Pitch.

*

The sky was overcast and grey, but Jack didn’t think it was going to snow or rain. The trees around them quivered needles and leaves in the wind, and Jack and Pitch walked down a well-trod deer track, winding through the forest around them. It was wide enough that they could walk side by side, and Jack wondered if it meant that they were the larger deer that they used to talk about in the creche. The ones that lived in the deep forests and were hardly seen.

He had his staff pointing forwards, untrusting of the scenery. Pitch seemed unbothered. Maybe North’s safe-houses really were just…safe.

‘Sharpwood does not enjoy multitasking,’ Pitch said. ‘Especially when eating.’

‘He really doesn’t care about what we did like, last night and this morning, does he?’

‘He really doesn’t,’ Pitch agreed.

‘And this whole…induction thing? You really think I should do it? With him?’

‘Jack, where do you think we learned how to do it in the first place?’

Jack’s steps slowed, and then he jogged to catch up to Pitch’s faster, longer stride. He looked up at Pitch, and then dragged his staff along the ground, staring at the floor. After a minute, he realised he didn’t have to walk at all, and he lifted up above the track, amazed at how easy it was. The winds were like quiet friends, always there.

‘What was Lune like before the Light and the Darkness?’ Jack said. ‘What did we have before then? Everything is... I can’t even imagine. Like, the hymns, the psalms, the sacred words, the hypnosis, the- I mean everything. What was there, before?’

‘We believed in spirits in the land,’ Pitch said quietly. ‘We were already a rather superstitious race, so perhaps that made it easier to pick up what the Tsar and his team created. The costuming helped. We already had priests and systems of worship and ritual. A lot of it was assimilated. That side of things I think Gavril expected to go worse than it did, but it was one of the smoother transitions. There are still some people in the outreaches who still have habits that hearken back to the old ways.’

Jack waved his staff to clear the path a bit more for Pitch.

‘Is that like...how I remember being told not to anger the king stag, because he’ll curse your legs with weakness?’

‘Yes, exactly,’ Pitch said.
‘I thought it was just like, you know, if you make the stag angry, he’ll come chase you down until your legs are weak.’

‘That’s how most people think of those things now. They come up with some explanation, and forget that we ever cursed by the King Stag instead of the Darkness or the Light.’

‘Do you remember it all?’

‘I was never very spiritual,’ Pitch said. ‘So I didn’t embrace it all even then. I was…pragmatic, and concerned with being the best. I didn’t have time to propitiate the land, unless I thought it might help me through an exam.’

‘But it wouldn’t have been- you weren’t training to fight the Light, were you? You were training to fight other nations.’

‘Yes,’ Pitch said. ‘That was how it went back then. Our drills were designed to help us in armed combat with others. We have remnants of it in the training now, but only remnants. It’s one of our greatest weaknesses. The Tsar’s guard are trained in armed combat against people, and the Golden Warriors are trained against the Darkness. We…lack practical experience in war. Against nations. People. Eva and I have worked to develop new drills, or re-employ old drills when we’re away on assignment, but it’s not the same as regular practice.’

That didn’t sound promising. It might also go some way to explaining why the first resistance didn’t work very well. Jack had always wondered, but it was true, a lot of their movements in drills were designed to be used in concert with the Light, while battling the Shadows. Jack remembered Pitch’s emphasis on sword combat in the beginning, how Pitch had constantly been knocking Jack to the ground. Was that also because Jack’s drills just…weren’t suited to what Pitch did? Was Pitch trying to show him even then, how unsuited Jack was to combat with another person?

‘Will you consider hypnosis with Sharpwood?’ Pitch said. ‘I won’t leave your side. He knows the techniques as well as – if not better than – any of us. Gavril and I stole them from Grisaille, after all. Sharpwood is a Professor. He does know what he’s doing when it comes to this.’

‘Have you…have you done it with him before? I don’t like hypnosis. I go- I can’t watch what I’m saying. I say stupid things.’

Pitch stopped walking and turned to Jack, grasping his shirt and pulling him closer.

‘Nothing you say during hypnosis is stupid,’ Pitch said soberly. ‘Nothing. Vulnerable or raw, yes. But not stupid.’

‘I don’t want to say stupid things around him.’

Pitch rolled his eyes, and pulled Jack down until his boots touched the ground. Jack was about to grumble about being Lune-bound once more, but the words vanished when Pitch gently wrapped his arms around Jack’s shoulders and held him close. He kept waiting for Pitch to say something, but Pitch didn’t say anything at all, and eventually Jack leaned into the embrace, blinking past Pitch’s arm, thinking this was all very strange. It reminded him of when Eva had done it, and told him that Jack should take family where he found it.

It was weird.

‘This is weird,’ Jack said.

‘I know,’ Pitch said. He didn’t let go, and Jack awkwardly reached around and returned the
embrace with one arm. That was kind of nice. Jack could feel the strength in Pitch’s back, through his heavy coat. He patted it absently, and then squeaked when Pitch’s arms drew him closer. There wasn’t much closer left.

‘It’s not bad though,’ Jack added.

‘Shh,’ Pitch said, and Jack pressed his lips together, deciding that this was probably not the time to just awkwardly make statements until everything was over and felt normal again. He had to fight with himself for several seconds, he wanted to make some stupid jokes, some quips, and eventually all of that died away and he heard the sounds of the forest around them – the wind, the birds in the distance, the creaking of branches – and he felt Pitch’s body against his, tall and warm and strong.

Jack took a breath, sighed it out. He closed his eyes.

No, this wasn’t bad at all.

They stood like that for several more minutes, until Jack was idly stroking his fingers along Pitch’s spine, and he was leaning harder into that weight that didn’t move and just…accepted Jack’s presence.

Then, Pitch drew far enough away that he could look down at Jack, and ghosted his hand over Jack’s hair, before stroking his knuckles down the side of Jack’s cheek.

‘You said you loved me last night, do you remember?’

Jack nodded. Of course he remembered. ‘I also said it was cool if you couldn’t say it back.’

Pitch winced. He nodded. ‘I can’t,’ he said. ‘But I will.’

Jack supposed asking ‘When?’ would be a bit unhelpful. He’d meant it when he’d said that Pitch didn’t need to say anything at all. Hearing that Pitch would though, that was… What did that mean? That Pitch didn’t feel it yet, but he knew he would? That he felt it now, but couldn’t say it?

‘I’ll try it,’ Jack said. ‘The hypnosis with Sharpwood. I’ll try it. But I’m not making any promises.’

Pitch smiled, drew Jack back into the embrace. Jack leaned into it. If he didn’t know any better, he would’ve said there was something sad on Pitch’s face then, but he didn’t understand why that would be, so he just closed his eyes and took what was on offer, trying to focus on the warmth and the cold forest around them once more.

* *

They sat outdoors, which surprised Jack, but Pitch said he wasn’t bothered by the snow, and Sharpwood seemed unbothered by any sort of physical privation, whether it was starvation, captivity – as false as it had been, he’d still stayed in that armchair for hours – or otherwise.

Within a small clearing, surrounded by tall trees that hung their canopy over them, Sharpwood sat cross-legged in front of Jack, and Pitch sat behind him, close enough that Jack could feel his warmth. He even had one hand on Jack’s side, some protective gesture maybe. Sharpwood didn’t seem to care.

‘Close your eyes,’ Sharpwood said, his voice quiet, but still firm. Jack hesitated as Sharpwood stared unblinkingly at him, but then he considered what Pitch had said, what Sharpwood had offered to do. There was no way Pitch would just let Sharpwood ransack his mind or do something crazy. Or no crazier than Pitch had done, anyway. Jack shivered, but then closed his eyes, knotting
his hands together in his lap.

‘There is a circle,’ Sharpwood said quietly, ‘perfectly formed. In the centre, a flame of light, small or large, but perfectly in the centre. Can you see it?’

The words were familiar, but not identical to the ones he’d heard as a child, as a teenager, from Pitch. They were more descriptive, easier to fall into, and Jack felt his chest rise and fall more evenly, his breaths come more deeply as he began to imagine the circle. The flame in the middle was golden bright, and while it was small, it gave off a steady, constant light. He could trust it.

He could trust that light.

‘He does fall deeply,’ Sharpwood said, and Jack made a faint humming sound of acknowledgement, but didn’t know if the sentence was meant for him.

‘There is a circle,’ Sharpwood said again, his voice that same evenness as before. ‘The flame in the centre, a boundary to the circle, and all that space in between. All that space in between. As you contemplate it, you begin to fall into it. When I tell you to go deeper, you shall begin to fall, safely, softly, but fall all the same. Do you understand?’

‘Yes,’ Jack said softly.

‘Go deeper,’ Sharpwood ordered.

The sensation of spiralling down rapidly to some point, knowing the landing would be soft, anticipating it, and a heavier relaxation falling into him. All the while, Sharpwood spoke, reiterating every step. The circle, the flame of light, the boundary, the space. Every time he said the words ‘go deeper,’ Jack would descend more than before, until his awareness of the forest and winds vanished, until he couldn’t tell who was behind him, and only felt that point of warmth at his side as though from a distance. Even Sharpwood’s voice would have disappeared, if Sharpwood hadn’t told Jack that he could still hear it, floating so far from everyone and everything.

Where he was safe and soft and falling.

‘Well done,’ Sharpwood said, his voice coming through cotton wool, but clear somehow all the same. ‘You are a master, aren’t you, falling like this. Every time I say go deeper, how you have mastered the space, the flame, the circle.’

Jack sagged backwards into a strong weight that didn’t shift, and didn’t think of anything at all. If he’d had any concerns about how quickly he fell into induction or hypnosis, he’d left them behind the moment he’d started to fall. This was far more than anything Pitch had asked of him, reminded him of his earliest years in the creche, when he’d craved this blissful emptiness and looked towards induction sessions the way others might look towards berry season.

‘Well done,’ Sharpwood said again. ‘Now you will look inside yourself for something else. The ice abilities you have. Can you find them?’

‘Yes,’ Jack said. He could always find them. They were the reason he was cold. That was how he knew he had them.

‘Now you will manifest them for me. Make a sharp point of ice for me, Jackson.’

Jackson.

Jack could feel his ice, but he couldn’t draw it forth. He couldn’t make the sharp point. It was
uncomfortable to try, but he didn’t feel ashamed. Wheeling in space, it was hard to feel anything at all.

‘I’m trying,’ Jack said eventually.

‘Well done,’ Sharpwood said. Jack relaxed, distantly wondered why he couldn’t make it, but tried not to think about it very much. ‘I am going to ask you what you’re afraid of, and you’re going to tell me one thing. It can be a very small thing. Very small. You will feel nothing but softness and safety when you tell me, for the circle contains you, and the flame is your guiding light. Do you understand?’

‘Yes,’ Jack said.

‘What are you afraid of?’

‘That you’ll make fun of me. Or think I’m stupid.’

‘You told me two things, how generous. Which is the smaller fear?’

‘That you’ll make fun of me.’

‘I promise that I shall not make fun of you for anything you reveal here. You are so soft, and so safe, that you believe me, don’t you, Jackson?’

‘I want to,’ Jack said.

A pause, and then Jack heard the instruction to ‘go deeper’ once more, and Jack couldn’t have imagined that he could feel more comfortable, more okay, but by increments it happened. He was breathing more deeply now than he could remember, and when Sharpwood began to speak again, Jack felt as though his voice came across a very great distance. Still, every word was clear, and Jack understood him.

‘You want to learn how to make your ice around others, whenever you wish, don’t you?’

‘Yes,’ Jack said. ‘And my Light.’

‘Then we shall do both, because you are capable, and can achieve anything in this space. You can even trust me, can’t you? Just in this space. Not outside of the circle or the light. Just now.’

‘Yes,’ Jack said, thinking that it should never have been hard. Of course he could trust the voice. It had led him into this space in the first place.

‘Well done,’ Sharpwood said. ‘Now, you can let go of fearing that I will make fun of you for this, can’t you? For someone who is trustworthy would never hurt you like that. Would they? Do you trust me?’

‘Yes.’

‘Then let go of the fear that I will make fun of you.’

Jack did. He could hardly feel it in the first place. One moment it was there, the next it was gone. It was nice to let go of it. He couldn’t remember why it had bothered him. No one was going to make fun of him in this space, no one ever had.

‘Now, I want you to reveal another fear. This one slightly larger. What are you afraid of?’
‘Hurting you,’ Jack said.

‘You cannot hurt me while you are in this space,’ Sharpwood said patiently. ‘You could never hurt me. I am taking care of you, and taking care of you means taking care of myself, which means I would never let you hurt me. I wouldn’t be able to care for you then, would I? Therefore, you cannot hurt me. You can let this fear go, can’t you, Jackson?’

‘Yes,’ Jack said.

He didn’t feel lighter after letting that one go.

‘Now show me your ice. Form it into a sharp point.’

Jack tried, but it wouldn’t move. He tried again, but all he could feel was the coldness of his body.

‘I’m trying,’ he said, in response.

‘What are you afraid of?’

And so it went. Sharpwood would ask him what he was afraid of, Jack would respond, and he would be reassured and asked to let the fear go. Some of the fears were tiny – he was afraid the weather would get bad, he was afraid the ice would ruin his clothing – but some of them were larger and they didn’t always feel good to let go.

He still couldn’t make his ice.

Finally, they reached a fear that Jack was reluctant to say, despite Sharpwood saying it would be easy to reveal.

‘It won’t do anything,’ Jack said.

‘You’re afraid that your ice won’t do anything? What does that mean? Search for the fear beneath that. I know you can.’

Jack searched, stumbled across the huge thing before he’d even realised what he’d found. It had been lurking at the bottom of so many of the other fears. He was grateful for the warmth behind him, and grateful for the safety of the space he was floating in, but he still spoke in a small voice when he said:

‘I’m helpless. I can’t do anything.’

‘That might be true sometimes,’ Sharpwood said contemplatively, ‘but here in this circle, by the light of the flame, floating in safety, you can do anything at all. Jackson, you will let go of the fear of being helpless when I tell you to go deeper. Won’t you?’

‘Yes,’ Jack said.

‘Go deeper.’

He felt it then, not just cold, but ice, and crystals of sharpness inside of him, and malevolence, and darkness, and he hissed and stiffened, his fingers splaying, as he tried to control it. He wasn’t helpless. He could control it. So he wasn’t helpless, but-

‘Jackson,’ Sharpwood said patiently, ‘I want you to form your ice into a sharp point for me. Now.’

A single point. A million points. It didn’t matter. It would be a relief to let go of it. He knew he
couldn’t hurt Sharpwood. He knew he wasn’t helpless. He knew Sharpwood wouldn’t make fun of him or hurt him or that he wouldn’t ruin his clothing. He knew. The darkness inside him was terrifying, but he had an order, and he wanted to follow it.

So he did.

A boom shook through the ground around him. A crunching, rushing sound that made the flame in the centre of the circle gutter before burning strong once more. The warmth at his back disappeared. Jack’s eyes were shocked open, though everything except Sharpwood and the ice had faded into darkness.

Then Jack realised he could see Pitch.

For Pitch was standing over Sharpwood, who had conjured a blue shield that held a single insignia on it—a grey figure holding a white flame in one hand, and a black flame in the other. The shield faded as Sharpwood stared calmly back at Jack. Around them, they were surrounded by a world of ice. The trees had disappeared. It was sparkling blue and white as far as the eye could see. They were covered in a dome that held small spikes on the inside. Jack knew if someone was looking at it from the outside, they would see huge, jagged points.

Pitch was looking at Jack too, and he said: ‘He’s come out of it.’

‘He hasn’t,’ Sharpwood said patiently. ‘Support him again. We are not done.’

Pitch moved back over, having to crouch beneath the thick dome. He nestled in behind Jack again, and Jack sagged into that warmth, staring sleepily and dazedly at Sharpwood, a thick malice running through him. It felt so oily he worried it would leak out of his mouth.

‘Close your eyes,’ Sharpwood said, looking unbothered.

So Jack closed his eyes.

‘There is a circle,’ Sharpwood said, ‘and within it, a flame of light. And within that, so much space that you cannot help but float in it, can you?’

‘I can’t help it,’ Jack said.

‘What are you afraid of?’

‘I want to destroy you,’ Jack said. ‘It’s the darkness. I want to— I could— I could rip you apart. Let me.’

‘No,’ Sharpwood said. ‘Stay with the darkness.’

‘I am,’ Jack said, his voice shaking.

‘Well done,’ Sharpwood said. Jack wanted to tear his calm, even voice to shreds. He wanted to turn the warmth behind him to ice. He wanted to use his ice to freeze Sharpwood’s face off and he could do it because he wasn’t helpless.

A shift behind him, and then:

‘Kozmotis, leave him. This is normal.’

‘Nothing about this is normal,’ the warmth behind him said.
‘This is normal. Isn’t it, Jackson? You don’t want it to be normal, but it is, isn’t it? This darkness is in you all the time. It’s a part of you now. As normal as your blood, as your ice, as your very self.’

‘It wants to help me,’ Jack said, resisting the lure of its call. The way it promised him safety if he would just listen to it.

‘How?’

‘I want to destroy anyone who’s ever hurt me.’

‘Including me?’

‘Yes.’

‘I haven’t hurt you.’

Jack didn’t laugh, but his eyes opened again. ‘Yes, you have.’

Sharpwood stared back for a long moment, and then nodded once in acknowledgement. Jack couldn’t see anything around them now – not the ice, not the ground, not his staff on the floor. He could only see Sharpwood’s solid black eyes, the empty space around them both. It was like Sharpwood was floating too.

‘The Tsar has hurt you too,’ Sharpwood said.

‘Yes, he has,’ Jack said.

‘Close your eyes, Jackson. You are safe here, and protected. I haven’t hurt you, have I? I promised I wouldn’t.’

‘You’ve kept me safe,’ Jack said, his eyes dutifully fluttering shut. He was completely unbothered by what they were talking about, though an undercurrent of malice ran through him, cruelty splintering in his blood, like ice crystals beneath his skin. But he still felt sleepy and settled, as though he was ensconced in clouds of the finest silks.

‘What do you think the Living Darkness is?’

‘Meanness,’ Jack said. ‘Cruelty. Evil.’

‘But you heard your sister in the Living Darkness, didn’t you, Jackson?’

‘Yes,’ Jack said.

‘And you heard the Tsar?’

‘Yes.’

‘You are going to think of your sister from this moment on, whenever you feel the darkness, Living or otherwise, aren’t you?’

‘Yes.’

‘Because the Darkness gave that to you, didn’t it? Was your sister cruel and mean?’

‘No,’ Jack said. ‘But in the Darkness, she…sometimes was. She still helped me.’
‘I am going to tell you something very special, and secret. The Living Darkness itself is neutral. It hungers, but it is not evil. When your sister was cruel and mean, she was not being influenced by the Darkness, but by Gavril’s nature present in the mountain. What does that tell you?’

‘Gavril…changes the Darkness.’

‘He corrupts it. And because he was there when you were possessed by it, you were also corrupted by him. You share a link, and through that link, you can become powerless around those who carry the darkness. But any link can be broken, any knot untied. We are going to untie the knot today, Jackson, and it will be easy. First, we are going to talk about the darkness.’

‘Okay.’

‘What happens if you put your hand in a shadow? A normal shadow?’

‘Nothing.’ That was easy. Jack was covered in normal shadows all the time. Nothing ever happened. There was just less light.

‘That’s right. And what happens if you sit in the darkness, knowing day will come?’

‘Day…will come.’

‘And what might you do, while waiting for day to come?’

‘You could sleep,’ Jack said.

‘So you trust the darkness when you sleep, don’t you, Jackson?’

‘Yes,’ Jack said.

‘And day always comes, doesn’t it, Jackson?’

‘Yes,’ Jack said, smiling.

‘Are you staying with the darkness? You seem very calm. Is it easier?’

Jack nodded. It felt less immediate. Now that he’d made all the spikes, and was continuing to talk, it felt like it had settled from some rattling, horrific force, into some kind of river that wound through him. Or maybe like the night sky above him.

‘I want you to make a single point of ice for me.’

Jack held up his palm without looking at it, and felt the ice growing. He was surprised it had ever been hard. After all, the ice was always there.

‘You, like everyone here, have always had a capacity to be cruel and mean. The darkness didn’t give that to you, Gavril’s presence in the mountain did. But your sister was there too, wasn’t she? What if I told you that we can untie the knot to Gavril by forming a new one? You are going to think about your sister, when you feel the remnants of darkness that lie inside of you. It won’t stop you from feeling cruel or mean, but you will feel what you felt for her too. Shall we try?’

‘Yes,’ Jack said.

‘For this, we are going to go very deep now, and you might not remember any of this. We are going to forge a new link together, so that when you feel most afraid of the darkness, you will remember your sister. It will be a good feeling. Do you trust me to help you with this?’
‘You haven’t hurt me, and you won’t while I’m in this space. I trust you.’

‘Well done, Jackson. Well done.’

Then Jack felt Sharpwood encouraging him to go so deep that everything faded away. His awareness, his ability to understand what he was hearing or saying. He’d never known he could go so far inside of himself. It was like being housed in a warm, safe bubble. He hadn’t known it was possible to still feel that warm, since he’d gotten the ice abilities. He liked it.

It was a timeless place, and he had nothing more than feelings around him. Moments of fear and the sense of being around a great authority figure, and then softness and joy and sadness, and his sister by his side. He couldn’t do anything more than let it happen, and he could tell that the darkness inside of him was shifting and moving, changing shape. The Darkness had made new pathways inside of him in the mountain, but now he was seeing offshoots, tiny trails in the dark; forest paths like the kind deer and goats took, like the kind that he and his sister would take.

He felt exhausted when he came back to a loose awareness, and then he was opening his eyes and wincing because everything was bright even though huge dome of spiky ice was still surrounding them. He didn’t feel like he could move. Pitch had both of his arms around Jack’s torso, and Sharpwood had something almost peaceful on his face, like he’d been hypnotised too.

‘If you were worthy of being a Grisaillean,’ Sharpwood said, ‘I believe you would have chosen the darkness, like I did.’

‘Nope,’ Jack said slowly, too tired and calm to feel horror, but still alarmed by the statement.

‘No? Now that you know so much more about the true nature of the darkness?’

Jack opened his mouth to say no again, and then closed it, looking aside as he thought it over. His brain was sore. Would he have chosen the darkness on Grisaille? He couldn’t even imagine it. He was so far from what Sharpwood seemed to be. To eat that slowly, to do everything so carefully, to be unable to volunteer information most of the time unless direct questions were asked of him.

But there was comfort in the dark. It was cuddling with his sister at night in the creche. It was standing beneath a tree and waiting to pounce on her, while they played hide and seek. It was the shadow of a hand as it descended towards his, before her smaller fingers lay in his palm and she looked up at him with her bright, happy eyes. It was family. The darkness connected things together. Even the light only proved those connections. A person’s shadow touching the ground, trees in a forest touching each other not only with branches, but with long shadows in the afternoon sun, and even now, Jack’s body upon the snow beneath him, a murky space where they were tied together gently, in a way that didn’t hurt at all.

Jack didn’t say no to Sharpwood again, and he thought that if Sharpwood were from Lune, he might smile, because there was something satisfied about him, even if he looked impassive.

‘Remove this dome,’ Sharpwood said.

Jack touched his fingers to his staff by his side, and the dome dissolved into ice crystals that hung in the air, then were swept up by the wind and dispersed. He blinked rapidly as his eyes adjusted to the afternoon light. It was overcast, but bright all the same.

‘Two things, to make sure this worked. You won’t truly know how effective it was until you’re around Gavril, but I have complete faith in my methods, even if I’m not so faithful in your physiology. First, make a sharp point of ice in your hand. A single one.’
Jack did. The other point had disappeared, and this one sprung from the same place. It was smooth and perfect, a razor sharp tip at the end.

‘Lift your other hand,’ Sharpwood said, and Jack did. ‘Now make the Living Light.’

It should have been impossible. He should have strained for it. He was certain that this was the first time Sharpwood had even asked him to do this, even though he couldn’t remember everything that had happened. Yet – almost without effort – his right hand began to glow with a bright golden light, and he could feel the way Pitch’s breath caught behind him, felt the way fingers tightened slightly where they held him.

Sharpwood stood and dusted himself off. ‘I am tired. I need to rest.’ Then, looking past Jack, he said: ‘You’ve all never had a single idea of what you were doing with the skills you took from me, from us. You believe your own rhetoric about the darkness, and so poison yourselves and your own minds. If you are surprised by anything about today, be surprised at the fact that you’ve all had centuries, and still don’t understand.’

With that, Sharpwood walked towards the cottage.

Jack stared between both of his hands, at the Light, at the ice, his heart beating with excitement.

‘I can do it,’ Jack whispered. ‘I can do both. It’s not even hard. Look!’

‘I’m looking,’ Pitch said, a strangeness to his voice.

Jack made the Light vanish, and then brought it back. A slightly hysterical giggle escaped him.

‘Look!’

Pitch’s reaction was so unenthused that Jack turned around, shaking the ice off his hand and letting the Light disappear, even though he just wanted to keep on using it to prove he could. Pitch looked unhappy, and Jack felt a frisson of apprehension shiver through him.

‘Did he do something bad?’ Jack said. ‘Did he… was- Was it bad?’

‘No,’ Pitch said, meeting Jack’s eyes. ‘I’m simply contemplating what Sharpwood said. I did not know that Gavril had corrupted the Darkness in the mountain so blatantly. Or everywhere, since we’ve had it. I didn’t know it could be so easy to right the imbalance in you. Oh, I understand it’s not a perfect art, and there will be hiccups, but he made it look…effortless. He’s right, Jack. We believe our own rhetoric. And I don’t know how far it goes, and I don’t remember what I used to be without it. And,’ Pitch turned and looked towards the cottage Sharpwood had disappeared into, ‘I don’t know how much he hasn’t told us.’

‘So we’ll figure it out,’ Jack said. ‘That’s all I’ve been doing since the initiation anyway. Figuring stuff out. I’m getting better at it. I could help.’

Pitch pulled Jack closer, and Jack wrapped his arms around Pitch’s neck, and then held out one of his hands and made the Light again, staring at it with rapt eyes.

*I’m a Golden Warrior. After all this time, it’s really true.*

‘I can tell you’re making it,’ Pitch said blandly.

Jack grinned to himself and stopped, and then pulled back, looking into Pitch’s golden eyes. Had this been hard for Pitch? To let Sharpwood do the induction and hypnosis? To hand that over? To
be told afterwards that he’d always been bad at it? Jack hadn’t even considered that Pitch felt anything other than a general approval towards Sharpwood doing this. But now he wondered if Pitch had encouraged Jack to try, because everything else hadn’t worked.

Did it sting, for Sharpwood to achieve in one morning, what Pitch hadn’t been able to achieve over months?

But Pitch had been busy, and living in the Palace with the Tsar, and trying to preserve his own sanity. All his life, hadn’t he been trying to do just that?

Jack leaned forwards until his forehead touched Pitch’s, knowing that it couldn’t be comfortable. He was basically half on Pitch’s thighs anyway. But Pitch didn’t push him away, Pitch didn’t do anything except close his eyes. Jack wanted to say that it was fine, but he knew it wasn’t. He knew Pitch had been shaken by the events of the day, and he knew – by the Light, did he ever know – what that felt like.

Slowly, Pitch tilted his head up, brushed his lips against Jack’s. The kisses were dry, sweet and nearly as soft as the space Jack had been lured into by Sharpwood.

‘I think I might be too cynical for this war,’ Pitch said against Jack’s mouth.

‘And I’m too naïve,’ Jack said. ‘So we balance each other out, okay? That’s a thing, isn’t it? And if I would’ve chosen the darkness on Grisaille, maybe you would’ve chosen the light. We need each other. I need you. That’s okay, right? Maybe Sharpwood did something that you couldn’t do. But you’ve spent months helping me. After Crossholt. Taking me away from Lune when Gavril wanted me to wear that pin. Half-killing Bunnymund and literally saving my life.’

Pitch kissed him again, longer this time, somehow gentler than before. Then he pressed his forehead against Jack’s and sighed.

‘I love you,’ he said.

They both stiffened at the same time, and then Jack drew back enough to meet that gaze, shocked. Pitch just smiled ruefully, shrugged.

‘I said I would say it, didn’t I?’

Jack returned a brighter version of Pitch’s smile and kissed him once, then tucked his face into the warm space between Pitch’s shoulder and neck.

Pitch might not be in the happiest mood, but Jack was having a pretty good day.
Reunions

Chapter Notes

So, as you can see, we now have a cap for the final chapter - I've finally (for the first time) plotted the rest of the story and am fairly confident that the Golden Age is going to end around chapter 55. Which means were over 3/4 of the way there! :D

The next day and a half passed almost normally. Jack didn’t train, Pitch said there wasn’t much point and that Jack would be able to get back on a proper training regimen when they ‘arrived.’ Instead, Pitch seemed content to mostly live silently in the cottage, sleeping beside Jack at night, sharing meals with Sharpwood without any dialogue between them.

Jack liked it too. He didn’t expect to, and he could feel a tension building now that he knew they were going to leave the cottage. That they were going right back into reality. His mind was filled with fragments of thoughts and half-plans, and he was angry at himself for even trying to solve the issue of how to defeat the Tsar, because he had no experience, and everyone else was constantly proving to him how much more they knew. What could he bring? Except ice?

Though he did think that if Sharpwood’s hypnotism had taken – and it seemed to, Jack was in a habit of frosting his hands deliberately around Sharpwood on a regular basis, and it was easy now – he should use the ice against the Tsar. He thought of Crossholt. Surely the Tsar couldn’t survive something like that? Except that Sharpwood had said that the Tsar had mages that protected his body. Mages stolen from other planets? Were they as loyal as Sharpwood was? Because that didn’t seem to be very loyal at all.

Jack had come around to Sharpwood. He didn’t trust him, but he didn’t think Sharpwood even wanted him to, and that kind of helped. Sharpwood didn’t fawn or expect loyalty, and Jack could almost imagine his look of detached disappointment if Jack dared trust him. A pit in his gut opened up when he thought about Sharpwood so far from home, aware of the mistake he’d made in betraying his own planet and being unable to fix it of his own volition, seeking someone to serve, and serving the Tsar. Jack wondered if Gavril was ever cruel to him, or if he was just…businesslike. Would Sharpwood even care? Was it all the same to him?

Jack was too afraid to bring those things up. He didn’t want that pit inside of himself to widen. It scared him already, the things he felt about Lune, the Tsar, the creches, all of it. He didn’t think he could contain much more without screaming. He was afraid that if he started, he’d never stop. He didn’t want to turn into Pitch. So bitter and despairing. At first he didn’t want it because he didn’t want to be that miserable. Now he didn’t want it, because he knew in his heart that Pitch needed someone who didn’t reflect that back to him. Pitch needed hope, even if he didn’t want it.

He watched as Pitch packed his case that he travelled with. Jack sat on the edge of the bed, thinking that Bunnymund was there at whatever ‘base camp’ was. He’d have to see him. It’d been easy to ignore it, and now…now he could feel the darkness inside of him, tangling and prickling with the fear. He thought of his sister when the darkness got loud enough, some automatic response that Sharpwood had planted in his mind, but it didn’t really halt Jack’s fear of Bunnymund’s whipping arm.

‘How long will it take to get there?’ Jack said.
‘Some hours, even travelling at high speed,’ Pitch said. He folded a shirt with precision. Jack could never fold shirts that neatly. Jack supposed if he had hundreds of years of practice he might be able to do it. Maybe.

Realistically, he’d probably care even less about it.

‘And Bunnymund’s gonna be there?’

Pitch lay down the shirt in his pack and smoothed it down so there was more room, and then turned to Jack from where he was crouched on the floor.

‘Yes.’

‘Cool,’ Jack said. ‘Cool, cool. I mean it was my idea. So that’s cool.’

‘Is it?’ Pitch said.

‘Totally cool,’ Jack said.

‘Well. I suppose we’d best hope that the Tsar’s defeat doesn’t depend on your ability to be deceitful.’

‘Mm,’ Jack said. ‘Hey. Hang on, you’re so rude.’

Pitch smiled briefly, and then kept packing. Jack didn’t really have much to bring with him. He was taking some of the basic uniforms he’d found in the closet, but he still had his ‘Jack Frost’ uniform, which was his pretty cape and his ridiculous vests and shirts that he’d sort of fallen in love with, because it reminded him of Flitmouse and…well, they might not have become the closest friends, but Jack liked to think they would have, if they’d had more time.

‘He’s under my orders to stay out of your way,’ Pitch said to the suitcase. ‘And given he knows I’ll murder him happily, if he so much as looks at you with a hint of his bad attitude, I believe you’ll not have much to worry about.’

‘Oh,’ Jack said. ‘But what about-? He’s a Guardian, right? So he’s gotta be there, with the meetings and stuff? Am I even gonna- Maybe I’m not going to be there, right?’

‘We’ll work it out,’ Pitch said. ‘You’ll need to be at some of those meetings.’

‘That’s still weird.’

‘I know,’ Pitch said, opening a bag of toiletries and looking through it. Then he opened a second black bag and Jack got a glimpse of rope and other things that looked like…the kind of things Pitch would use on Jack.

‘So that’s…so that’s where you keep your stuff.’

‘Some of it,’ Pitch said.

‘What, do you just never leave home without it?’

‘I don’t usually take it with me on missions,’ Pitch said pensively. ‘It blurs the lines too much. But this isn’t like a standard mission, and I don’t expect to be visiting the City of Lune again for some time. In fact, I’m not sure anything will be left standing by the time we’re done with the Palace. Which is…’ Pitch stared off, and then frowned. ‘I’ve always admired the Palace.’
‘Maybe nothing will happen then.’

Pitch gave a small, tight smile, and zipped up the second black bag and kept going through the rest of his things, checking what was there. Jack watched him, and decided he couldn’t actually imagine the Palace being destroyed, and he didn’t want to. He hadn’t seen enough of war or battle to understand destruction on that level, but maybe the others had. Even in Endan, where the Darkness was a plague, the buildings had still been eerily standing and almost entirely whole, but for where age had worn plaster down or caused awnings to drop.

Jack closed his eyes, concentrated, and then spread his hands apart carefully. On the floor, assembled from delicate ice crystals, a small glacier goat appeared, a kid with knock-kneed legs still learning to walk. Jack made it tremble into Pitch’s pack, and look up at him with a tilted head.

A soft breath of laughter from Pitch, and Jack realised he’d never done this for Pitch before. Seraphina, yes, but almost no one else. He watched Pitch’s fingers reach up and curl around it, without touching it. The glacier goat’s tail wiggled, and Jack thought it was half his own power, and half the ice and the wind inside of him, a playful bright energy that took on a life of its own when he let it.

‘Seraphina likes them,’ Jack said.

‘It’s charming. She told me what it was like, but until one sees it, it’s hard to imagine.’

‘You must be happy you’re going to be seeing her soon.’

Jack made the little goat playfully jump off the pack and then trot gaily around the room, its little chin lifted and its tiny stubs of horns gleaming brightly. Pitch turned and watched, lowering his hands into his lap. When he looked at Jack, his golden gaze was softened, and Jack found it weirdly intimidating.

‘It’s just ice,’ Jack said nervously.

‘I think she’ll be happy to see you,’ Pitch said.

‘Oh yeah, the person who convinced her to run off and leave you. She’ll be super happy.’

‘She’s a pragmatic soul. With some time to think it over, she’ll know you did the best thing for all of us.’ Pitch stood and Jack waved his hand and let the tiny goat vanish, pressing his lips together. More reality. Seeing Seraphina and Anton and Eva again. The other Guardians. Jack didn’t think he was ready. Life in this strange little two-storey ‘cottage,’ North’s mysterious stronghold, was peaceful. It had been a glimpse of something different. Better.

‘I wish we could stay here,’ Jack said.

Pitch sat on the bed next to him. ‘She likes you more than Fyodor.’

‘What?’ Jack said. A beat when he realised what Pitch meant, and then he laughed incredulously. ‘No she doesn’t.’

‘She does.’

‘She worshipped him. I remember. She only came into that room to…talk about how great he was. And strong. And how much I wasn’t like him.’

‘Hm,’ Pitch said. ‘I take your point. But you weren’t there for the several hundred times she asked
me when you were coming to dinner, if we were going to spend time together, if we would both come and visit her in her garden, the times that she told me ‘in secret’ – which meant her speaking directly into my ear without having much of a concept of how to whisper – that she likes you and thinks you’re more fun. Every language lesson that she recounted in extreme – extreme – detail. I know more about your progress in the Lune alphabet than you do.’

Jack looked up at Pitch, and then couldn’t stop himself from laughing. He could imagine it. That affectionate look of long-suffering on Pitch’s face, too, he liked that. He found himself leaning into Pitch’s side, pleased.

‘I think they’ve all been waiting for me to catch up to what they’ve known all along,’ Pitch said quietly.

Pitch got up and kept packing, and Jack kept watching, not commenting on what Pitch had implied with that final line, cautiously allowing a sense of excitement that he’d be seeing some of the others again.

*

Sharpwood was a quiet, patient traveller. He didn’t walk about the ship in agitation, he didn’t peer over the rails. He simply sat where Pitch told him to sit, and said nothing unless he was asked a direct question. His eyes were watchful, but he seemed content to stare ahead. Jack wondered if he was thinking about anything, or if he just turned his mind off sometimes.

The journey took hours, even at high speeds above the clouds. They travelled northeast, the weather increasingly frigid around them. Jack didn’t mind it, even stood barefoot on the clipper. But Pitch had a heavy travelling coat, the kind that was belted firmly about him at multiple points so it didn’t billow away. Jack thought it had the nice effect of highlighting his tall, lean build, and resisted the urge to touch him because that would be…inappropriate.

So Jack stood next to him instead, looking around, thinking that soldiers didn’t jump off flying ships and float around them just to prove they could.

He was surprised when Pitch hadn’t asked for any kind of snow cover.

‘Why aren’t we more worried about attack?’

‘North scuppered most of the ships he left behind,’ Pitch said, talking over the whipping winds. ‘They run half on his magic, and half on engineering. We were pursued initially because Gavril was expecting it. Now…I’m not sure what he expects, but he would assume we were already at base?’

‘Why did he put the Guardians in positions of power? You and North? It doesn’t make any sense.’

Pitch angled the ship’s wheel north, and Jack looked over the railing and thought the forested land beneath them – as far away as it was – looked familiar somehow. Small villages and towns. Wider circles of plain land with larger buildings that marked creches. The patchwork of farms, sometimes with little white or black specks – livestock huddled together in the cold.

‘It was different for each of us,’ Pitch said. ‘North… North was the only one to get the particular magic he got from the mountain. There is no other magician and engineer who is as brilliant as he in making contraptions that shouldn’t work but do. Gavril was unwilling to give him up, though he has his own ships made by his own personal team, none of them work as well nor fly as fast. He will have commandeered a small flotilla of ships that North didn’t have a chance to destroy.'
‘As for me, I worked for him. I was his dog. I didn’t have to like it, but I still did what he wanted, willingly or no.’ Pitch shot Jack a bitter smile, and then looked forward again, his gaze hard. ‘I think that was just his sadism, to enjoy having me there in the Palace at his beck and call. He’s never expected true loyalty from me, it was why he was so quick to slaughter Fyodor at the slightest hint that I might be contemplating rebellion again. It was why he was so quick to insert himself into your life.’

Pitch shifted the small round mirrors that let him see if anyone was approaching from behind them, or to the sides. Jack had seen pictures of sea ships that had tall poles topped with crow’s nests, for people to climb and watch for anyone coming. But on North’s ships, there were mirror systems. Lookouts were still necessary, they just didn’t tower above the ship like a weird sentinel toothpick.

‘Toothiana has always been assumed to be loyal,’ Pitch continued. ‘Sanderson, too. Gavril has always considered him something of a milquetoast. His mistake. That leaves Bunnymund, who, as you know, wasn’t given a position of power at all. He was instead demoted, given a job he hates, disallowed access to most of the materials he needs for his advanced alchemy, and is regularly called in for interrogation, which is neatly explained as ‘interviews to continue to assess his capability to be the Disciplinarian.’ The day he quits his job, is the day he’ll be executed. It’s essentially just a passive form of torture until Aster can’t cope with it anymore. Gavril’s good at that. You’ll well remember with the fireplace.’

‘He never seemed to hate it with me,’ Jack said, folding his arms and hiding the way his hands had clenched into fists.

A pause, and then Pitch touched Jack’s upper arm once, before returning his hand to the wheel.

‘You harden yourself to something, or you break beneath it,’ Pitch said. ‘Aster has…I’m not sure he can come back from what he turned into. I’m not sure I want him to.’

‘So the Guardians… What makes one? Is it just anyone who gets extra in the mountain?’

‘No,’ Pitch said. ‘It’s complicated. I’m not sure I understand it. Their little club of four is quite an exclusive one and I was never invited.’

‘Did you want to be?’

Pitch was silent for a long time, and then instead of scoffing – which Jack expected – Pitch only shrugged.

‘I did help lead the first rebellion, but I’m not sure I’m as invested in the cause as they are. I never encouraged anyone to defect. I reported those who did. I did everything right, to a point. I did protect my own Golden Warriors, as much as I could, but I didn’t have the…wherewithal to extend that further to new, young children, who the Tsar would kill in the mountain or soon after.’

Jack nodded, wondered what it mean that they’d speculated that he might be a Guardian early on. How could they tell something like that so early? No wonder Bunnymund had been so against it. Did North only suggest it because he wanted access to Jack’s powers? Or did he see something more?

The landscape beneath them looked the same, but Jack squinted down at a forest they were travelling over.

‘Are we near the Overland creche?’ Jack said abruptly.
'Yes,’ Pitch said. ‘You can tell?’

‘It just…’ Jack squinted down. He looked ahead, then looked behind them. He’d never been above the landscape quite like this, and yet it was something strange in his bones, this recognition. He swallowed, what if he felt that bond because of the way they got him to bond with the creche? Was it that? Would he have once felt this familiarity to be near his parent’s home? Then- ‘There!’

Jack pointed, and a huge circle imprinted into the ground took shape, much larger than the others they’d passed. The large, rectangular and square buildings in the centre, grey and nondescript from above. The heavy concentric circles of fencing that not all the other creches possessed to the same degree.

They passed it quickly, and Jack almost ran to the other side of the ship. He turned, but made himself stand still. It wasn’t home. It had never been home.

And yet…

It hadn’t been that long since he’d left. He’d probably still know some of the people there. Certainly the team leaders. Most lived there, trapped behind the fences, resenting the children that escaped for doing what they couldn’t.

He had a vivid memory of a team leader – the only thing distinctive about him was his huge beard – saying tiredly, as he closed the door to Jack’s stint in isolation:

‘It’s not like we don’t want to go and get fresh berries either. You have to learn.’

The sound of the door closing, and Jack worrying about Pippa, simultaneously relieved that she wasn’t being placed in a room, on her own, potentially in the dark.

‘Why’s it so large?’ Jack said, distracting himself.

‘A lot of the children they never wanted in other creches were…placed in the Overland creche.’

Pitch turned the wheel slightly. ‘Can you make some snow cover?’

‘Now?’

‘Please.’

So Jack used the opportunity to hover above the ship, calling more violent winds than usual. Once, he would’ve assumed it was the darkness, but now – after the hypnotism with Sharpwood – he understood that it was just him. He was just…angry sometimes. The darkness inside of him could reinforce it, but it didn’t have to. It was the protective shadow of clouds over the ship, releasing snow in flurries above and below. It was Jack’s silhouette hanging above Pitch, obeying his order, even as the wind twisted his hair into wild shapes and made his shoulder cape flap loudly.

He felt like he was really getting the hang of this ice-snow thing now. And it was good to exercise his powers, even as he tried not to think about that large circle of land, the dull grey buildings, and the dull grey lives within.

* 

Jack was shocked when after only another hour of flying over rugged forests and one low mountain ridge, a space of clear land appeared, and upon it, large buildings. It was clearly the base. He was expecting something underground. A reappropriated Asylum that could be hidden from the Tsar. This was in plain sight. Jack looked around, his skin prickling. Surely the Tsar had people
stationed around here? How could he not?

‘It’s protected,’ Pitch said.

‘How?’

‘The same magic that protected the cottage. The Tsar suspects it’s somewhere north of the Overland creche, but he’s never been able to find it. The teams he sends out never return. He finds it all very vexing. He’s never sent me, because I think he suspects I might just vanish into it and also never return.’

‘It’s larger than I thought.’

‘It’s well-populated.’ Pitch had slowed down, the engine moving into its finer whir as they began to slowly lower towards the ground. Jack could see different groups of people in formation on the ground, in training. Some marching, learning how to move as one. Others with weapons out, sparring each other.

‘Why can we see it? You had to flip a switch before with North’s cottage.’

‘They know we’re landing,’ Pitch said, pointing to the glittering lights on the tiny switchboard next to the wheel. Jack had watched Pitch pressing at them occasionally as they’d travelled, but he thought it’d been some other kind of device, not a system that communicated with…whatever this place was. Base camp? ‘Besides, if the Darkness attacks – which it has, regardless of whether the land is protected from view or not – there’s people here who can make the Light. It might look open to attack but it’s been very well looked after for some time.’

They drew closer to the ground and the groups in their different formations. In the distance, near what was clearly a hangar, Jack could see smaller clippers outside and the hint of much larger ships within. Some had been patched up with new colours, new metals, and were no longer the solid black of the Golden Warriors and the Tsar’s military. They had flagpoles and flags attached, but the flags were hanging mostly limp, and Jack couldn’t make them out.

Jack’s mouth was dry. There was no way he could go back to his previous life. Disloyal, untrustworthy, no longer a citizen of Lune in the eyes of the Tsar.

All these people who lived here, they would be killed for daring to believe something different than the lies they’d been told.

He startled when he felt a hand rest on his arm. He looked up at Pitch, who was looking at him soberly.

‘All right?’ he said.

‘It’s just…more than I expected.’ He reached up and nervously stroked the snow out of his hair, and then looked closer at one of the formations in the distance, squinting. ‘Hang on…’

Jack stared as Pitch touched down into the large, paved square. Stared ahead as his heart began to beat faster and faster, until he could feel it in his throat, like a huge wintry bird that needed to break free. He clutched the railing, and Pitch said:

‘Jack, are you sure you’re all right?’

No point replying to that. Jack swooped up into the air, staff helping him balance because he was dizzy from what he was seeing. And then he was on the ground and running, and the figure in the
distance had noticed him and had turned and was staring at him with that same wide-eyed, disbelieving wonder. Not in training white, but in some new uniform – red and black and gold, like the old kind that used to be worn before the wars between the Darkness and the Light.

Jack heard Jamie’s burst of laughter, and it knotted up painful and bright deep inside of him. Jamie ran towards him, both of them sprinting, and then Jack dropped his staff – it fell with a clatter – as he reached out and wrapped Jamie in both of his arms, his own chest crushed in Jamie’s grip.

He was half-laughing, half-sobbing, and he’d be embarrassed, except Jamie was making similar noises. They weren’t even trying to talk. Jamie had huge handfuls of Jack’s vest and shirt, and Jack was thumping Jamie on the back in place of being able to say how much he’d missed him, how much he’d been sure he’d never see him again. It’d never occurred to him to ask anyone if Jamie was a part of the resistance like this, a soldier with a uniform and a weapon at his side, training all this time against the Tsar.

Eventually, they pulled back from each other, and Jack stared into his brown eyes, at his hair, at how healthy and happy he looked, and then looked over his uniform. Behind him, what must have been Jamie’s squad? Formation? Troop? Did they even call them that?

‘I didn’t know you’d be here,’ Jack said in wonder.

‘I’ve heard so many rumours,’ Jamie said, his voice rushed. ‘Man, so many. I heard- I didn’t even know what to believe. That you can fly? That you can make snow? Are you making the snow right now? It just started in the last hour! That you’re kind of like…” said in a whisper, ‘banging the Royal Admiral? That like- That you’ve taken on the Tsar already and like…”

Jack laughed weakly, and Jamie stared at the staff on the ground beside them.

‘I mean obviously you can fly, like- Jack- And that you’re Jack Frost now? Like it’s a whole thing? How are you? How are you? Are you well?’

Jamie’s arms gripping his upper arms tight, shaking him, as though making sure he was really there.

‘Are you?’ Jamie said, pulling Jack close again. ‘Are you okay?’

‘Are you?’ Jack said. ‘I didn’t know what to think. I thought you were- I thought… And then the Guardians wouldn’t tell me anything. Not even North.’

‘I’m good, I’m good,’ Jamie said, and from the rich warmth in his voice, Jack knew it was true. Jamie had never been a great liar, and towards the end of his time under Crossholt’s ‘care,’ and his disenchantment with everything, he’d always sounded kind of flat and sarcastic. Now he sounded hopeful. Happy.

‘I’m so sorry,’ Jack said, pushing his forehead into Jamie’s shoulder. ‘I’m sorry. You were right, about everything, and I stayed behind. I shouldn’t- I’m sorry I didn’t realise sooner. About everything. You must’ve thought I was such an idiot. And so- so naïve.’

‘Jack, no, what? Don’t do that,’ Jamie pushed Jack back again and stared at him hard. ‘Don’t- I’m just blown away that you’re even here. So you… You get it, right? Why we have to fight back against the Tsar? The system?’

Jack wanted to say you could’ve told me, but he kept those words in his chest, because he knew it wasn’t true. There was nothing Jamie could’ve said. Jamie even tried to gently bring it up sometimes, and Jack had just ignored it, and refused to report him, because they were only words.
But it’d always caused tension between them. Jack had resisted the truth for a long time, even once the Royal Admiral was just about plainly stating it. In retrospect, Jack thought it was a miracle that people had tried to be so forward with him, when it was so obvious that Jack’s loyalty was at least mostly to the Tsar, and he could have reported them all at any moment.

‘Yeah,’ Jack said. ‘I get it.’

He didn’t want to say how he’d learned about it. He didn’t want to bring up the fireplace the Tsar had made him sit next to, or the heat exhaustion, or the emotional manipulation or anything. Because like this, they were two old friends meeting on some neatly paved stones, and Jack could pretend it was just a sweet, wonderful reunion. Not a prelude to fighting a monster that the Royal Admiral and the first wave of resistance couldn’t take down.

‘Hey,’ Jamie said. ‘What is it?’

‘Nothing,’ Jack said, smiling. This should’ve been one of the happiest moments of his life, and it was, but it was…sour-tasting as well. He touched his hand to the embroidered marks on Jamie’s breast pocket. ‘What are these?’

‘Oh,’ Jamie said, looking down. ‘Rank and stuff. I’m…doing well here. Really well! So, get this, I’m really great at this kind of stuff if I have like- if there’s a common enemy we all believe in. Not just the crap that we were forced to believe.’

‘Yeah,’ Jack said. ‘Suppose I’ll have to get in on training and stuff now.’

‘It’ll be a relief just to be away from Crossholt though, right?’ Jamie said, lifting his eyebrows in commiseration. ‘Is he still riding your ass? You don’t have to have anything to do with him anymore now, though, do you?’

Jack kind of hoped that’d been dealt with in the rumours, but obviously it hadn’t. He still thought about it, though with less horror than in the past, since he hadn’t randomly killed anyone else since. But he was certainly violent enough with his ice sometimes… Even Pitch had sprung up to defend and protect Sharpwood during the hypnosis, when Jack was pretty calm and had his eyes closed and wasn’t even aware of what he was doing.

Reality. That’s right, I remember how much it sucks now.

‘Totally,’ Jack said. He looked over Jamie’s face. He looked older, even though realistically, not that much time had passed. Maybe it was that he looked more seasoned, mature somehow, like this mattered to him and he took it seriously. ‘It is so good to see you again. Like, I- So good.’

‘Right?’ Jamie said, reaching up and touching Jack’s hair. ‘It really is white. They said- And your eyes. It’s like… But you’re still you. You’re still obviously you. The hair looks amazing. It actually really suits you. Probably because your eyebrows didn’t go all weird and white, and are basically the same they always were.’

‘Oh yeah,’ Jack said. ‘My ice powers were really good to me that way.’

‘So it’s true? You’re the reason it’s snowing right now? Ice powers? You can make like snow and shit? All of that?’

‘You’ll see it soon enough,’ said a cold, distinctive voice. Footsteps approaching. Pitch’s, and Sharpwood’s behind him. Jamie stared over Jack’s shoulder, eyes going wide. ‘He’ll be training with you all, once he’s gotten a better handle on his powers. Won’t you, Jack?’
Jack startled when he felt Pitch’s hand close over his shoulder, the grip tight. Jack bit at his lower lip, feeling like it was the strangest thing, these parts of his life meeting. It wasn’t at all helped by the way Jamie then looked at Jack, then back up to Pitch, then back to Jack, then back to Pitch, and then finally – with some impish, mischievous expression that he probably thought was subtle, but totally wasn’t – he looked at Jack.

*Yeah, okay, he knows we’re sleeping together. I’m never going to hear the end of it.*

‘Yep,’ Jack said, his voice thin.

‘And this must be James-’

‘Jamie,’ Jamie said automatically. ‘Royal Admiral, Sir.’

‘Ah,’ Pitch said, with that same acerbic tone he used all the time. Jamie looked somewhat terrified, and Jack wanted to reassure him that it didn’t really get better with time or closeness. Pitch was just sometimes pretty terrifying, and he seemed to like it that way. ‘Jamie.’

‘Hi,’ Jamie said amiably, holding his hand out to shake the Royal Admiral’s. ‘Royal Admiral, Sir. Wait, is it- Is it just Admiral now?’

If someone rolling their eyes had a sound, Jack was pretty sure he was hearing it. Really, he had no idea what expression was on Pitch’s face, but it was fun to imagine.

To Jack’s surprise, Pitch extended his other hand and shook Jamie’s – a quick, firm handshake. Then Pitch let go of Jack’s shoulder and stepped forward to be beside him, picking up Jack’s staff and handing it to him. He turned to Jamie and said:

‘I am glad to see you are safe. Jack has talked of you. Blood brothers, yes?’

Jamie stared up at Pitch in amazement, and Jack resisted the urge to do the same. The truth was he’d hardly ever spoken of Jamie around Pitch, because it hurt so much, because Jack just didn’t see the point in reminiscing like that. Jack remembered telling Pitch that blood brothers didn’t kill each other, when Pitch had talked of his friendship with Bunnymund. He remembered saying Jamie was his. Pitch remembered that? Jack had just assumed he didn’t really care, or pay attention.

‘Uh, yeah,’ Jamie said. ‘That’s…right.’ Jamie stared at Jack, as though he couldn’t believe Jack would ever talk about him around the Royal Admiral of Lune. ‘Royal Admiral, Sir.’

‘Look, Jack,’ Pitch said. ‘This is how you should be addressing me.’

‘Keep dreaming,’ Jack muttered.

‘Whoa,’ Jamie whispered. He raised his hands, palms forward and stared at Pitch as though in apology? Disbelief? Was he chagrined that Jack talked so casually? It was too late for Jack to start using all the formal terms now. It’d become some weird thing they only did in the bedroom now.

Jack’s cheeks flushed.

Before he had a chance to say anything, there was a loud whistle from nearby. Jack looked over automatically, and from one of the other formations, a large, broad-shouldered woman taking her fingers out of her mouth. She’d been the one to whistle at him.

‘Cupcake!’ Jack said, staring. ‘How in the Light- How is she here?’
‘Oh, right,’ Jamie said, as Cupcake approached, her eyes narrowed. Jack couldn’t tell if she was happy or relieved or pissed off or annoyed that he was there. ‘She’s one of the newbies. Only arrived about a month ago.’

‘Yeah, I… She went into the mountain with me,’ Jack said. He walked towards her, and they stared at each other. Cupcake was scrutinising him like she didn’t know what to think. The last time they’d seen each other had been at the Parade before the after-party.

‘Cupcake.’

‘Jack,’ she said. Then she broke out into a wary smile. ‘The fuck you doing here?’

‘What are you doing here?’

‘Training,’ Cupcake said, shrugging.

‘Me too,’ Jack said, and she smirked. At her side she had a hilted broadsword. On the other side what looked like a hatchet. Jack imagined she was terrifying with both.

‘I didn’t know what to think,’ Cupcake said, the wariness beginning to disappear. ‘Last I saw you, you were telling me how the Tsar was having meetings with you and the Royal Admiral hated you.’ Her eyes flicked to Pitch, and then back to Jack’s. ‘Seems you worked out where you stand?’

‘Guess so,’ Jack said. ‘You won’t have to haul me out of any mountains anymore.’

‘So you say,’ she said, her voice hard, but her eyes twinkling. ‘Anyway, I gotta get back to it. Come find me if you’re not too high and mighty for it. Feel like you have some stories.’

‘Bet you do as well, to have ended up here.’

‘My whole life is stories,’ she said, turning away from him, even as he caught the way her smile broadened. ‘How’d you think I ended up with a name like Cupcake anyway?’

Jack watched her go, saw the way everyone else in her formation was staring at him. He didn’t recognise any of the others. Were they all… newbies?

He heard footsteps and looked over to see Jamie joining him.

‘So you… help with all of this?’ Jack said.

‘Yeah! Anyway, I-’

Seraphina tore out of what looked like the main entrance into one of the grandest, three storey buildings. Her arm was in a sling, her hair plaited into a single tail that flew behind her at the speed of her sprint. She ran across the paving stones bare-footed, shooting towards Pitch. Jack smiled helplessly as Pitch reached out with his arms, lifted her up automatically, hands curving around her sides and bringing her close, both of them pressing their noses, their foreheads together.

It was so easy to think of Pitch as cold-hearted sometimes. As someone who had forgotten to care about anything. But it wasn’t true at all.

‘I gotta go,’ Jack said to Jamie, as he saw Anton and Eva walking out of the double doors Seraphina had come out of. ‘I’ll catch you soon?’

‘Soon,’ Jamie said. He yanked Jack close and hugged him again. ‘I missed you. We have so much to talk about. You gotta tell me everything.’
‘You too. Promise.’

‘Promise, doofus. Go on then, I suppose I’d better get back to training.’

Jack watched him go, resisting the urge to grab him again. He made himself walk back to Pitch’s side.

Eva was glaring at Sharpwood, and it was obvious she wasn’t happy to see him walking around freely. Jack could hear Seraphina making small noises of excitement into Pitch’s neck, and her fingers were digging in so hard that her knuckles were white. Jack wondered if it was like that every time Pitch came back from a mission, or if it was just more intense this time, because everyone knew they were all in danger.

As Eva and Anton got closer, Pitch said:

‘I see her arm’s in a sling.’

‘You don’t miss a thing, do you?’ Eva said. She beamed at Jack, but the look she directed at Pitch was the same kind of critical gaze that Pitch directed at Jack sometimes. Pitch didn’t seem remotely intimidated by it. Instead, he lowered Seraphina to the ground, gently smoothing a hand over her hair.

‘What happened?’ Pitch said.

‘She thought it would be wise to jump off a roof.’

‘Ah.’

‘And she wouldn’t let anyone other than you heal it.’ Eva looked down at Seraphina then, an arch in her eyebrow to suggest she was very unimpressed by that. Seraphina just lifted her chin and stared stubbornly back.

‘Yes. Then I’d best do that,’ Pitch said.

‘Yes, I think you’d better.’

So Pitch knelt down and touched his hands gently to Seraphina’s arm, shaking his head at whatever he seemed to find over the sleeve of her blouse, underneath her sling. A pulse of golden Light that grew stronger, until finally Seraphina’s whole arm glowed with it. Jack stared and then thought of the last time Pitch had used his healing Light and choked on a cough, spluttering before turning away.

Seraphina looked at him curiously, and Jack could only offer a smile and feel a kind of outrage that Pitch obviously had no shame at all.

Once her arm was healed, Pitch removed the sling, untying the knot and drawing the fabric away, as Seraphina straightened her arm and bent it cautiously. It looked practiced, like maybe she’d jumped off roofs before and needed to have things healed. She definitely seemed like someone who was both very good at climbing trees, but had maybe fallen out of a few as well.

Seraphina touched Pitch’s travelling coat, looking up at him.

‘Thank you, Papa.’

‘You’re welcome,’ Pitch said.
Then, without missing a beat, she turned and threw her arms around Jack’s waist, pushing her head against him. Jack’s arms came around her automatically, and he looked down at her glossy, black hair in shock. Her arms were tight around him. Her hands were digging into the scars on his back, and Jack found it uncomfortable, even as he wanted it to be okay.

‘Hi there,’ he said, automatically. *Do you forgive me?*

‘You should’ve been here sooner. Everyone is too much of a grown-up.’

Jack nodded, grimacing. That was definitely a compliment, but it made him flush to have it said so openly around other *adults*.

‘Everyone’s being a bit too stuffy, huh?’

‘It just leaves Mihail.’

‘Yeah, I mean-’ Jack stopped.

*It just leaves Mihail.*

‘The Tsesarevich is here?’ Jack gasped, looking up. ‘You took his son?’

‘Oh, he wanted to come,’ Seraphina said.

‘It’s…kind of complicated,’ Anton said. ‘You should come inside with us. It’ll explain everything, I promise.’

‘Or just confuse him more,’ Eva said drily.

‘It’s worth a shot,’ Anton said mutinously.

‘Yes, well, I suppose it is, precious boy. I suppose it is. We’d best all go inside then. I imagine you’ve been living on eggs and porridge for three days now. Are you looking forward to more decent fare?’

‘What’s wrong with what we were eating?’ Jack said, following them towards the double doors. Seraphina grasped his hand in hers, and he looked at her, only to see she’d grasped Pitch’s hand in the other. He shared a look with Pitch, feeling something bigger than he could explain, warm and frightening at the same time. He didn’t know if he liked it. This was all kind of terrifying. It’d be nice if the world just stopped for five seconds so he could figure out what was going on with him and Pitch.

Like, it was one thing to *love* someone, but it was another thing to feel like this, wasn’t it? Or to… feel like maybe you did have a place in the world. Because it wasn’t true, was it?

Jamie jumping up and down in the distance and getting yelled at, and risking it so he could wave frantically to Jack. Jack waved back with his free hand as Eva said:

‘You were living like peasants, darling.’

Jack dropped his hand and scowled at her back. She and Anton were leading the way together, and Sharpwood was still quietly following behind Pitch, and no one had said a thing about him being there. He didn’t expect that to last.

‘What’s wrong with living like peasants,’ Jack said sharply. ‘It’s still food isn’t it? There were even apples. So what gives?’
Anton’s steps faltered as he turned to look at Jack.

‘My dear,’ Eva said, without even turning around, ‘if you want to live on peasant food for the rest of your life, you are more than welcome to and we will even make special accommodations just for you. But some of us miss champagne, and cured meat, and medium-rare steaks, and fruits that aren’t just apples.’

‘Cool, yeah,’ Jack said, making sure he didn’t accidentally clench Seraphina’s hand. ‘You do realise that if you defeat the Tsar, nothing’s going to change if you just keep the fucked up system in place where you all get to drink champagne and eat cured meats and medium-rare steaks and fruits that aren’t just apples and no one else gets to, right? You know that peasant food doesn’t have those things because they can’t afford it, right?’

Pitch let loose a breath of laughter then, as Eva turned to look down at Jack, her eyebrows lifting with incredulity. After a minute, she only smiled, and there was genuine warmth there, not something critical and calculating, as Jack expected.

‘I do know,’ she said. ‘And we are prepared. Or preparing. I misspoke, Jack, and I apologise. I have long taken my privileges for granted, and I appreciate your pointing them out. However, if you swear at me again in front of the rest of your peers, given our respective positions, I will toss you into isolation faster than you can say cool, yeah.’

Oh, right, she’s like…the Captain of the Fleet and second to Pitch. Whoops.

‘Sorry,’ Jack said, chastened.

‘Quite all right,’ she said, turning forwards again as they ascended four tiled stairs into the building. Beneath their feet, runes gleamed and glowed. Jack could only read some. They represented strength and safety, protection and healing. The rest were like a memory hidden just out of reach.

The hall before them was bland compared to the Palace, but Jack was surprised to see framed propaganda posters – the kind Bunnymund had printed, but some were ancient, or half-torn, or ripped at the edges – hanging at intervals along the walls. It reminded him of a creche in some ways, but not in others – the workmanship was too fine, the materials were less dull, there were real floorboards creaking beneath their feet and not just cold stone.

They walked down a narrower corridor, and then another, and Eva calmly opened a door into what looked like a very small mess hall. A large kitchen down one end, and three long tables that could each seat ten people.

At the middle table, Toothiana sat on the table itself, looking over files. She’d looked up briefly when they’d walked in, smiled, then back to the files again, making notes with a feather quill on occasion, absorbed.

Closest to the door, Jack saw Mihail sitting on a chair, swinging his legs because his feet didn’t touch the ground. He wore plain grey pants, neat black shoes, and wore a white shirt embroidered with rabbits and flowers. It was something that a child might wear in the poorer towns on his or her name day. Mihail was looking up at someone, meeting their gaze, and Jack looked at that someone and didn’t recognise her. She must have been important, because Mihail hardly looked at anyone, and even then, not for very long.

The woman had a fall of red, wavy hair that tumbled so thickly that her face was obscured, except for the point of a nose. She wore a light green knitted sweater, and dark brown suede pants beneath
that. But her shoes were worn. Jack wondered if it was some contact they’d made in the creches or something, someone who had never lived in the City of Lune.

Then she turned and looked at them, and Mihail stared down at the ground, and Jack’s chest felt tight.

Instinct had been drummed into him from birth. The last time he’d seen her in person, she’d looked like a red and orange pincushion from a distance, she’d been wearing so much fabric. She’d held a stiletto knife like she knew how to use it. But that had been such a long time ago. He dropped to his knees before her, placing his forehead on the ground.

‘Your most Holy Imperial Tsarina Lunanoff,’ Jack said, breathless.

‘I suppose he’s finding some habits hard to break,’ Pitch deadpanned.

The chair was pushed back, scraping along the floorboards. Jack heard footsteps before him and thought of the Tsar, couldn’t not, and felt fingers at his shoulders, drawing him upright. Then he looked up helplessly, and her warm hands cupped his cheeks, she smiled down at him.

‘Jack Frost,’ she said, her voice rich and sweet, ‘I have heard so very much about you. It is unfortunate we’ve not yet had a chance to meet properly, is it not? I would be so grateful if you would not call me Tsarina Lunanoff, and call me Lady Agnessa instead. Would that be fine with you?’

Jack stared at up her and thought of the Tsar telling Jack to call him Gavril. It made him feel cold and ill at the same time. Even so, he felt like this was different. He didn’t know what it was, perhaps his intuition had gotten better, perhaps it was that she was here, or that she was dressed down and looked like a headwoman of a small village might. She wasn’t someone who was always dressed to perfection, who – unlike the Tsar – could actually shed the fashionable trappings of the Palace.

‘Yeah,’ Jack said, voice rasping. ‘I mean, yes, Lady Agnessa.’

‘Wonderful,’ she said. Then she looked at Pitch, and beyond that, to Sharpwood. Her warm eyes became cold, and she dropped her hands from Jack’s cheek. ‘I imagine we have rather a lot to catch up on, all of us together. Admiral Pitchiner, I’d like to hear your report now, please. If it’s not too much of an inconvenience.’

‘It would be my honour, Lady Agnessa,’ Pitch said.

Jack looked at all of them, and then stiffened when he felt Seraphina press closer to him. She took his hand again and squeezed it gently. When he looked at her, she was looking ahead, a serious expression on her face, mirroring that of her mother’s. But Jack appreciated the reassurance all the same, and squeezed back. She was right, after all, he really wasn’t as grown-up as the rest of these people. He was completely out of his depth.
Anton – with hair the colour of pewter – took Seraphina and Mihail from the room, ushering them into some other part of the building. Jack stood with Pitch and Sharpwood, in front of the Tsarina, Toothiana and Eva. It was an intimidating crowd. He didn’t really want to say anything, which was good, because everyone was looking at Sharpwood, and then back to Pitch, as though that was the most pressing issue.

Jack watched as Pitch explained the situation with Sharpwood, starting the story from the very beginning. Jack slowly realised that none of them knew the information that Pitch had shared with Jack. None of them had any idea that Sharpwood sometimes slept with Pitch, not even Eva, as her eyes widened and she scrutinised Sharpwood and Pitch in turn. Even hearing the story the second time, he couldn’t bring himself to trust Sharpwood, and he knew the others couldn’t either. But he also knew he was more accepting of Sharpwood than they were. He understood things a bit better, had listened to him talk. Had seen how Sharpwood would help, was living proof of it. If Jack could give Sharpwood some patience and time, surely they could too?

‘Regardless of what you all think,’ Pitch said, ‘it’s too late to send him back, I’ll not have him executed, and he can’t simply spend the next few weeks or months unconscious or imprisoned. He is here as my guest, and I will be accountable for him.’

‘You assume that we think you’re responsible enough to be accountable,’ Toothiana said, eyebrows raising. She withdrew her cigarette holder, inserted a cigarette, and lit it with a jade lighter. Soon, a plume of smoke wound its way thinly towards the ceiling. ‘Who will be accountable for you?’

‘Forgive me, we’ll just take our leave. Jack? The clipper is where we left it. Let’s go.’

Pitch turned, and Jack – automatically – turned to follow him.

‘Darling,’ Eva said, as Pitch reached the door, ‘don’t be childish.’

Pitch turned, fingers resting on the doorknob, and looked singularly unimpressed.

‘I didn’t come back to deal with the Guardians scapegoating my behaviours while taking no responsibility for their own. The many that Toothiana has thrown before the wagon or sent to the Asylums herself, because of betrayals against the crown. Whole families dead in those places because Toothiana had to preserve her role, or what about those that Bunnymund has executed? The warships that North has engineered to see our citizens slaughtered? The youths that Sanderson himself drugs to the nines so that most of them never know they’ll die, embalmed in Darkness, inside that mountain?’

Pitch glared at Toothiana.

‘You want to make your cruel banter, find another target. I don’t care that you’re inconvenienced by Sharpwood being here. I think he is an asset. You don’t get me without him, and you don’t get Jack without me.’

Toothiana’s eyes had been narrowed the entire time that Pitch had spoken. She looked at Jack then, as though discerning whether Jack really would leave. And though Jack’s heart was hammering at the thought of it, he’d rather take his chances with Pitch, than with the Guardians. Pitch had
already saved his life. Pitch had actually been the one to try and defeat the Tsar the first time. Alone. None of these people loved Jack.

“We have all done things we regret,” the Tsarina said, looking between everyone as she sat down once more. Her voice was even, pacifying. ‘All of us. No one in this room is above reproach. I cannot say I’m happy to see Gavril’s right hand man here, but I am pleased to know that Gavril doesn’t have him by his side, either. We can talk about this again later.

‘If you wish, Agnessa,’ Pitch said, acceding to her, even though his eyes didn’t leave Toothiana’s. Jack had no idea the tension between them was like that all the time. It’d been like that in the beginning, when Pitch had taken Jack straight to Toothiana’s tower, and she’d then sent him off on errands just to get Jack to herself. He’d been furious. But Jack had thought that was just…Pitch being annoyed at Jack, not her too.

Toothiana smiled, and her expression smoothed all at once. ‘Look at us, getting off on the wrong foot. You are, after all, here as Admiral of the Resistance, are you not?’

‘I’m surprised Eva hasn’t stolen the role out from under me,’ Pitch said, looking at her. They shared a smile, and then Eva reached out and placed a hand on his shoulder.

‘Not yet, comrade. Not yet.’

‘Soon, I hope.’ Pitch began to unbuckle the belts on his heavy travelling cloak. ‘I’d like to freshen up, at any rate, before all the debriefs and so on begin. I take it there’s to be meeting after meeting whenever I’m ready?’

‘Whenever you’re ready,’ Toothiana said. ‘May we borrow Jack for a bit? Your rooms are back down where they’ve always been. I assume Sharpwood will stay with you? And Jack?’

‘Yes,’ Pitch said. ‘Jack, come and find me. I don’t want to be here for this part. Ask anyone about the Admiral’s sector and you’ll be shown.

Pitch turned and left with Sharpwood, which surprised Jack, because he expected Pitch to make more of a fuss about the fact that Toothiana wanted to talk to Jack alone. Then his surprise morphed into alarm as he realised he was in a room with three of the most powerful women he’d ever known. The most powerful women that possibly existed on the whole of Lune. His cheeks started to warm.

‘So, hi,’ Jack said, studiously avoiding Agnessa’s eyes. The Tsarina? Agnessa? He supposed he should use her name. It wasn’t like she could tell him off for it in front of the others, when she’d just asked him to do it.

‘Pitch hates this part,’ Toothiana said, sliding off the table. ‘All new members to headquarters have to be told what we are, what we do, etcetera. I’ll make it quick, since I assume you know most of it. This is the headquarters for the Resistance. It is well-protected and well-guarded, and not only do we monitor incoming traffic, we monitor outgoing, in part to prevent any ill-timed betrayals. Just in case you were having any last minute thoughts about going to Gavril and telling him where we are – he has an idea. It’s the area where none of his people return from. And just in case you were having any last minute thoughts about going and sharing our plans to him, we will shoot you down before you have a chance. The property is manned with harpoons and the latest munitions, along with magical preventions.’

‘So it’s like a prison.’ He couldn’t help but think of the creches with their fences. They’d always said it was for the protection of the children.
‘Yes,’ Toothiana said bluntly. ‘It is. I’m glad you’ve said that, because it’s better than all of us just pretending this also isn’t an answer for the future ahead of us. But we need the high security, because our lives are constantly under threat.’

Jack nodded slowly. He let Toothiana’s words sink in as she explained how many buildings they had, how many facilities – it was so large and independent, it functioned like a small town, complete with farm plots – and how fortified they were. The Guardians officially were North, Toothiana, Sanderson and Bunnymund. They were all here, apparently, except for Sanderson, who regularly sent communiques to headquarters by radio code.

Toothiana and North together were the Chiefs of the movement. Everything went through them. Jack kept expecting her to mention how important Agnessa was, but no one did, and Agnessa never interrupted. Second to Toothiana and North was Pitch, which made Jack frown.

‘But none of you want him.’

‘It’s complicated,’ Toothiana said. ‘But if he accepts the role of Admiral of the Resistance, he is always second to myself and North.’

‘Above…Bunnymund? And like…?’ Jack looked over at Agnessa, frowning.

‘Yes,’ Toothiana said clearly. ‘We’ll need to have a meeting to chat about where you stand in relation to him, because you’re likely not going to call him by his title around the others, so we need to ensure they understand why that’s happening. I’d like that not to simply be because he’s fucking you.’

Jack’s toes curled down towards the ground. This was stupidly embarrassing. No wonder Pitch had vanished. Jack wanted to do the same thing.

‘North will want to make you a Guardian,’ Toothiana said, as though she had no real opinion about it either way, which Jack knew couldn’t be true. ‘It’s up to you if you decide to move in that direction, but if you do, it will certainly make it easier for the others to understand why you’re not calling Pitch, Admiral.’

‘Okay,’ Jack said, feeling like he should stay non-committal on everything.

‘I know it’s all very new for you,’ Toothiana said. ‘And Pitch has communicated to us at length about some of the things you’ve concluded, and also many of the things you’ve learned over the past few weeks.’

‘He has?’ Jack said.

‘Pitch has been sending communiques to us regularly since we fled,’ Toothiana said.

‘If it helps,’ Eva said softly, ‘he was mostly asking about Seraphina, Anton and myself.’

Toothiana’s lips quirked, and she nodded.

‘So…can I ask why? Like…why you’re here?’ Jack said, turning to Agnessa. ‘Is it for protection?’

‘Somewhat,’ Agnessa said, smiling at him. Her eyes were warm even now, and Jack wondered if she let Eva and Toothiana do all the talking, because she was used to Gavril taking over all the time. But somehow she didn’t seem like a pushover. She was also surprisingly old-looking. He was so used to the youthful perfection of the Tsar, but Agnessa had frown lines around her mouth, and smile lines at her eyes. Her forehead wasn’t unlined even when it was relaxed.
‘For the Tsesarevich?’

‘I have never been…in love with Gavril,’ Agnessa said. ‘We married because he wanted an heir, and because he wanted my familial lineage. It had very little to do with me, and he wanted very little to do with me, and that suited me. I lived an enshrouded, sheltered life, out of the public eye, and I gave birth to Mihail, who revealed himself to be unsuitable as heir, and Gavril did his own thing, as he’s ever done.

‘Staying out of the public eye for my protection, also became my salvation. I needed attendants to dress and fuss over me, and I was sent Flitmouse and his team. Through them, I came to know Toothiana. And through my protection details, I came to know Eva, who has long been friends with Toothiana. They have been my very closest friends, like sisters. I have been a member of the Resistance for many years now. I have never worked directly against Gavril, but I have worked for the health of Lune, to preserve what might be left of her heart. I always knew I’d leave the Palace when it was time.’

‘And…the Tsesarevich?’

‘He is not a Tsesarevich,’ Agnessa said. ‘He doesn’t want to rule. He is simply Mihail. He is a little odd by other people’s standards, but he’s a bright and dear child who I want to grow up in a world that’s different to the one we have now. He has little love for his father, seeing him more as a myth or…the monster in the old folklore. I have not tried to make him believe such a thing. He simply sees it this way. He is perceptive, and he has always listened to us closely. He didn’t speak or sign to us for many years, but he could understand us and his father. We didn’t realise how much. Mihail knew more about Gavril’s true nature, his true motives, before I did. He didn’t tell anyone, because he didn’t want us to hurt. I have to protect someone with a heart like his.’

‘So you know about Gavril and like…the Shadows,’ Jack said, looking between them all cautiously. It seemed weird that he knew, and Pitch knew, but then that they did too? It felt like such a huge secret.

‘Yes,’ Agnessa said.

‘Did he ever hurt you?’

‘Not like that,’ Agnessa said. ‘And, honestly, given what I know of him…not especially. Nothing compared to others, and nothing that I couldn’t heal from with the help of my sisters. I was fortunate he was never truly attracted to me, and never gave me his devotion except during courtship. He wants very little to do with me. I’m here to help in whatever capacity I can.’

‘To be Tsarina,’ Toothiana said softly. ‘Actually.’

‘Yes,’ Agnessa said, smiling. ‘For that.’

‘You see,’ Toothiana said, ‘we have a problem. A huge problem that is perhaps more insurmountable than the immediate battle ahead. It is Pitch’s and North’s job to decide what we must do to remove the Tsar from power. It is a monumental responsibility to decide what to do after that. To remove what is essentially the god of Lune, the personal saviour of all, the one who has brought the Light to deliver the citizens from the Darkness. If they are not already aligned with us, many will hate us and organise against us, and seek more than ever to hold by Gavril’s principles, his creches, his plans, once he’s gone.’

Eva walked over and sat on the stool that Mihail had occupied, placing her elbow on the table and leaning her head on her hand. Suddenly she looked very tired, very sad. But she still gestured for
Jack to pull up a stool as well. Instead he floated up and sat on another table, opposite Toothiana, facing them all.

Agnessa’s expression turned wistful to see Jack moving like that, and Jack took a moment to remember why. He’d become so used to his ice powers, his ability to move. It felt so natural.

‘If we imagine a world without Gavril,’ Toothiana explained, ‘we must also imagine the chaos and grief that will follow. A nation outraged and in denial and unable to believe the truth. As you were unable to. Imagine your resistance to understanding the truth of what happens on Lune, the lies we’ve been told, and imagine that amplified. Imagine it in the sick and the elderly. Imagine it in children who live only to possess a coin with their Tsar’s face on it. Imagine it in those who are weaker or stronger, refusing to accept what is before them.’

Jack couldn’t imagine it. He tried, and within seconds it became too big for him to even contemplate. As though his brain simply couldn’t contain the hugeness of it. He swallowed, his mouth dry, looking between the three of them.

‘So it won’t help,’ Jack said, his voice strained. ‘To remove him? It won’t help at all? It will make things worse?’

‘Yes,’ Toothiana said. ‘It will. In the short term, these people believe freedom is the Tsar commanding Golden Warriors on their behalf. It’s not critical thinking. It is not engaging in philosophical debate or choosing a new leader. They cannot simply be expected to learn what they not only have never been taught, but have been told they will be killed for learning, overnight. They cannot even be expected to learn that in their lifetimes. For some of them, the worst thing that will ever happen to them, will be the removal of the Tsar. We cannot stop that.’

It hurt to think about. It was a visceral ache in his chest. He wrung his staff in both of his hands, thinking that he’d been on some grand, epic journey to somehow find a way to defeat the Tsar. And then…what? He’d live with Pitch, or something like that, and everything would become some kind of better normal.

‘It’s a lot to take in,’ Eva said. ‘It is. And you have to understand that this is something we don’t share with everyone who comes here. If you are to become a Guardian, even if you are simply to work along Pitch’s side, you need to know what is coming. He knows, that is why he is the way that he is. The exhaustion isn’t simply…this, now. Or the past. It is the future, too.’

‘And so my role,’ Toothiana said, ‘as Chief Strategist, has been to use the past to structure the future. To that end, Agnessa has been in training for many years now, to accept the mantle of Tsarina of Lune once Gavril is gone. She is already well-recognised and well-loved, and we know her son won’t be able to take up the mantle. We do not have to prepare the people of Lune to accept the grieving widow of Gavril, because they will be grieving with her. It will be Agnessa’s role to take on that grief, to condemn us – the Guardians – and promise that she will seek justice for what has been done. If necessary, she will imprison some of the Golden Warriors, perhaps pardoning them over the years as need be, to remove the lingering Darkness. But everyone in Lune will know that her mercy will only happen on behalf of the survival of the citizens, that her grief will echo their grief. They will attach to her as a figurehead.’

Agnessa nodded soberly.

‘By the end,’ she said, ‘the plan is that I will be hated.’

‘What?’ Jack said, staring at her, wide-eyed.
‘I will not live forever,’ Agnessa said ruefully. ‘And Lune must change. It must learn to think critically. It must learn to understand what the Tsar did, what caused the arrival of the Darkness, and his role in it. Our role in it. As they learn, they will begin to understand that the Resistance – who I will have publically condemned, even as I work with them in secret – actually saved them. They will look for someone new. They will dare to imagine a leader who isn’t royalty.’

‘Someone royalty-adjacent, perhaps,’ Toothiana said. ‘That part is unforeseen. But I have been working for some time to manoeuvre Seraphina into that position. Daughter of the Admiral of the Resistance, wild and freedom-loving, she already wants to protect the people of Lune so badly. She wants to teach others. And we’ve encouraged it.’

‘She is a good teacher,’ Eva said, blinking at Jack slowly, ‘isn’t she?’

‘And she already calls herself a princess,’ Agnessa said.

‘I have contingency plans,’ Toothiana said, ‘but should Seraphina step up to the throne, to rule, I expect she will be widely beloved. With her normal lifespan, her adoration of growing things, which is what the citizens will need. Growth.’

‘You’re thinking decades from now,’ Jack said.

Toothiana laughed, smoothing her bright blue coat where it was trimmed in violet and green. Her hands were adept, brown fingers ending in manicured violet, tipped with gems. She – like Gavril – was always perfectly coiffed when he saw her. He wondered how much she’d influenced Gavril, or if it was the other way around, or if it was just what some members of the Palace were like.

‘Decades,’ Toothiana said. ‘Only decades?’

‘We live forever,’ Eva said, offering Jack a small smile. ‘One day you will understand, Jack. We are not only thinking decades ahead. Not Toothiana and I.’

‘Long after Agnessa is gone,’ Toothiana continued, ‘Seraphina will rule, and then – in an ideal world – when she dies, the people will need someone who can provide stability. Who can anchor them into a new, growing Lune. They will want a ruler who will stay with them. And who better to do that…’ Toothiana trailed off, looking down.

Eva cleared her throat, her eyes glittering wetly. ‘Who better than a grieving mother who was once the Captain of the Fleet? They won’t want Pitch, and he wouldn’t want it either. That’s never been his trajectory. The plan has always been that when the time is right, I will become Lune’s Admiral, that I will be proud of my daughter when she becomes Tsarina, and then that I will…I suppose, deal with that inevitable loss by giving myself another job to do. I will cherish Lune the way I won’t be able to cherish her. I might as well be useful, darling. A mother is not much use as a mother, when she no longer has a child.’

Toothiana slid off the table and walked over to Eva, placing a gentle, slim-fingered hand on her shoulder. Her violet eyes were sympathetic, and she turned them to Jack.

‘These are not easy things to talk about,’ Toothiana said. ‘Of course everything might change. But Seraphina will die, and we can use that for Lune. It will take centuries to bring anything like proper stability to Lune, and even then, things will still need to change. Will people let go of the creches? Will the members of the outreaches uprise against us? I expect some rage towards even the members of the Resistance for holding such status, for so long, for using it against them.’

‘Kids finding out about the serum you’ve been giving their parents,’ Jack said slowly. ‘By the
Darkness, I can’t- Not letting us learn to read properly, or-

He felt sick. A thick, unavoidable nausea that swamped his words and made him close his mouth so he didn’t retch right there. He could see the strings that they were pulling not just now, but all the way into a future that he couldn’t fathom, couldn’t begin to fathom. He imagined Pippa, it was so much easier to deal with it when he only thought about how it had hurt him, but when he thought of her…

He took several deep breaths, hating how they shook.

‘You’re…you’re basically going to manipulate everyone from here into whatever future you imagine. Thinking you know what’s best? That you’ve always known what’s best? And you secretly hate us anyway, you don’t fight for Lune,’ Jack said bluntly, even as Toothiana’s expression didn’t change. ‘We’ve only done awful things to you and yours since the beginning, right? You heard them when you went in the mountain, you said that. And you know what that means- You heard them, because Gavril took that orb and used it to eat their souls and their magic when you were fighting back against him, the Darkness, so that they were trapped in the orb. Do you even want what’s best for Lune?’

‘I want to make sure that what happened here, can never happen again,’ Toothiana said evenly.

Jack knew he’d crossed some line from the way Agnessa and Eva were both looking at him. Not shocked, exactly, but like they hadn’t expected him to speak so openly. So angrily. Well, he was in it now, might as well say what he was actually thinking.

‘Well, you can’t do that,’ Jack said. ‘You can’t stop someone like Gavril from ever being born again. Are you going to execute Sharpwood, who thought it was a good idea at the time? What about Pitch, who is the one who knows how to destroy planets and has done it? Are you just banking on him feeling enough regret? Playing on his misery and making him feel like he’s not a part of all of this, so what- he’ll fight to belong? Or so you drive him away? I’m sure that’s part of your plan. If you’ve been thinking ahead for decades- You put me in the path of Bunnymund, and made it so he could kill me, just to see what Pitch would do! As a test! Don’t think I’ve forgotten. I know what your stupid plans do! And Flitmouse! I don’t see him here. Someone like you is how we end up in situations like this in the first place. People who think they know what’s right for an entire country, and then manipulate everyone until they all just tell you that you could never be wrong.’

‘Yes,’ Toothiana said eventually, her voice muted, ‘I think North will very much want you to become a Guardian.’

‘Fuck this,’ Jack said, scrubbing at his face, not realising how angry he’d gotten. ‘I’m fighting for Lune. Not you. Not your stupid plans. I’m going to find Pitch. No wonder he didn’t want to be here for this. No wonder.’

He left, leaving a flurry of snow behind him, and was furious enough to slam the door on the Spymaster, on the Captain of the Fleet, on the Tsarina. He didn’t care. The worst part was he could see that Toothiana’s plan was still the better option. Somehow, that mess, was still the better option. He slammed his staff into the floorboards as he went, and a crackling six-pointed figure crazed away from it, the ice spiking up.

He walked down the corridor, not seeing anyone to flag and ask about Pitch’s rooms. He grimaced when he heard the door behind him open. When he heard the quick, running steps. He turned, ready to yell at whoever it was – expecting Eva – and stopped short when he saw it was Toothiana. No longer perfectly composed, her heels clicking, her coat flapping briefly until she stopped in
front of him, one foot on ice, the other on the floorboards.

She opened her mouth, closed it, and then stared down at him. She didn’t look angry like he expected. He couldn’t think of what to say either. She still kind of scared the crap out of him, but she was also the one who had praised him for not trusting them, for not taking them at their word.

‘I wish…’ she said. Then she closed her eyes and smiled, a pained expression. She took a breath and started again. ‘I wish you could have met me as I was. Not as I am now. Not who I’ve become. I wish you could have known me then. Because I think we would have been friends. And now I know how you see me, because of course I am what you think I am, and I know how I see myself.’

She looked down at her fingernails, as though seeing them for the first time. She looked at her teal boots with their heels. A quick sigh, and she flashed a bright smile at Jack, which was somehow forced and not at the same time. It was hard to imagine that she’d ever been anything other than the Spymaster, but like North and Bunnymund, even Sharpwood, she’d probably once led a completely different life. One she missed and couldn’t get back.

The energy that had fired him up vanished, and he felt deflated.

‘I used to be a warrior,’ Toothiana said softly. ‘The most joyous, in battle and out of it. I can’t quite remember what it was like, not being able to remember the details of everyone’s past. Not having that encyclopedia of knowledge behind me, to see what we might do in the future. It is a strange, unwelcome prescience. Can you imagine?’ Toothiana laughed, the sound sweet. ‘I miss that. But the mountain gave me what it gave me. That orb, as you say. I can’t remember exactly what I was thinking. Maybe I wanted to remember who I was, who they were, my sister-warriors, taken by the Darkness.’

Footsteps in the distance, and they both looked in that direction. Toothiana waited for far longer than Jack, once the sounds had dissipated, before she met his eyes again. She stepped forwards and slid her warm fingers under his chin, and her eyes were kind.

Jack cleared his throat. He was pretty sure his hand was iced to his staff. Something about Toothiana made him curious and frightened at the same time. She’d given him warm chocolate in her tower the second time they’d met. The very first time, she knew everything about him, even though she asked about Jamie, and the shadow sickness, and talked about North. She’d always shared things with him, but it was like seeing the new green leaves emerging from the fog, and not realising there was a forest beneath.

Somehow, despite everything, he liked her. He wanted to like her more, but he couldn’t.

‘I like it when you speak up,’ she said, letting go of his chin and touching his shoulder, as lightly as she’d touched Eva’s. ‘Others might talk of showing respect and how we’re your elders and have experience, but you’ve got a good head on your shoulders, Jack. Use it. Keep using it.’

She bent down and kissed his forehead, and Jack was pretty sure she’d left a smear of lipstick on it from the feel. But then her thumb came up and rubbed it away, an affectionate smile on her face.

‘More strategizing for me! Go find Pitch, I’m sure he’s discovered we’ve been using some of his rooms for storage and is a tad put out.’

She turned and walked back towards the room she’d left, leaving Jack alone in the corridor.

*  

There was no one to flag down, when Jack went searching for Pitch’s rooms. He went up stairs,
down stairs, and the headquarters were way larger than he’d first thought. The Guardians each kind of had a – well maybe not a wing, but they all had more than one room to themselves. When he realised he was approaching E. Aster Bunnymund’s wing – according to the plaque on the corridor, he sharply turned and spun his staff nervously, his breath turning colder in his lungs.

So Bunnymund was on the top floor. North and Toothiana were on the second. He couldn’t find any rooms for the Holy Priest Sanderson, but maybe he didn’t stay here. So where in the Darkness was Pitch?

He ended up back on the first floor again, and then heard voices up ahead, footsteps, laughter. He breathed a sigh of relief. He could finally just ask someone.

He was surprised to see Anton turning the corridor with two other Golden Warriors, saying something that made the other two laugh. When he spotted Jack, he said goodbye to the others and made a beeline towards him.

‘Hello!’ Anton called, beaming. ‘Got lost?’

‘Seriously, this place…’

‘I know,’ Anton said, ‘I was looking for you, my fine lad, but got distracted by Anatoly and Vladimir. I’m sure you’ll get to meet them later.’

Jack nodded, felt a little awkward. Began following Anton through the headquarters.

‘Pitch is settling in. I’m still not sure what to think about Sharpwood. I trust Pitch, but…still…’

‘Yeah, I know what you mean,’ Jack said. ‘But he seems okay. I mean Sharpwood. I don’t think he wants us to trust him, honestly, which helps.’

‘I see, I see,’ Anton said. ‘Hey, can we have a quick chat? Before you see Pitch?’

‘Um…sure,’ Jack said. Anton grinned, and then grabbed Jack by the wrist and pulled him into a side room like he’d planned it. Jack looked around, and realised they were in some kind of medical ward. There were some hospital beds, some chairs, white shelving filled with medicine bottles. The room had an air of disuse, smelling dusty.

Anton drew Jack over to two chairs, and dusted both with his hands before he gestured for Jack to sit, doing the same.

‘Are we good?’ Anton said, pressing his palms down into his knees. ‘We never had a chance to properly talk about anything, and the last time you and I were on our own, you were angry, and had every right to be. Look, I really felt like what I was doing was the right thing, but there were so many other ways I could have gone about it. Maybe I should have explained things better to you. Or had you there when I talked to Pitch? I have a habit of going off half-cocked sometimes. It’s that whole Anton the Brave thing.’

It was arresting, having Anton’s undivided attention. Those bright eyes, so much brighter than Pitch’s, or anyone else’s. The way he gazed at Jack like he was the only person Anton had ever wanted to hold in high regard.

‘I mean it helped,’ Jack said, shaking his head. ‘It helped. It needed to happen, I suppose. I didn’t get it at the time. I don’t know how you could’ve explained it so that I did. I just- I didn’t get it.’

‘I hate the idea that we wouldn’t be friends, or even more than that one day. I don’t know.
Whatever you want, of course. I don’t know what you think about me, but I do care about you. A lot, actually. Rather a lot. It’s more than the fact that you’re cute.’

Jack laughed helplessly. He’d forgotten this. And, he realised, he missed it.

‘I like your hair, the dark silver thing,’ Jack said.

‘Yes, me too,’ Anton said, touching his hair and looking up as though he could see it. ‘I think it makes me look distinguished. Pitch, the rude bastard that he is, told me it made me look old.’

‘Rude.’

‘And you and Pitch? That’s…going well?’ Anton waggled his eyebrows, and Jack rolled his eyes and pressed his palm to his face.

‘Sort of? Yes? I dunno. He’s not- Um, I don’t think either of us know what we’re doing. Which I get why I’m like that, but he’s done relationships before. Lots of them. With like everyone.’

‘I think it’s different with you,’ Anton said. ‘That’s what I was hoping, anyway. I’m sure you’ll both figure it out. I know you said you’d never…trust me again, or talk to me about those things, but in the future, if you wish, my door is always open if you want someone to talk to. And I get how he thinks sometimes. Although I think if you just keep in mind that he’s an irascible, grumpy baby, you’ll go far.’

‘Look, I- I meant the things I said when I said them,’ Jack said, and then frowned when Anton’s expression fell. ‘But you were in my corner, Anton. I didn’t understand that at the time. On my side, it just looked like I was so lucky to have Pitch give me any attention like that, and you were going to take it away, by trying to turn it into something it wasn’t.’

‘I should have told you my suspicions,’ Anton said. ‘Which was that I thought he was falling for you, and being an irredeemable wanker about it. Pitch has a tendency to respond to soft, warm feelings with monumental emotional feats of constipation.’

Jack snorted, and Anton winked at him.

‘I guess I can see that,’ Jack said. ‘He’s getting better.’

‘Good. Very good. I suppose this means you and I won’t be kissing anymore. And I won’t be drawing you over my knee.’ Anton leaned back in his chair and slumped melodramatically. ‘What’s a boy to do? I’ve been ever so solicitous, I’ve taken myself out of the game. Or,’ he opened his eyes a bit and squinted at Jack, ‘have I?’

‘Uh,’ Jack said, biting the inside of his lip. How did Anton do that? As soon as he brought it up, it sounded like a great idea. He thought of Pitch, and they’d not talked about it or anything. Jack had just expected that Pitch would keep sleeping with Anton and other people, but he’d never thought what his relationship with Pitch meant in terms of… Should he talk to Pitch about it first? Would Pitch think it was stupid?

He did kind of want to keep kissing Anton. The spanking thing though…

‘So you…’ Jack hesitated, even when Anton lifted his hand in a gesture to encourage Jack to keep talking. ‘I mean you- I…’

‘I do like this part,’ Anton said, grinning wickedly. ‘How long will it take before that wears off, do you think? This part, where you stumble over everything because you’re still not sure if you even
like spanking?’

‘Oh that’s not- I mean I know- I just…’

‘Loving this part,’ Anton said. ‘I’m a fan. You could perform at parties, you’ll be a hit.’

‘Just shut up for a second,’ Jack said, laughing.

‘Yes, this does seem to be the point where people lose their patience with me,’ Anton said. ‘I’d just like to say, given I’m auditioning my services, that I give wonderful care after I’ve blown your mind. Wonderful. Cuddles for days.’

‘Did you draw me aside to like apologise? Or to flirt?’

‘Yes,’ Anton said. ‘Yes, I did.’

‘Are you going to be like this all the time?’

‘Yes,’ Anton said, beaming. ‘I suspect I am. Look, people deal with war and the world falling apart in different ways. This is my way. I’m going to be having a lot of sex in the next few weeks. My calendar is full and my ass is sore, and that’s usually the way I like it.’

Jack covered his face with his hand. ‘I really have never met anyone like you.’

‘Is it too much?’ Anton said. ‘You’re so sweet, I can’t help myself. Though it’s still all true. I don’t like to lie. Look, I’m getting ahead of myself. First – I apologise for our falling out. It was my fault. I don’t believe I was wrong to do what I did, but I do believe there were more graceful ways to go about it. Can you ever forgive me?’

‘I think I already have,’ Jack said. Anton’s resulting smile was so warm that it made Jack feel lighter, just to say the words. They were true, as well. Anything Anton had ever done for Jack, he’d done it out of care, and a sense of love. It was weird, and Jack didn’t know what he’d ever done to attract Anton’s regard like that. He liked having it though.

‘Excellent,’ Anton said, standing. ‘And as to the other thing. Do you think I might steal a kiss? Just the one. You can – of course – say no.’

Anton was already walking towards him, and Jack swallowed as Anton’s fingers curled around the armrests on both sides. He leaned down, and then paused, and Jack thought it was pretty hard to say no when someone looked at him like that. All intent but playful. It was different to Pitch though, way less terrifying for a start. That dude had such a boner for fear.

‘You’re not saying no,’ Anton said, smiling.

‘I guess I’m not,’ Jack said, resisting the urge to bite his lips, to lick them. He worried they might be too dry. He worried that his breath would smell. He worried that-

Anton leaned down and kissed him.

First it was warm, dry skin against him – lips against lips, and so gentle. Anton’s nose rested next to Jack’s, his mouth was still upturned in that smile, and fingers came and slid up Jack’s neck until they could cradle his chin, bracket his ear. It was like the warmth that Anton carried in his spirit found its way through that kiss, made it easy for Jack to relax into it, for his lips to part, his thoughts to settle.
The kiss stayed gentle, and Anton’s lips caressed Jack’s, his tongue slowly licked along sensitive skin. He teased until Jack was leaning forward, trying to do the same to Anton, and that was when Anton withdrew, stepped back and winked.

‘You’re good at that,’ Jack said, pressing his fingers to his lips.

‘Practice,’ Anton said. ‘You’re good at that too. Anyway, shall I show you to Pitch’s rooms now? He’s probably wondering where you’ve gotten to. I’d best be responsible.’ He took a huge breath and exhaled heavily, as though he hated it. But Jack knew it wasn’t true. Anton was surprisingly responsible. He played up being a fool, but his concern for the wellbeing of the people around him was strong enough to risk breaking his friendship with Jack, and – probably – his connection with Pitch, too.

‘Okay,’ Jack said. ‘We better do that.’

Anton held out his hand, palm up, and Jack slid his fingers into that grip, smiling. He did make a point of floating just above the ground though, partly because he could, and partly because he liked the way Anton kept looking down every minute, as though reminding himself it was real.

*

It was easy to understand why he couldn’t find Pitch’s rooms. Because the double doors into the training arena filled with soft sawdust had – at first glance – just looked like a training arena. They skirted around the edges, Jack watching veterans working against each other in direct combat, not using their Light at all. They were all so focused that none of them paid much attention to Anton, or even Jack.

On the opposite side of the arena, a single nondescript door that had a stained wooden plaque above it: *Kozmotis ‘Pitch’ Pitchiner*. The other plaques had been made of metal. They entered, and instead of a room, they walked along a corridor that had large windows to the left viewing the outside – a ground of concrete, and all indications were that this was also an area used for training.

‘Okay,’ Jack said. ‘I guess its pretty obvious what he focuses on. I didn’t know he’d be on the ground floor.’

‘He likes to be close to the action,’ Anton said.

‘Really literally.’

A door open to the right, showing a room filled with weapons, armour, even cannons. Jack didn’t know why he’d expected something more peaceful, like at the cottage. Maybe because this stuff was never so brazenly displayed in Pitch’s section of the Palace. But this was…unavoidable.

Another door open, another room, filled with star-charts, portable blackboards with the kind of travelling formula that pilots needed to be able to calculate. Books stacked in corners. A soldier Jack had never met before, looked up from the book she was staring at, and lifted a hand in a businesslike greeting, before going back to whatever she was studying.

‘Does Seraphina stay here?’ Jack said, voice hushed.

‘No,’ Anton said. ‘Eva stays nearby, and Seraphina splits her time. There’s a hall that connects Eva’s to Pitch’s rooms that bypasses this part. Pitch will just as often stay in our rooms, because they’re less…like this. It must be a bit of a shock. You’re still not used to combat at all, are you?’

‘No,’ Jack said. ‘Aside from Endan…’
Anton ruffled Jack’s hair, then opened the double doors at the end of the corridor.

‘Here we go, Pitch’s bachelor pad! There, did I get that right?’

Pitch sipped at whatever glass of liquor he was drinking, and then placed it carefully on a side table. This lounge was so much like the one back at the Palace, that Jack almost did a double take. A lot of the furniture was similar. The dark, brooding colour scheme was similar. He was certain that he could use one of the doors to find a ‘special’ room like the one Pitch had back at the Palace.

Except that this room was pretty dusty, there was a stack of large cardboard boxes in the corner that had been there for what looked like years, and Sharpwood was sitting at a table, reading a book, not paying anyone any attention at all.

‘All right,’ Anton said. ‘My work here is done. I’m off. You wanted the second and third patrols assessed, didn’t you?’

‘The third is more important,’ Pitch said.

‘Yeah, I’ll start with them. Farewell!’

Jack stood there awkwardly once Anton had left. It was weird.

‘I yelled at Toothiana,’ Jack said.

‘Good,’ Pitch said. He finished the rest of his drink, and then stood up, walking off towards one of the side doors. ‘I’ll give you a tour.’

Jack followed, thinking that Pitch wasn’t approachable like Anton was. Anton was someone Jack felt like he could probably bother at any time, and Pitch was someone who...seemed like he didn’t want to be bothered by anyone, ever, except maybe Seraphina. Jack knew it wasn’t true, Pitch was okay when Jack bothered him for the most part, but Pitch didn’t have that same open character that Anton did.

‘I didn’t know if you wanted to sleep in my room, or have a room of your own,’ Pitch said, the words coming after a slight hesitation. ‘So...I sleep in here.’

Pitch’s room was large, and aside from the pack Pitch had set upon the bed, it looked undisturbed. Jack coughed as he breathed in a mouthful of dust.

‘Yes,’ Pitch said, ‘I suppose they really didn’t expect me to come back.’

‘That’s kind of annoying? Everywhere else is really clean.’

‘It is kind of annoying, isn’t it?’ Pitch said, walking into the bedroom and opening a side door. ‘This is your room. If you want it. There’s a bathroom in the corridor, or I suppose you can use mine. At least I know you won’t be using all the hot water.’

Jack peered into the room, wondered who else had slept there in the past. Had it been Fyodor’s room once? Or...had Pitch not had a chance to return, before Fyodor was executed?

‘All right, that’s done,’ Pitch said. ‘You can explore the rest of the rooms yourself. There’s a kitchen, and a door that leads to Eva’s, since they kept her rooms clean, you might prefer it there.’

‘I’d...rather be here,’ Jack said. ‘Are you okay? You’re acting kind of weird.’

Pitch looked down his nose at Jack and frowned.
‘Well, you are,’ Jack said defensively. ‘If you don’t want me to sleep in your room with you, you can just-’

‘It’s not that,’ Pitch said abruptly. ‘I don’t want to be here. And now that I’m here, I’ve remembered in rather vivid detail what this will look like – a lot of soldiers and very, very earnest new recruits throwing their lives away, while I order them to do it. Believe it or not, that’s not my favourite part of being Admiral, and I’m in no hurry to do it again. Yet I will, while enduring the constant sniping from the Guardians of Lune. My patience for it is at an all-time low. I didn’t think that was possible.’

‘Anything’s possible,’ Jack deadpanned.

Pitch’s lips quirked, and that small thing, not even a smile, was enough to make Jack realise that he was where he belonged. He was in the right place.

‘I’ll stay in your room,’ Jack said.

‘Good,’ Pitch said, closing his eyes. If Jack didn’t know any better, he’d say that Pitch looked relieved. Had he been worried that Jack wouldn’t want to?

‘Because I want to,’ Jack added. ‘Because I need to be able to annoy the crap out of someone.’

‘So do I,’ Pitch said, opening his eyes.

‘So are we going to clean your rooms, or whatever?’

‘No, cleaners are going to do that, because that’s their job. You and I are going to decide where you fit in the training roster. No more slacking, it’s time to see what you’re really made of.’

Jack didn’t point out that he felt like he’d already done that, what with Pitch taking ages just to get Jack’s darkness to show itself, because he could tell that Pitch meant something different. Besides, in a way, he was excited for it. He wasn’t jaded like Pitch, and he wanted to fight on behalf of Lune. He had something to fight for, after all, and it was what he’d trained for all his life.

He was ready to prove himself.
You Are Mine

Chapter Notes

Apologies for the delay! December has been roughhh, and then on top of that, this chapter decided it would be over *10,000* words so like, at least there's a lengthy chapter to sink into! I hope you all have a good festive season <3 Thanks so much for reading. :)

Jack hadn’t been able to properly stretch his ice powers – not in combat – for some time. There was a cleared area of paved stone near Pitch’s rooms, and no apparent witnesses, though Jack was sure some people were watching. Pitch stood some distance away, and told Jack to do whatever he liked. It was a far cry from being ordered to do specific drills, and for a few minutes Jack just stood there, ice creeping out from beneath his feet as he wondered what to do.

It took a moment for him to realise he could do anything.

Jack shot up into the air like an arrow, remembering what Toothiana had said about how they monitored people leaving, and covered himself with flurries of snow. The sky was already laden with clouds from Jack’s snow cover when they’d arrived.

He moved through it at speed, breathing coming fast, a sense of excitement bubbling in him as he concentrated and brought the Light to his hands. It was so much easier since Sharpwood had done that induction. It was incredible.

Thinking of Pippa and winter, the way everything could glitter after an untouched first snow, he willed the Light to glow throughout his staff.

It was only too easy to light up the skies, turn them white-gold, every piece of snow glowing as it fell.

He flew downwards quickly, tight spirals that were made even faster by the wind urging him on. He saw Pitch, who wasn’t looking up at the snow falling – even though Jack thought it was one of the most beautiful things he’d ever seen – but was staring at Jack.

The grin crossed his face quickly, and then he laughed. Pitch wanted to see what he could do? Jack didn’t even have to be close to raise the fortress of ice around Pitch. He saw it in his mind’s eye, felt the coldness rushing up through his lungs and breathed out ice crystals that tickled his mouth as the fortress rose to brutal points.

He sped low to the ground, spread his arms, and heard the sharp, crisp noises of ice snapping up into knife-sharp edges, paving stones too dangerous to be crossed. When he was done, the world was glowing gold, except where the light was hitting the spikes that Jack had raised from the ground. Jack cleared a space for himself near Pitch and stood calmly, staff in hand, and waited, staring at the ice fortress he’d made around Pitch and feeling like he could have done so much more.

But that was a good start.
It took Pitch five minutes to cut himself free with his sword. Then he stared around him, the tip of his sword scraping next to his boot.

‘So like that?’ Jack said. ‘You mean like that?’

‘Don’t be smug,’ Pitch said without looking at him.

‘But you totally meant like that, right?’

Pitch nodded slowly. ‘How much did that cost you? With the Light as well?’

‘Like…nothing,’ Jack said, bouncing on the balls of his feet. ‘I could do way more. Should I? Like, would it be fun to ice everyone in for the day? We could do heaps with this, right? I’m right, aren’t I?’

When Pitch looked over to him, eyes narrowed, an odd expression on his face, Jack was hovering a few inches off the ground.

‘This,’ Pitch said, waving towards Jack. ‘Are you- This exuberance, is it you? Or is it the ice?’

Jack started to think of a reply, floating back down to the ground again, when Pitch looked sharply to the right. Jack turned, dread bubbling in him, only to see faces pressed up against the glass windows of the corridor. There were at least forty people, most of them soldiers. But Anton was there, and North, and Toothiana. North was beaming, a look of wonder on his face as he stared up at the snow. But Toothiana was staring only at Jack, face expressionless.

‘Ignore them,’ Pitch snapped, like he hadn’t been the one to look at them in the first place. ‘Answer the question.’

Jack faced him, his mind racing. ‘I think… The ice. Or the wind. Maybe the wind. The wind likes to do stuff. And fast.’

‘So you have no real measure of how tired you are yet.’

‘No, I’m pretty sure-’

‘No,’ Pitch said abruptly. ‘I want you to vanish the ice – if we wait for it to melt we’re going to flood – and then we’re going to be observing the others on their training drills. Understand?’

‘I think-’

‘Jack.’

The hardness of Pitch’s voice, the expression on his face, and Jack realised that he wasn’t just having a conversation with Pitch, he was also talking back to the Royal Admiral. And he’d been given orders.

‘Yes,’ Jack said, voice smaller. ‘It might snow for a bit longer.’

They both looked up at the glowing clouds. Jack had no idea how long they’d hold the Light for, but as long as the clouds were wreathed in it, the snow that fell contained it.

‘I believe that is going to be very useful,’ Pitch said quietly. ‘If it does have a minimal energy cost, as you say, you may find yourself on the frontlines for any incursions into areas infested with Darkness. Can you make the snow inside?’
‘You know I can,’ Jack said.

‘Do you know what would happen if I took you over my knee in front of all these witnesses?’ Pitch said idly.

Jack’s gaze darted back to all those people who were still there. They were behind thick glass, so they couldn’t hear anything, but it didn’t stop Jack’s cheeks from burning. It also didn’t stop that weird anticipation either. Like, he did not want that to happen, ever. But privately?

‘I can make the snow inside,’ Jack said roughly.

Pitch smiled to himself, and then looked out over the training ground. ‘Get rid of this.’

Jack hopped up into an eager wind that ruffled the base of Pitch’s pants and robe before Jack flew away, using his staff to direct that invisible yet tangible force that let him dissolve the ice into crystals and send it off into the wild. He removed the ice fortress as well, and it was only as he came back to Pitch’s side – having scoured every corner for stray bits of ice in case Pitch said it wasn’t good enough – that he realised he was tiring. It wasn’t severe, a slight heaviness in his eyes, a fading of that reckless enthusiasm of before.

Pitch made a sound of frustration when he saw that everyone was still watching. He made a clipped gesture of dismissal at his neck, and Jack watched in bemusement as about forty Golden Warriors scrambled away. It left North and Toothiana. Even Anton had gone. Jack wasn’t sure if he wanted to talk to North or Toothiana. He knew he had to, but he was nervous about it. He had no idea what North really thought of him, and he just didn’t want to do anything that felt… momentous. Hadn’t he only just arrived?

‘Not in the mood to deal with them?’ Pitch said softly.

‘I have to though, don’t I?’

‘Nah,’ Pitch drawled, and Jack looked at him in shock. ‘You can fly, can’t you? There’s plenty of ways to get back into the building. If you go around it, you can enter through the front. If you’re happy enough watching people train in the snow, do that. Monitor your energy levels. I’ll deal with North and Toothiana.’

Jack wanted to stick around for that alone, but instead he jumped up onto the winds and flew away.

* *

It was strange, walking along the training soldiers. He didn’t know anyone except for Jamie and Cupcake. He had somehow assumed they’d all be new like him, but the more he watched, the more he realised that some of these people had been here for decades, maybe longer. There were Golden Warriors here, and they were immortal. Even the defector trainees with their normal lifespans, some of them were in their forties and fifties. It was a cadre as regimented and formal as anything Jack had experienced training with Crossholt.

There were differences. The drills were designed with combat against real people in mind, and not against the Darkness. The uniforms were the old design. There was a greater mix of experience within the squads and platoons. There were those being taught the basics, and those who moved through challenging drills with exceptional precision and timing, as though it was easy.

The Guardians had created this, maintained it, reinforced it. Jack couldn’t grasp the power, contacts and reach they had. Gavril hadn’t even known about Toothiana. All four of the Guardians frequently spent their time in the City of Lune, yet this organisation seemed to run smoothly
regardless. Did these people have so much faith? Had they replaced one set of blind beliefs with another?

Jack began to feel tired, spent some time watching Jamie shouting orders, so focused he didn’t notice Jack was there. It was a peculiar gladness. He was so happy Jamie was alive, and yet he couldn’t forget Pitch saying that he didn’t like the part where he sent people off to their deaths. Wasn’t that what everyone was training for?

The first Resistance movement had failed. Pitch had watched so many of his friends die or be placed in Asylums.

Jack looked around at the hundreds of people training and then turned around and went back into the building, wanting to think of something else.

*

The next morning, Jack woke early, the large bed already empty. Jack reached over to touch Pitch’s side, and the sheets were cold. He got up, showered quickly and went out into the main rooms. Sharpwood wasn’t anywhere to be seen, and Jack imagined he was just reading somewhere, or eating in private where no one could interrupt him. He’d not displayed any signs of wanting to know what the Resistance were doing, which Jack expected from a spy, so he put Sharpwood into the ‘weird but probably not super dangerous’ category in his mind, and walked to the kitchen that he’d found the night before.

Pitch was there, an empty plate with crumbs on it pushed aside on the table. He was reading a newspaper Jack hadn’t seen before. The Guardians Gazette. Jack blinked at it. That was several orders of illegal, and just seeing a sign of printing press that didn’t belong to the Tsar existing, let alone one that was creating a Resistance newspaper, made him stop and forget what he was doing.

‘That’s a thing?’

Pitch turned it so that Jack could see the headline: Snow Boy and Admiral of Resistance Arrive.

‘Um.’

‘You’re a celebrity,’ Pitch said, looking over the article. His lips quirked up. ‘This rag rarely contains much of use, but you might enjoy it.’

‘Snow Boy?’ Jack said indignantly. ‘Gavril changed my name to Jack Frost! In the name of the Light, what are they thinking? I already have a name. I have two!’

Pitch shrugged, and then blinked when Jack snatched the newspaper out of his hands. He scanned it quickly, glad it was in the common alphabet. Snow Boy.

‘I’m not ten,’ Jack muttered.

‘With the way you behave sometimes…’ Pitch said lightly.

‘Oh, well, they should be calling you Boy Admiral then, with the way you behave.’

‘Do you think it will catch on?’ Pitch said, standing and taking his plate over to the sink, before walking back and looking over Jack’s shoulder. The proximity was a little alarming, and Jack found himself unable to focus on the article.

‘If they’re going to call me this, they might as well go back to calling me Jack Overland. But no,
can’t do that, because Overlands are the worst.’

‘You don’t need to tell me,’ Pitch said, and Jack turned and looked up at him, to check if he was joking. It was impossible to tell. Pitch’s expression was somewhere around ‘I could be stirring you up but you’ll never know for sure.’ Pitch was good at that.

Pitch stepped closer to Jack’s back, narrowing the space between them until he could bend down and rest his chin on the top of Jack’s head, slid his hands around Jack’s waist.

‘That’s…’ distracting, Jack thought.

‘We’re living together.’

‘We’ve been kind of doing that for a while.’

‘You’re sharing my bed.’

‘Uh huh,’ Jack said slowly. It was hard to concentrate with Pitch standing behind him, those warm hands curved around him, holding him in place. It was casually possessive, and Jack stood rooted to the ground, staring blankly at the newspaper.

‘Yet I have no time to do all the things to you that I want to do.’

‘This is good.’

‘This is a novelty,’ Pitch said, drawing Jack backwards, until Jack’s back hit Pitch’s chest. The strange nerve endings across and through his scars tingled, flashed with sensation, and Jack wondered why it felt like this with Pitch, but was always different if he was lying down, or sitting against a chair. Had Pitch done that somehow? Made him notice? It made him breathless just to feel it. ‘Meanwhile, Anton has told me in no uncertain terms that he still has you in his sights.’

‘Oh,’ Jack said, his fingers tightening on the newspaper. ‘Yeah. Um. He kind of- We kissed? The other day? Is that-? Do we need to talk about…things? I don’t really know how this works. This whole…all the Golden Warriors just sleep with each other casually and like-’

‘Nothing about what I feel for you is casual.’

Jack gulped. No, it didn’t feel casual. But it never had. And Jack was pretty sure Pitch was this intense with everyone. Still, it was a thrill to hear Pitch actually say the words.

‘So it was bad that I kissed Anton?’

‘Ah, all right, let’s talk about this now while I have a spare ten minutes. Come sit down.’

‘This is good,’ Jack said.

‘If you think I can’t tell how much this distracts you, then you must be very distracted,’ Pitch said lowly, right against the back of Jack’s ear. Jack shivered, and then stepped out of Pitch’s arms to prove that he could do that, and he was fine. But when he turned to mock glare at Pitch, he couldn’t quite manage it at the impish expression he saw.

Instead of sitting on one of the chairs, Jack sat on the kitchen counter. Pitch sat back at his chair and faced him, crossing one leg over the other, looking amazing. Jack could still feel the tips of his fingers resting over Jack’s shirt, the warmth lingering.

‘So- How does it work?’ Jack said.
‘Do you have a problem with me fucking other people?’ Pitch asked bluntly.

‘No,’ Jack said. ‘I never have. I mean- I don’t… What we have is different, right? But even if it wasn’t- I mean I don’t… I just assumed you were still sleeping with other people and doing the things you do.’

‘Not as much lately,’ Pitch said, shrugging. ‘There’s been less time, and I’ve been preoccupied, and I find when I do have free time I want to be spending it with you. But I care about my relationship with Anton and Eva, and others too, and I shan’t be neglecting those forever.’

‘You sleep with Eva? But she’s- Isn’t she like you? Doesn’t she… Like who tops?’

Pitch laughed and then shook his head. ‘We usually top someone else, it’s…something of a relay race. I can rest while she takes over, and vice versa.’

Jack had never been into women, at all, but he’d learned that he was into people with dominating natures. The idea of the two of them together inspired both terror and curiosity.

‘Wait, you mean like Anton?’ Jack said.

‘Usually Anton.’

‘He’s so… He’s not like that with me,’ Jack said. ‘I mean I know he likes that, and he says he likes that – doing what I do, with others. But like, with me-’

‘Anton likes everything,’ Pitch said, smiling. ‘And he certainly likes the idea of topping you. If you were interested in that, you’d likely enjoy it. He’s got a very different style to mine. Much gentler.’

‘I don’t think that’d be hard,’ Jack said, going to swing his legs and accidentally slamming both of his heels into a kitchen cabinet door. ‘Ow.’

‘So, you don’t mind if I fuck others. Do you want to do the same?’

‘I mean- I just…’ Jack’s fingers clenched on the countertop.

‘You can,’ Pitch said slowly. ‘I have zero problems with it.’

‘I just…’

‘You have a problem with it,’ Pitch said, a faint question in his voice. Then: ‘Something concerns you?’

‘I know you all have expectations about how things will go,’ Jack said, looking down at the ground, feeling mortified. ‘I’m not- I really don’t want you all to myself or anything, because that’s kind of against who you are as a person. And I know you like things that I can’t handle, and I don’t want you to not have those things. So- It’s really not that? But I just… This matters to me. And I don’t know how to do it. And I know it matters to you, but I just- Like at the end of the day, I want you to be the one I- Fuck.’

‘Jack,’ Pitch said.

Jack refused to look up, the knuckles in his fingers hurt from how hard he was squeezing the bench he was sitting on.

‘Look at me, Jack,’ Pitch said. His tone was gentle, but the order was still clear. Jack forced his
neck upwards, and thought that it wasn’t any easier, even if Pitch’s expression was open, even concerned. Maybe that made things worse. ‘You are mine.’

Jack stared at him, and Pitch’s lips quirked up.

‘It’s simple, really,’ Pitch said. ‘You are mine. Unless you want it otherwise, you come home to my bed, and you may spend some time sleeping with other people, and so will I, but you and I are…’ Pitch looked aside, clearly trying to search for some term to describe it. When he looked back, his eyebrows knitted together. ‘I’ll tell you in the future, if I’ll be spending time with others in that manner. You don’t have to do the same, but you can if you want to. Jack, I haven’t wanted to share my bed with anyone, until you.’

‘Fyodor…’

‘No, let me be clearer. I’ve shared my bed with plenty. Hundreds. But I haven’t wanted to simply-To sleep by someone’s side. To share my personal space with them, the way I do you. Until you tell me otherwise, you belong to me. That is why it is easy to let you go off and do whatever you like with others. Because I know it,’ Pitch said, touching his fingers to his chest briefly. ‘Please stop comparing yourself to Fyodor.’

‘I will if you will.’

‘Touché,’ Pitch said, a sad smile gracing his face before vanishing. ‘Still, does it help? Having talked about it?’

‘It does,’ Jack said. ‘I’m kind of- I mean I am curious about Anton, y’know? Not really anyone else. But I like him.’

‘Me too,’ Pitch said.

‘You’re really going to tell me when you’re like…doing stuff with other people?’

‘It might be more pleasant for you than simply coming to bed one night and finding I’m not there,’ Pitch said. ‘And- Yes, I think so. I could try that. I’ve never done it before.’

Jack almost asked if he was serious, but it was obvious he was. Jack’s hands loosened on the benchtop as he realised how much Pitch wanted to try and make this work. Whatever it was. After months of pushing Jack away, or pulling him in only to treat him like he didn’t matter… Had this been there behind it the entire time? It was intimidating, Jack didn’t know if he could bring anything to the table that would match Pitch’s intensity, but he also wasn’t willing to back out of it, either.

The whole conversation had helped. Jack was still reeling over it.

‘You’re being all…honest and stuff,’ Jack said finally. ‘It’s...’

‘Yes, it’s rather odd for me too,’ Pitch said. Then he stood and sighed. ‘I would much rather stay and talk, but I am late to a meeting as it is. We can talk about this matter more later?’

‘If you want,’ Jack said. ‘But this helped a lot.’

Pitch walked up to him, leaned in and pressed his lips to Jack’s still open mouth. ‘Good.’

‘Uh,’ Jack said.
‘Must run.’

‘Okay.’

‘You have a busy day too, someone will be by.’

‘Cool.’

Pitch flashed him a quick, handsome smile, and vanished down the corridor.

Jack sat there for a couple of minutes longer, and then picked up his staff where he’d leaned it against the bench. He felt tingly and pleased, like something momentous had happened in less than ten minutes.

A loud knock on the door startled him, and he slid off the bench, realising that his day was probably going to be swamped with other things instead of just feeling giddy about Pitch.

* *

A week later, Jack was thoroughly tired of meetings. They were usually mind-numbingly boring, with moments of subject matter that roused his interest, before they moved into the minutiae of strategy again and Jack wondered why he was even there. Couldn’t they just point him in a direction and tell him what to do?

North, too, was persistent about Jack becoming a Guardian. At the end of the second meeting, he’d pulled Jack aside and said:

‘They are already calling you one, so what is the harm, really?’

‘What?’ Jack said. ‘Who are?’

‘Everyone here is saying that someone who makes snow that glows like that is being new Guardian,’ North said in some satisfaction. ‘If we are making it official, there is being ceremony, and I am thinking—’

‘Nope,’ Jack said, laughing a little. North glared down at him, and Jack shrugged, pretended that he wasn’t intimidated by North’s height and breadth and those wicked sabres belted at his hips, the black-work tattoos on his arms. ‘I’m still thinking about it. I don’t want to commit to anything. Like don’t get me wrong, I believe in what you guys are doing. But you haven’t even told me what it is to be a Guardian yet.’

‘It is up to you,’ North said softly. ‘There is no secret to it.’

‘Then why isn’t Pitch one?’

North looked flummoxed, and Jack floated backwards slowly, spreading his arms apologetically.

‘Sorry, man, I don’t see why I get to be one but he doesn’t.’

‘Jack, you are being ridiculous! We are going to be talking about this again.’

‘Cool!’ Jack said, floating backwards around a corner and waving. He grinned quickly to himself, flew away, and thought he’d somehow cheated the system. Especially when he heard a burst of laughter from North behind him.

But he still had to attend the meetings. There was a conspicuous lack of Bunnymund, even on
things that he should be there for. Jack had no idea where he was. They said he was around, but Jack wondered if they were covering up for him.

Meanwhile, Jack learned that they had to figure out all sorts of things. What to pay for different kinds of food and monitoring any vitamin and mineral shortages in the citizens. Whether it was ethical to splurge funding – such as it was – on nicer items, especially for name days. Where to find more oil stocks to keep the increased numbers of machinery running smoothly. There were apparently three building crews and two were fighting with each other for petty reasons to do with infidelity and an unexpected baby, and this was creating much unrest amongst those who were doing building maintenance, so one of the buildings that housed soldiers had no plumbing and that, understandably, was bad for morale. And so it went.

Then, a meeting on a Friday, and Jack’s interest was piqued immediately.

‘The Tsar has unleashed the Darkness on the City of Lune,’ Toothiana said, looking at all of them present. Several people Jack still barely knew the names of were there, as well as Pitch, North, Agnessa, Anton and Eva. Jack had been surprised to see Anton at the meetings, until he learned that Anton had one of the highest military ranks among the Resistance.

‘In what manner?’ Pitch said.

‘Reports are varied. Shadows slinking into bedrooms at night and consuming people. Entire families vanishing. Some connected to the Resistance, some not. There’s possessions. The Tower of Healing cannot keep up with bouts of shadow sickness, which is more severe than usual. People are dying from wasting within less than a handful of days. The Tsar says it is because some of his best people have betrayed him – that the Darkness is so zealous now – yet he is not letting his full contingent of remaining Golden Warriors out to fight the Darkness.’

‘He’ll be interrogating some,’ Pitch said. ‘Clearly he’s trying to force our hand.’

‘This is being our thinking,’ North said heavily. ‘Losses are already high. Two hundred, maybe three hundred dead. Others sick or dying. Families fragmented. He is luring us back into the City.’

‘We’re not ready for a battle of that scale on his home ground,’ Eva said.

‘We couldn’t send off a small number?’ Anton said. ‘Some kind of advanced fire team?’

‘To do what?’ Pitch snapped. ‘Die?’

‘If we take four soldiers, and three of them die, but we stop another two hundred deaths, that’ll sit okay on my conscience, actually,’ Anton said. He didn’t look like that was true, but Jack felt the same way. He was surprised that Anton was the only one who wanted to do something about it.

‘Is anyone evacuating?’ Agnessa said softly.

‘Evacuation is being marketed as disloyalty,’ Toothiana said, a wry smile on her face. ‘There’s some suggestion that if the City of Lune was truly a faithful place, this wouldn’t be happening.’

Agnessa looked down, her ears coloured red. Jack thought she was embarrassed, but when she looked up, Jack saw the spark of fury in her eyes. But she didn’t talk about rescuing anyone there either. Jack looked around desperately, waiting for someone to bring it up.

‘We should do something,’ Anton said. ‘They’ve been stirred to rebellion in the first place because of the Resistance.’
‘Not entirely endorsed by all of us,’ Toothiana said calmly. ‘And this isn’t our responsibility. The Tsar is trying to invoke guilt and play on our sense of shame and empathy. Remember that he is the monster, and we have one goal. That goal isn’t to save the City of Lune, it’s to defeat Gavril.’

‘Whatever we are doing in response to this,’ North said. ‘It will have to be considered, carefully, over the next few days at least.’

‘It’s good to hear some sense,’ Pitch said, writing something down in his notebook.

Jack’s fingers scraped the underside of the table, ice pressing up from the ground beneath his chair.

‘So,’ Jack said, his voice rough and strained. Pitch looked at him immediately, eyes narrowing. Jack hardly ever spoke in the meetings. ‘So like, correct me if I’m wrong, but what’s the point in defeating Gavril if there’s not even a City of Lune to save anymore? Isn’t the point to help the people?’

‘When we can, without compromising ourselves, of course,’ Toothiana said. ‘But we went off half-cocked into rescue missions before, and it has – invariably – almost never ended well for us. Gavril mounts some of his most brutal counter-attacks where he places people that need saving.’

‘What’s the point of all the training then? You have hundreds of people here! Surely you can spare-’

‘No,’ Pitch said firmly, staring at Jack.

‘I think Anton was right, and I think-’

‘No, Jack,’ Pitch said.

Hearing Pitch talk to him like that, Jack felt like he was a five year old being allowed at the adult’s table, and his hands clenched with it. He was humiliated. It only made his anger brighter, and he couldn’t believe that they weren’t doing more.

‘You all sit here and talk about how Luther from the first building team is stirring shit with Galahov from the second building team like that’s the most important part of your Darkness-cursed day, and then you hear that hundreds of people are being killed in the City of Lune and this is your response? Seriously?’

Jack stood, Pitch opened his mouth, and Jack pointed at him, gritting his teeth.

‘Don’t even,’ Jack said.

‘We can use it,’ Toothiana said, meeting Jack’s gaze with a steady one of her own. ‘Gavril will be expecting us to counter in the City of Lune, but I doubt he’ll be expecting us to counter with a rescue mission to the Asylums. I think we’re ready for that. I’d like Jack to come too. There’s one Asylum in particular that is particularly infested with the Darkness, but it’s where some of our most valuable Warriors are – or were, if indeed they’ve survived the experience. You can make your Light snow inside?’

Jack nodded, slowly sitting down again.

‘Good,’ Toothiana said. ‘It will, theoretically, bolster our ranks a bit. At the very least it will destroy some of the strongholds of the Darkness. He’s been using the Asylums as incubators now for centuries. There’d be some left afterwards, but we’re aiming for the most dangerous. It will be risky. Pitch has been overseeing the teams and strategies for the different Asylums.’
Jack looked at Pitch in surprise. He’d had no idea Pitch was doing that. Was that what Pitch stayed up late working on, when Jack got tired of waiting up for him and eventually fell asleep long past midnight? It seemed Pitch spent a lot of his time hunched over desks and talking to random older soldiers who kept coming to his offices. Jack had only seen him train once, with Anton and what looked like a team of elite soldiers. It had been arresting, but he’d only been able to watch for a couple of minutes before he’d been whisked off to familiarise himself with the inner workings of the Resistance.

‘He could destroy the City,’ Agnessa said, her voice pained. ‘He would, you know.’

‘I know,’ Toothiana said. ‘With citizens reluctant to evacuate, it’s tough. My agents say that those who are rebelling are either dead, dying, or have already fled. Of course, Pitch is absent and everyone has noticed. His reputation is destroyed.’

‘About time,’ Pitch muttered.

In Jack’s mind, there were a line of doors that kept closing. Each one slamming shut created a fresh wave of dread and horror. He remembered feeling it the first time, the idea that he might be a traitor to the Tsar, to Lune. Then when it was done, he felt relieved, it was over with and he could move on. But he felt it every time anew. They could never return to the City of Lune – that he’d loved and dreamed of living in – if Pitch’s reputation was dead. Jack could never go back.

He spun his staff under the table and the inside of his mouth felt far colder than usual.

He was confident in his abilities with his ice. He was confident that he could protect them with Light and snow if they wanted that. But everything else felt rushed. He wanted more time to make decisions before he made them. Instead, Pitch reacted nonchalantly to finding out he couldn’t go back home. The City of Lune was being destroyed. The Guardians talked about trade prices. Even Anton the Brave ceded to what they said, like he knew they were doing the right thing.

How did he know?

Everyone else seemed to learn that it wasn’t meant to be one way, so it could only be the other way. If loyalty didn’t go to the Tsar, then it had to go to the Resistance.

Jack felt like he was stuck in some weird grey area. He was loyal to Pitch, he knew that. He was loyal to himself, he’d learned that. He couldn’t be a Guardian in this organisation. Even if that’s what people were starting to call him; Guardian Jack Frost, resident snow boy. Anton and Eva and Agnessa and the others just following along, accepting Toothiana’s judgement, or North’s…it didn’t make it easier to trust them. It was harder.

The meeting ended on a discussion about the rescue missions to the Asylums, and Jack paid attention, and picked at his fingernails nervously, wondering when it would start to feel good. When the Tsar was defeated? When Gavril was dead? Maybe not even then.

He caught the contemplative gaze that Pitch directed his way, and the one that Anton did too, and that only made things more complicated. Jack wanted a break.

*  

That night, Jack showered in the warmest water he could manage without making himself feel sick. His skin pinched up, his hair plastered to his head, and he let the water fall over his face and his mouth and tried to remember what it was to be human. His staff leaned against the drawers near the basin, and every time Jack took it with him into a bedroom or bathroom, he always thought of
Pitch drawing it away, saying that everyone else put their weapons down, and that Jack never did.

In the City of Lune, there were probably children without parents, parents without children. Because of course, most of the parents in Lune got to keep their children. Until the Darkness took them away.

Jack leaned his head against the tiles, water coursing down his hair, his face, dripping off his nose and down his cheeks.

The Resistance was going to do nothing.

It was understandable, if one was callous and unfeeling about it. They’d use it as an opportunity to do something different, more successful, make the final battle more worthwhile. Jack had somehow imagined that it wouldn’t involve the citizens like this. It would only involve the people who had really picked a side. The soldiers, or the ones who had joined the Resistance.

Not just the people in their homes, trying to do the right thing.

He felt small and naïve. After a while he could hear himself breathing, the sound of it wet and echoing off the tiles. Another night of Pitch doing whatever he was doing – organising a huge swath of rescue missions probably – and Jack waiting up in bed, listening to the sounds of a place that never really slept. It was so like the creche, and yet not at all at the same time. It was homesickness, but he had no idea what he was really missing.

*

When he came out of the bathroom, dressed in black slacks and a simple cotton shirt, Pitch was there standing by the bed. Jack tensed, wondering if something had happened, if they were going to go on some mission.

‘You’re here,’ Jack said.

‘I am,’ Pitch said. ‘I’ve been neglecting you.’

‘You’ve been busy.’

‘And yet, what I’ve said remains true. If you want to keep arguing with me about how it’s completely all right that I’ve been neglectful, I think that will say more about you than it will about the truth.’

Jack fell silent.

‘I’m going to put some choices on the table tonight,’ Pitch continued, in that way that was a little hypnotic. Jack couldn’t look away from him. ‘All you need do is choose one. We can fall asleep. We can go and talk somewhere if you’d rather that, and then we’ll sleep afterwards. Or you can tell me you don’t want to think about any of this anymore, and I will distract you in the best way I know how, and again, we’ll sleep afterwards.’

It was almost too tiring to think about. He didn’t want to go straight to sleep. He knew it would be a night where he stared up at the ceiling no matter how tired he was. He didn’t want to talk about anything. He wasn’t sure he wanted to be spanked either.

‘I don’t want to be hurt a lot,’ Jack said finally.

‘Just a little then?’ Pitch said.
Jack swallowed, shrugged. Pitch nodded, walked up to Jack and took his staff away. He walked over to a chest of drawers and leaned it against the wall, and then opened the middle drawer and drew out a length of black cloth.

‘Close your eyes,’ Pitch said, lifting what was to be a blindfold, not a gag. Jack hesitated, and then decided he was just too tired to even be that scared. As the blindfold settled over his closed eyes, he felt the carefulness in Pitch’s fingers, the way he tucked Jack’s hair in ways that would stop it from catching in the fabric.

Something that had been spun tight in him for days, loosened a little.

Pitch was silent as he drew Jack’s shirt up and off, laying it nearby. As he pulled down the loose-fitting pants, skimming his thumbs over the tops of Jack’s thighs as he went. Pitch braced him as Jack stepped out of each leg, solid and there and already radiating more heat than the shower had.

‘That’s very good,’ Pitch said softly, drawing his hands up over Jack’s naked hips, his sides, until they came to rest on his ribs. ‘You’re not even in the mood to talk back, are you?’

Jack shook his head. He really wasn’t. But after the events of the week, he wanted to curl up and vanish for a few hours. Was it the same for Pitch? It was hard to tell sometimes.

‘A dire sign indeed,’ Pitch said, pressing a soft, closed-mouthed kiss to Jack’s cheek. ‘I’m going to turn you, and then you’re going to walk two small steps forwards and your knees will hit the bed. I want you to get on it and lie face down so that you’re comfortable.’

Jack nodded. Pitch pressed fingers to the backs of Jack’s shoulders and turned him, and Jack bumped into the bed after a couple of steps and crawled onto it, shifting a little to make sure his cock wasn’t at a weird angle. He reached up and grasped at one of the pillows and brought it down, absently folding his arms around it and resting his forehead against it.

Was it okay to have this, when people elsewhere were dying? Afraid for their lives? He wasn’t even aroused. He was somewhere between wishing Pitch luck, and calling it all off.

He listened as Pitch walked off somewhere, opened a cabinet and retrieved something. When he came back to the bed, he sat by Jack’s side. After a moment, Jack half-expecting his hands to be tied or something, he was surprised to feel a palm stroke over the still-drying hair on the top of his head, and then fingers. They moved down over the back of the blindfold and brushed through the softer tufts at the top of his neck. Then they stroked over the centre of his neck, from the base to the hairline, shifting the hair slowly as Jack shivered.

It was so different, and Jack turned his head to face Pitch, even though he couldn’t see him.

‘I wonder sometimes, why it grew in white,’ Pitch said. ‘The magic of the mountain? Or perhaps some trauma from the mountain. But I’ve never seen it before.’

Jack shrugged, and Pitch kept petting him. Sometimes sliding two fingertips along the curve of his jaw, or tracing his ears. Eventually, Pitch’s fingers moved down over Jack’s shoulders, avoiding the scarring, each long, firm stroke enough to have Jack slumping a bit more into the bed. Maybe he’d just fall asleep anyway.

Then he felt those fingers move lower, brush over scar tissue, and he tensed.

‘Does it hurt?’ Pitch said.

Pitch’s hand was as clever over his back as it could be, as though he remembered all the times he
touched it before, and knew the worst places to avoid. Even Jack’s body memory wasn’t that good. But it was still the scars he had on his back, and they were still being touched by someone, and his heart beat faster. Did it hurt?

‘I don’t know.’

‘These poor nerve endings, they don’t know what to do with themselves, do they?’ Pitch murmured. ‘Neither do you.’

‘So smooth,’ Jack said into the pillow. Pitch chuckled behind him.

‘Given how new everything is for you, given how confronting it must be, you are acquitting yourself admirably.’

Jack scoffed into fabric, and felt the way Pitch’s fingers paused on his back. He thought Pitch would say something, but instead, Pitch shifted and picked something up off the bed. Then he lay it across Jack’s back.

It took Jack a few shaky moments to pick out the sensation of what was resting there. It could almost have been multiple strands of cloth but for the cold, long part that felt-

He pushed himself up onto his elbows immediately, eyes flying open behind the blindfold. The heel of Pitch’s palm pushed him back down again, his other hand bracing Jack’s lower back.

‘Stay,’ Pitch said.

‘What in the Darkness do you think-?’

‘Stay,’ Pitch said.

Jack’s fingers fist ed into the pillow. His toes curled. Not a whip, exactly, but close enough.

‘Take it off,’ Jack said.

‘No,’ Pitch said. ‘It’s not doing anything. It’s not hurting you.’

‘You want to use it,’ Jack said, his voice strangling off into nothing at the end.

‘I do,’ Pitch said.

Jack wanted to believe that Pitch understood him better after all this time. He wanted to believe that Pitch wouldn’t do this. It wasn’t a single-tailed whip, but a flogger wasn’t much better.

‘How could you?’ Jack said, his voice small.

Pitch didn’t take the flogger off his back even then. It just rested there, the soft tails pretending to be innocuous.

‘Is it hurting you?’ Pitch said. His steadiness was almost infuriating. Jack had gone from feeling numb and heavy, to this anxious place, and he didn’t think it was any better.

‘You will though.’

‘That’s not what I asked you. Is it hurting you now?’

‘You’re going to-’
‘Jack, if you’re going to talk back to me, you’re going to add a Sir to the end of it. You can go in that direction if you want, tonight, but otherwise you might want to listen to me, and answer my questions. Don’t tell me what I’m going to do.’

The knot in his throat was thick as he tried to swallow it down. His fingers clenched into the pillow again. Belatedly, he realised that Pitch was caressing his shoulders with a thumb, and he’d not realised when Pitch had started. After a while, he shook his head.

‘It doesn’t hurt now,’ he said mutinously.

‘Do you want to say either of the words?’ Pitch asked. ‘Is it time to stop?’

‘Why can’t it be easy?’

A long pause, and Jack concentrated on the thumb moving slowly on his shoulder, but couldn’t stop thinking of the flogger there either, like some kind of promise. Pitch had always said he’d never whip Jack, but how was a flogger any different?

‘I’m quite certain that if it was easy, you would be thinking about everything you didn’t want to be thinking about. I said I would distract you, and I’m going to try.’

‘Like this.’

‘Like this,’ Pitch echoed. ‘What do you think will happen? That I’ll pick it up and begin striping you up, as you’ve experienced in the past? That’s all you know, isn’t it?’

Jack shivered, pressed his face down. Wasn’t that all there was?

Pitch picked up the flogger, and Jack tensed so hard that he felt it across his abdomen, his waist even. The fall of the tails rested on his back so lightly that Jack hardly felt them. He kept waiting for the first blow to fall, couldn’t help himself.

‘This has been made of a supple leather,’ Pitch said, ‘with a suede finish. That makes it softer.’

The flogger moved until the tails stroked along Jack’s side and then finished over his shoulder, falling like hair might. Jack’s breathing was short, shallow. He could smell it. The whips were made of leather. And Jack wasn’t enough of a connoisseur to pick the flogger as anything other than the reek of leather.

‘It’s not meant to hurt someone,’ Pitch said. ‘Not really.’

Pitch moved the flogger once more, so that it followed the trail that Pitch’s fingers had before – the base of his neck, up over his hair, until it stroked over the top of his head. Pitch paused, and then did it again and again, until Jack blinked tiredly behind the blindfold. His breathing slowed. It was almost nice. He didn’t want it to be, but it was. Unlike five finger tips, it touched more of him. There must have been about twenty individual tails, moving behind his ears, the delicate skin behind them, snaking through his hair as Pitch drew it over, and then repeated the motion.

‘The type of leather affects how it feels,’ Pitch continued, like it was some kind of lesson. ‘Mountain deer make a very soft leather. You won’t have felt it before. Until now. Did you see many mountain deer growing up?’

Jack nodded, and though the movement was jerky, he felt the worst of the tension in his shoulders, in his back, begin to unspool. He couldn’t even help it, really. He still expected something terrible, his heart was still pounding, but he sagged back towards the mattress.
‘They have coarse guard hairs, but such velvety skin. A long time ago now, my family owned a small farm. We kept some for their milk, for meat as well. My father made me a deerskin coat, and I kept it until it fell apart. That took…over a century.’

The tails of the flogger moved to Jack’s arm where it was bent and holding the pillow. It tickled and sensitised him, but then soothed at the same time. It was like being touched with Pitch’s hands, but it was cooler, and the tails fell in random ways. Sometimes they would fall over one side of his arm, or the other. Sometimes they’d trail down the centre and hardly leave his skin.

The leather seemed to be warming, the smell was stronger, and Jack squirmed a little. It was confusing. Hard to remember what was probably coming when Pitch kept talking about his past like that.

‘Turn over,’ Pitch said. ‘Onto your back.’

Jack’s forehead furrowed, and then he turned, resting his head on the pillow he’d grabbed. He felt exposed like this. Pitch might not be able to see his eyes, but he could see everything else.

The gentlest touch of leather in the centre of his chest, dropping until the tails pooled there. Then Pitch dragged the material down – Jack’s belly jerking at the touches – over his cock, over his thighs, down between his legs. The touch continued, the bed shifting as Pitch stretched, until the tails moved over his left calf, his right. The flogger stroked his shins, and Jack sighed absently, his mouth opening. So weird.

The flogger lifted, lowered onto his chest again, stroked down once more. Pitch’s other hand followed, the backs of his knuckles dragging, then the callouses of his fingers. It was rougher than the suede. Jack’s eyebrows knitted. This was-

This was so not what he’d been expecting.

‘Just relax, Jack,’ Pitch said. ‘It’s okay.’

Easier said than done, especially when his cock was touched lightly by what felt like a million of those tails – only around twenty, but each one felt distinct. Then Pitch’s hand hovered over him – Jack could feel the heat of it – and moved down to his thigh, as the flogger stroked the other thigh.

Blood began to flow south, his cock stiffening, as though seeking attention from Pitch’s hands. Instead, the flogger flowed back up again and rested there, and Jack pressed his lips together.

‘That’s not very relaxed,’ Pitch said, sounding amused.

Ha ha, Jack thought, even as Pitch twitched the flogger back and forth. Pitch muscled a knee between Jack’s thighs, and then the tails of the flogger dropped down, brushing against his balls and sensitive inner thighs. Jack made a faint sound in the back of his throat, and then opened his mouth and caught his breath as Pitch continued.

‘It doesn’t have to hurt,’ Pitch said, as the flogger moved back over Jack’s belly, his chest, caressing his neck, and then trailing over his face. One of the tails dropped into Jack’s open mouth, before sliding away again, and Jack was becoming dazed. The tiredness of before was creeping back, but differently now. He couldn’t help but relax beneath what Pitch was doing, even as his cock remained hard.

Pitch’s other hand touched him too. Sometimes bracing his hip, even though Jack was in no mood to twist or buck or change position. Sometimes moving feather light over his flank, where Jack couldn’t help but moan every time it happened. Sometimes fingers circled his cock, hardly
touching him, the touch still enough to make Jack want more, lust spreading sleepily up through his lower back, flushing through him.

Then Pitch drew the flogger up and off him, and when he moved it down again, there was a very faint sound as the tails landed on his chest. Not enough to be called a hit, just the leather dropping harder than before. It didn’t feel painful, it didn’t sting. It just felt…

Jack didn’t know. It was hard to try and pinpoint, when the flogger went back to stroking him again.

Soon after that, there was a rhythm though. The flogger would move up or down his body, the tails falling and caressing, and then Pitch would lift the flogger, and then the suede would make faint sounds as it connected with his skin. It was almost always his chest, sometimes over his nipples, sometimes the centre, sometimes near his collarbone.

‘Does it hurt?’ Pitch said, as the flogger went back to sliding down one of his arms.

Jack shook his head, somewhere beyond the need to talk. Pitch’s other hand still cradling his cock, occasionally stroking it.

It was like a very weird massage, Jack decided. He could feel how his skin was warming beneath the constant attention. Could feel a faint burn in his chest, and he knew if he pressed his palms to it, the skin would be more sensitive than usual. Every time the flogger dropped there, Jack felt like that whole area was becoming more attuned to it. It was hard to concentrate on anything else. Whenever the flogger lifted, Jack waited for it to fall. They weren’t strikes, Pitch wasn’t swinging his wrist or arm, but…

There was a part of Jack that wanted to ask for more, and he didn’t know what to do with that. He didn’t want to hurt at all.

‘Can you…?’ Jack managed, his words thicker than usual.

Pitch made some questioning sound of acknowledgement, began slowly moving his hand on Jack’s cock. It was far too slow for Jack to come, and yet after his whole body had been strung along on these soft, gentle sensations, it felt far more intense than it should have. His inhale shuddered into his chest, he flexed his hips upwards without really thinking about it.

‘Would it hurt if you did it a bit harder?’ Jack said, his voice shaking towards the end.

‘No,’ Pitch said.

‘Really?’

‘Really,’ Pitch said. ‘Do you want to try?’

Jack didn’t say anything for a long time, and Pitch didn’t change what he was doing. One hand moving expertly over Jack’s cock, the other moving the flogger over him. Those same not-strikes on his chest, that long drag up over his face, down his arms, down his flanks, over his cock; wherever Pitch wanted to move it.

As the minutes passed, Jack decided he did want to try. It didn’t seem like a night where Pitch would hurt him just because he wanted to. Pitch was in a strange mood, and Jack wasn’t going to question that. Not when it felt sleepy and good, when it was less about fear and more about his body feeling like it was pinging and fizzing to Pitch’s continued touch.
‘I want to try,’ Jack said weakly.

‘All right,’ Pitch said.

The next time Pitch lifted the flogger, Jack tensed, couldn’t help it. But the flogger only landed like before, a hardly-there sound of the tails touching his skin. Except instead of stroking him with it, Pitch lifted the flogger again, let the tails drop onto his chest. A slightly different spot than before, over his nipple, and Jack bit his lower lip at the itch of sensation moving through him. He wanted to reach up and rub at his chest, diffuse it.

Pitch repeated the motions until Jack’s tension flowed away. Until his hips were moving up into Pitch’s hand with more frequency.

Then the flogger came down harder.

The sound stood out first. For a brief second he wasn’t in the room at all, but standing at the whipping post. It lasted hardly any time at all, a flash that lasted long enough to realise that the sound wasn’t exactly the same, the sensation was completely different, and Jack was firmly back on the bed in Pitch’s care, and the flogger was stroking over his belly.

The sensation seemed secondary after that. It wasn’t pain. It was sharper than before, in the same way that gently scratching at skin could awaken nerve endings and cause blood to flush forward. In the same way Jack could tug at his hair sometimes when he was frustrated, and it didn’t hurt, but it grounded him, made him more aware of himself.

It wasn’t like being spanked by Pitch’s hand, it wasn’t like being whipped. It was…

‘It’s different,’ Jack said, confused.

‘Do you want me to do it again?’

‘Yeah,’ Jack said. ‘Not harder.’

‘I’m glad we’re in accord then,’ Pitch said.

The flogger lifted from Jack’s body, and Jack still couldn’t help the reflexive tensing, though it wasn’t as bad as before. Then the flogger landed on a different point of his chest. There was a tiny sting where the tails fell, an overall heaviness as the bulk of the tails landed together, like being touched firmly by someone.

Jack panted softly, and then tilted his head back, trying to think of what to compare it to, but he couldn’t.

‘Okay,’ Jack said. He was hardly aware of what he was trying to convey.

‘More?’

‘Okay. S’weird.’

‘Tell me if you need me to stop,’ Pitch cautioned, and Jack nodded and hummed something that he hoped sounded like agreement.

Jack wondered if it counted as a flogging, even though it probably didn’t. Sometimes the tails would fall lower, beneath his pectorals. Once they fell over the vulnerable skin of his belly, and Jack’s voice caught on a whimper. Not pain, but still intense, riding the edge of knowing it could
be painful, his nerves singing, his muscles beginning to ache from the tense and release.

Pitch kept doing it, the grip on Jack’s cock tightening. Jack groaned, because suddenly all the warmth and itchy-stinging and every other strange sensation in his torso felt really good.

‘Ah,’ Jack managed, thinking that was meant to be some kind of encouragement. A ‘keep going’ maybe, or a ‘you could try a little harder if you wanted.’

The flogger moved faster now, the rhythm speeding up. Pitch let go of Jack’s cock, and Jack made a wordless sound of protest, and then hissed when Pitch dragged the flogger over that sensitive skin. The leather caught in places where Jack’s cock was damp with precome, and Jack arched up into it, wanting the friction. Pitch laughed then, a dark, pleased, quiet thing. He gripped Jack’s cock – strands of leather and all – and picked up the rhythm again, and Jack absently dragged his fingers over the bedspread, hips tilting one way and then the other. After the carefulness of everything, even this was overwhelming.

Pitch kept it up for a few more minutes, until Jack was moving up into his hand continuously, until he thought he really could come all over a flogger and that would not only be fine, but great.

Then Pitch let go, moved the flogger away, and Jack’s cry was forlorn.

‘That is very good,’ Pitch said, the hint of a growl in his voice. ‘You’d drive a man to distraction. You’ve taken to this like a natural.’

The flogger landed on his chest once more, and Jack dug his heels down and moved up into it, wanting the contact, the stimulation. When the hand closed over his cock again, Jack tugged at his own hair, the lassitude of earlier turning brighter. Where before he was happy to just be a passive player, now he wanted to come, wanted more. If he’d had the presence of mind to ask for it, he would have wanted to know what it felt like to have the flogger come down harder.

But Jack didn’t ask, and Pitch didn’t go any harder than he said he would. It was enough. The repeated friction against his chest made him feel like he was buzzing. The hand on his cock was paying careful attention to the underside, where the nerves were loudest, the pleasure squirming through him.

Pitch didn’t pull his hand away again, the flogger kept moving, and on a not-quite-strike that fell lower than the others – across the flesh of his belly – Jack’s muscles clenched and he gasped hoarsely when he began to come. The flogger moved over him through it, then stroked lovingly across his face, over his gasping mouth, tails resting at his throat. Pitch must have put the flogger down, because as he milked Jack through his orgasm, his other hand came and rubbed firmly over his chest, the heat of his skin acute.

Jack was sent off floating through it, intense sensation flooding him until he didn’t care about where he was, what other things he’d been worrying about. It seemed that he was allowed to stay in that space for hours, though it couldn’t have been that long. The loudest sound in his mind was his breath – first uneven, then steadier. Behind it, the sound of Pitch’s hand on his chest, the steady touch, was a welcome, pleasing interruption.

A dry cloth was there only minutes later, cleaning him up. The flogger was placed out of reach, and Jack’s whole world lurched when Pitch picked him up easily, sliding one hand under his shoulders, the other under his knees. When he was placed down again, the blankets had been turned down. Jack was pretty sure he’d missed a whole section where Pitch had manoeuvred to be able to pull that off, but he felt like he was floating, and like it didn’t really matter very much.
He reached up to remove the blindfold, but Pitch’s fingers resting gently on his hand stopped him.

‘Not yet,’ Pitch said.

‘What about you?’ Jack said, his voice rusty, tired. He could hardly concentrate. He didn’t think he could do anything at all. But it was only fair, wasn’t it?

‘Tomorrow,’ Pitch said.

Then, Pitch lay down behind him, one arm under Jack’s neck and the other over his chest, still rubbing at the sensitive skin.

‘I’m proud of you,’ Pitch said.

The blindfold stayed on. It was surprisingly comfortable, the knot wasn’t even digging into the back of his head. Pitch drew the blankets over them both, languidly stroking Jack’s ribs, his chest.

‘Do you need anything?’

‘No,’ Jack said. He wasn’t thirsty. He didn’t need clothing.

Pitch pressed his head to the back of Jack’s neck. He had to shift down to do it, but Jack liked feeling his breaths there. He wriggled backwards and then went lax, exhausted.

‘Would you want to do that again one day?’

‘Maybe,’ Jack said.

‘Poor Jack. Look at what we’ve done to you. It’s hard, isn’t it? Adjusting to everything.’

It was hard. Jack knew where his heaviness came from. His exhaustion. His breathing turned shallow. He squeezed his eyes shut, though they were hidden behind a blindfold, and he was facing away from Pitch. He felt like he’d been close to this for days, somehow.

‘North keeps saying I should be a Guardian. I just- I don’t believe in them like the others do. I feel like I’m a traitor.’

Pitch’s head tilted up, those warm breaths ruffling his hair, soothing his scalp. One of Pitch’s hands settled directly over Jack’s heart, pressed him close.

‘Because you don’t accept everything they say without question? You know Toothiana likes that about you.’

Pitch’s’s head tilted up, those warm breaths ruffling his hair, soothing his scalp. One of Pitch’s hands settled directly over Jack’s heart, pressed him close.

‘The people in the City of Lune are dying, and no one is doing anything,’ Jack said, and then his eyes burned and he felt the first of the tears blot into the blindfold. ‘None of you.’

‘I apologise for yelling at you in the meeting. I’m sure you would be relieved to know it won’t happen again, but it will. Do you understand- Do you see the sense of what we’re trying to do?’

‘Don’t ask me to say that,’ Jack said, pretending that he wasn’t shedding tired tears, even though he was fairly sure Pitch knew, by the way he was holding Jack so tightly. ‘Don’t ask me to say I understand why you’re all- Why- Why I’m just lying here, why I get to relax, when- When…’

He couldn’t continue. Couldn’t say it. He became a soldier to save people. Not to stand by and do nothing.
‘Are we really going to the Asylums?’ Jack forced himself to ask.

‘Yes,’ Pitch said.

They were going to go save people anyway. People that everyone had given up on. Jack tried to cover himself with that knowledge. He tried to bury himself in it, so that he couldn’t see anything else. But his thoughts ran back to the City of Lune, the people there, and he thought of how most people in the creches wouldn’t know, while the Darkness slowly ate the heart out of the world he wanted to protect and save.

He turned around, curling up into Pitch’s body, pressing his face against the shirt Pitch was still wearing. Neither of them took the blindfold off. He wanted Pitch’s hands on his back holding him painfully tight, more than he wanted the hands off the scar tissue. His body trembled, his mind dragging him towards a teary kind of sleep.

‘Don’t let me go,’ Jack said, cringing to hear himself say those words. ‘I’m sorry- It’s stupid, I just-’

‘It’s not stupid,’ Pitch said. Jack shifted to stay comfortable as Pitch moved closer to him, slung a leg over Jack’s thigh. ‘It could never be that. Of course you’re hurting. It’s an awful situation to be in.’

‘And you?’

‘It’s an awful situation to be in,’ Pitch repeated. ‘But then… I am grateful that you’re here. And I am glad that you’re mine.’

‘Me too,’ Jack said, ashamed of it, that he got to have this. Not so ashamed that he would push it away. He needed it too much. ‘Me too.’

The tears flowed faster after that, but easier too. He felt Pitch’s breathing steady and even against him, and wondered if Pitch had just mourned himself out until there was nothing but a dry barren left behind. But he craved that steadiness, the arms around him and the quiet languid pulse of his body that coaxed him towards rest.

‘People fight everywhere, Jack,’ Pitch said sleepily. ‘It’s not all despair. And you and I have a right to this. It will make you stronger in the end, to have this at your back, to know what and who you come home to. It’s made me stronger already.’

Jack nodded weakly, wanted it to be true. Finally his breathing turned from shudders to slower exhales, and he lost himself in it, the remnant tingling of his skin, the warmth of Pitch, the closeness. He found a small space of safety amongst the uncertainty, and taking Pitch’s words with him, finally settled into sleep.
Jack had been excited and scared about the Asylum break-outs right up until he heard that he wasn’t going to be with Pitch for the mission.

‘What?’ Jack said, staring at him as they got ready to go a meeting about it. ‘Why not?’

Pitch gave him a strange look, as though he was surprised Jack had an issue with it.

‘Because we’re targeting multiple Asylums at the same time, and we need to split up our best weapons and soldiers tactically. You’ll be under Anton’s command. He has the strongest Light, and you can make the snow, you’re both taking the largest Asylum. We’ve never dreamed about breaking into it before, so we don’t quite know what we’re in for, but since you can make the snow inside… It’s not a grand adventure, Jack. We can’t all go as one happy family to each Asylum one by one and let them warn each other.’

‘I know that,’ Jack said.

He didn’t really know that though. That’s sort of what he’d imagined would happen.

‘I’m heading up one of the missions,’ Pitch said. ‘Eva is doing another. You and Anton will be helming one. And so on.’

‘But I’ve had no- No real training.’

Pitch grimaced. ‘I trust Anton. It wasn’t a decision we made lightly or easily. We’re not sure what training you’ll need. This is a situation where it is definitely an asset that you make the snow-Light combination.’

‘Around Shadows though, and Darkness,’ Jack said. ‘I haven’t tried it yet, and- I mean Sharpwood doesn’t really count, does he?’

Sharpwood didn’t even look up from the fictional book of stories he was reading about naughty goats. He’d found a box of children’s stories and was slowly and methodically working his way through them. He tended to avoid leaving Pitch’s rooms, and when Jack asked him about it, Sharpwood had said that he didn’t expect he’d get a warm reception from anyone and while he seemed to not care about it, Jack realised that Sharpwood might be in actual danger here, and was hiding out to avoid it.

‘I might be useless,’ Jack added.

‘For someone who was extremely ready to prove himself, you seem remarkably willing to talk yourself out of going,’ Pitch said. He folded his arms. ‘This is unbecoming of you.’

‘I’m making good points!’
‘Do you think I’m unaware of all of these salient points you’re making?’ Pitch said. ‘Of course I know your Light is untested against the Darkness. We know. Do you think we’re all feeling very calm and relaxed about going to the Asylums, Jack? Ask any of those soldiers out there who have lived long enough to have friends go into them, how they feel about the possibility of seeing their corpses, or worse – destroying their Shadow-possessed bodies.’

Jack gulped, and Pitch gazed flintily down at him. Jack didn’t know what he expected when he started talking about it. Reassurance, maybe? The promise that it would be fine? His heart was knocking in his chest, he could feel its percussive thump making him nauseous. Of course Pitch didn’t go around reassuring all his terrified soldiers. That wasn’t how this worked.

Except he and Pitch were living together, and Jack didn’t know where the line was. Pitch was the one who got to decide where it was. Though now that Jack was thinking about it – with them both about to go into a meeting – he supposed…

He didn’t know what he’d been thinking. He felt stupid.

‘Yeah,’ Jack said, looking down. ‘You’re right. Uh, sorry.’

A long pause, and Jack quailed beneath the silence of it. Then Pitch sighed.

‘If you don’t think you’re ready…’

‘It’s not that,’ Jack said, shaking his head. ‘I am. I can do this.’

Pitch didn’t say anything, and when Jack met his gaze, he was chagrined to see that Pitch looked doubtful now. Had gone from being simply critical, to… Did Pitch think Jack couldn’t do it?

‘I can,’ Jack said, annoyed.

‘Then pull yourself together,’ Pitch said, frowning at him. ‘I’d sooner write you out of the plans and recalibrate than send you out while you were unwilling.’

‘I just- You know what? Let’s just go to the meeting. You’re being a dick. I don’t know why I’m so surprised,’ Jack said, yanking his cloak off the back of a chair and fastening it about his neck, ‘since you’re basically like that all the time.’

As Jack made a point of storming off so he could hear the thuds of his feet, instead of flying away, he heard Pitch chuckle behind him. Jack turned and pointed a finger.

‘Did you just bait me out of my attitude?’

‘No?’ Pitch said, staring at him.

‘You so did. That asshole.

He so did. That asshole.

‘You so did, you’re such an asshole,’ Jack said, and then smacked his forehead because this wasn’t achieving anything at all. ‘Let’s just get the meeting over with already.’

Pitch followed him, and Jack ground his teeth together. Well, if Pitch wanted him fired up and ready to fight, he definitely got what he wanted. Though he didn’t think it was much better that his nervy, frightened energy was now fuelling his anger instead.

It wasn’t until he entered the prime strategy room with Pitch that he realised that the inner darkness that used to be such a problem hadn’t bothered him once. He still had a hair-trigger temper – which
was way different than how it used to be before the initiation in the mountain – but he didn’t once think about like…icing Pitch to death. Well, maybe punching him in the gut or something, but still, it was progress, wasn’t it?

*

Jack sat in the meeting and heard enough to know that no one knew what the inside of the Black Asylum looked like. They knew it was multi-storeyed and sunk deep into the earth, and that it was a primary incubation chamber for the Tsar’s Shadows, and beyond that, even Pitch had never been able to get his hands on the blueprints. On top of that, none of the Asylums were built on the same blueprints anyway. Some were circular and a single underground storey. Others were spirals. Some were a network of rectangular buildings.

The holding capacity was terrifying. Jack stared at one of the blueprints, his vision blurring, his ears turning out what he was hearing, as he considered that the Asylums could fit every citizen of Lune within them and still have space left over.

He’d thought they were only designed to hold a truly small proportion of people. Just the wrongdoers. The betrayers. The ones with scars on their back. Like Jack.

He swallowed thickly and put down the blueprints. The blueprints that didn’t matter to him anyway, because even though he’d been told to look at all of them, he and Anton and the rest of the team had no idea what they were getting themselves in for. All he knew was that they were going there today. Right after the meeting. Not in a few days or weeks. Not as some hypothetical rescue in the future. Now.

Pitch talked like he was prepared to lose people, and no one at the meeting blinked an eye at that. North was there, talking about the weapons and little inventions he’d made to help them. Toothiana watched everything silently, seemingly content to let Pitch lead the meeting. It was weird, the respect Toothiana and Pitch could have for each other, given that they could devolve into petty sniping in a matter of minutes. Jack realised something about Pitch rubbed Toothiana the wrong way, and vice versa, because Toothiana never reacted like that to anyone else.

Bunnymund was still absent, and Jack was starting to wonder if something had gone wrong. Wasn’t he supposed to be there? Didn’t he have important things to do? Wasn’t he also a Guardian?

All too soon, the meeting was wrapping up, and Jack felt like he’d gained nothing at all except learning who his team-mates were. Except for Anton, he didn’t know any of them. An icy feeling covered the back of his throat and he tried to clear it away, but it wouldn’t go.

As everyone left the room, Pitch grasped Anton’s shoulder and looked him square in the eye.

‘Keep him safe,’ he said, and then walked out, without giving Jack a single glance.

Jack sure hoped this wouldn’t be one of those situations where the last thing he ever said to Pitch was that he was an asshole. But when he rushed out of the corridor to change things, Pitch was gone.

A presence behind him, and Jack turned to see Anton standing there, looking down at him, expression some mix of serious and affectionate. His hair was golden today, as glossy and bright as his eyes.

‘Ready?’
‘Yeah,’ Jack said, not wanting to suddenly unload about how he really didn’t feel ready at all.

‘You’ve got this,’ Anton said, winking at him, a flash of that charming grin. ‘After all, you’ll be with me. Anton the Brave. We’ll be unstoppable! You’ll see.’

Jack allowed himself to smile at that. Anton grinned back, and then indicated that Jack should follow him towards the shipyard.

* *

There were only five of them on the clipper. A tiny fire team to go in first. Jack met Anatoly, who was short, squat and cheerful but had a hard light in his eyes and looked like he would go hard on a battlefield. He was a Golden Warrior with centuries behind him, and had been a defector since before he’d even been recruited into the Tsar’s army. He only went into the mountain to get the Light because he thought he should. Even before he knew that the Tsar was behind the Darkness.

The other two were Ivanka and Vanya, two sisters who shared the same brown eyes. Ivanka never smiled, and Vanya smiled twice as much as though she was born with all of Ivanka’s good will and felt obliged to use it. They were also Golden Warriors. Jack knew from the meeting that the fire team going to the biggest Asylum were all some of the strongest Light users that existed.

They were banking a lot on Jack’s ability to infuse Light into snow inside the Black Asylum. He gripped the railing of the clipper and felt how clammy his palms were and hoped he wasn’t going to disappoint them all. They’d have to fall back if he couldn’t help them.

Behind them came a much heavier, larger ship with a skeleton crew designed for rescues and bringing people out and treating them for shadow sickness immediately, if there were any survivors. Jack knew that Cupcake was on that ship, and a few of the other new recruits. Jamie wasn’t on any of the missions. This was so Light-dependent that they really needed people who had gone into the mountain first. To test if anyone was still possessed, to heal people, to destroy the Darkness.

The clipper’s engine hummed, it was almost perfectly silent thanks to North’s magic. Beneath them, what looked like nondescript, solid forest. The ground underneath would be permafrost. So little of Lune was suitable for actual farming without considerable effort going into preparing the soil first, sometimes for years in advance.

‘A few hours to go yet,’ Anton said, looking down at the map and then at the ground.

‘We’re sure the location is correct?’

‘We’ve sighted it before,’ Anton said. ‘Aster was the one who found it, and knew it was big from his magic. But we had to get out of there fast because they sensed us. They’re attuned to magic interference. It’s why your snow is so good, because that’s not technically magic, not in the same way.’

‘Oh. It’s not?’

‘Mm, not as I understand it,’ Anton said. Jack noticed that he was so much more serious on mission. Like Pitch, just in a different way. Jack wondered if the soldiers with Pitch were so scared of Pitch they forgot to be scared of their mission. ‘It’s just a part of you, like the Light is a part of us. That somehow doesn’t count either. I don’t really know much about it, but Aster’s tried to explain the philosophy of it to me before. It all goes over my head, honestly.’

Jack frowned. Of course it shouldn’t be surprising that Anton and Bunnymund had chatted to each
other. That they might even be friends. Jack wanted to bring it up, but now was so not the time. He looked up at the clouds gathering over them. Jack had been drawing them with him, as though they were leashed to the winds that wrapped around his body and his cloak.

Strapped to his side, a small-sword made from the meteor metal that repelled the shadows. In his right hand, his staff. His cloak flapped in the wind, though it was weighted and didn’t go up into his face. His boots had been polished, his white leather gloves – leaving the tips of his fingers bare – had been laundered.

‘I thought there’d be more of us,’ Jack said.

‘No,’ Anton said, and for the first time he looked grim. He hesitantly looked at Jack, and then looked ahead again. Then he looked back at Jack, as though he couldn’t help himself. ‘Jack, if we don’t pull this off, no one will survive.’

‘Yeah, but-’

‘It’s why Pitch and Eva aren’t here. Because their missions have a higher chance of success. If they fail, some of them will still survive. It’s mercenary, but we need our best strategists to have the best chance of survival. Pitch doesn’t like it.’

Jack pressed his hand to the back of his neck, and then stared down at the forest. He jumped when he felt Anton’s hand resting over his own, covered in the thick leather gloves the pilots wore. Jack looked up at him, feeling like he couldn’t mask the fear in his eyes no matter how strong he wanted to be.

‘He has a lot of faith in you,’ Anton said. ‘If you think – at any point – you can’t do this, say so.’

Jack turned and looked behind him. Their clipper was so small that there was hardly any shelter for Ivanka and Vanya, for Anatoly. They sat on metal crates on the other side of the ship, chatting with each other. They made jokes, they flashed smiles, and Jack wondered if we’d only hear gallows humour if we went over there.

Had Pitch spent the past…however long, deciding that this would be Jack’s role in the rescue? Did Pitch really have that much faith in Jack? How could anyone? Jack slid his hand from beneath Anton’s and curved it around the railing instead.

He forced himself to take a deep breath. Forced himself to close his eyes.

He felt the winds around him, those that knew him and were with him all the time, and those who were eager to get to know him, like leaping baby farm animals. He thought of Pippa, he thought of the reasons he’d wanted to become a Golden Warrior, and he thought of how he’d fought to get out of that mountain and had done so, even if it hadn’t been in a conventional manner. He thought of the induction with Sharpwood, and how in the small time they’d had afterwards in that cottage, Jack had made his Light and ice around Sharpwood whenever he wanted, constantly proving that he could after being unable to for months. Finally, he thought of the training he’d done with Pitch, the snow glowing around them, the shards of ice littering the ground, and could feel the way the ice in his body responded to that image even now.

‘You okay?’ Anton said.

Jack opened his eyes, staring ahead.

‘Yes,’ he said.
‘You sure?’

Jack looked at Anton, and Anton blinked at whatever he saw on Jack’s face.

‘I’m sure,’ Jack said, as the wind whipped at his cloak and his hair.

* 

Hours later, amongst land that was more rocky mountain ridge than forest, they landed on a clearing of black, cracked asphalt that had been ruined by permafrost and the tiny spindly twiggy trees that could conquer the rocky frozen ground and could certainly conquer some tarmac. There were no other ships around. There was no lookout. No people. In the dull light, in the thin air, the place gave the appearance of being completely abandoned. It looked like someone had only cleared the space to create the tarmac, and nothing else.

Anton led them down a path that only counted as a path because it was clearer of rocks than any other area, towards a rocky mountain face that soared black and brown and rugged up to the tepid blue of the sky, the grey clouds.

The cold didn’t bother Jack, but the others were rugged up well against the chill. Anatoly’s nose had turned bright red, but the tips of his ears were hidden away in his fur hat. Ivanka occasionally cursed the weather under her breath, and Vanya sometimes breathed tiny pieces of laughter that froze in the winds that raced along the grounds like fleeing forest deer. In the distance, the sound of rock falling down the mountain, the crunch and creak of ice warping the world around it.

Anton led them towards two hulking, metal double doors that had rivets the size of Jack’s head. The doors had been set right into the sheer side of the mountain.

‘How do we open it?’ Jack said. ‘Do you have a key?’

‘We are needing no key,’ Anatoly said.

‘Yeah, anyone can visit any time they like,’ Ivanka said, her frosty voice matching the weather around them. ‘Didn’t you know? Visitors welcome. Visiting hours: Always.’

They stopped about fifty metres away, and Anton gestured to Jack to make the snow. They’d talked about this beforehand, and it was easy to summon it, even in this thin air. Jack had been ready, and he felt like his ice was just waiting for an excuse. It seemed even easier than before to infuse it with his Light, and it began to fall around them. Where it collected on their faces and clothing, it shone.

‘The Darkness will still seek to find gaps in it, so it won’t be a complete cover,’ Anton said. ‘Jack, when we open the doors, can you flood the snow in with the winds?’

‘Yeah, that’ll be easy,’ Jack said. ‘It’s windy enough out here as it is.’

To be on the safe side, Jack created a vortex of swirling snow around them, even as it reduced their visibility.

All too soon, they were standing in front of the doors, so large that Jack was reminded of the cavernous vault of ledgers and books where the Tsar had sat idly before that huge fireplace. Jack shuddered, and then reminded himself to focus.

Time froze as Anton placed his hand on the bar. Then he looked back over his shoulder.
‘Get ready.’

Ivanka and Vanya already had their swords out, and Anatoly had two wicked looking sabres, like the kind that North carried. Anton’s hand glowed with Light, and then his sword did.

A screeching, rusting sound as the bar slid back.

The moment the bar no longer kept the doors shut, they opened just a crack even without Anton’s hand on the giant handle.

An unearthly growling, inhuman and rumbling through the earth itself. Anton moved back quickly into the vortex of snow as the first tendril of Darkness slithered out. Jack could feel it. Not that small thing that looked like some underwater creature seeking purchase, but the weight of the Darkness behind it. Like the wave of the stuff on Endan, so much stronger than anything he’d encountered in the mountain.

It was horror growing in his body, as though the rumbling sounds from the mountain were lurching up inside of him. For a moment, he almost shouted for one of them to drive the Light through him, just to be safe. But no, it was falling all around them.

But he wasn’t safe.

‘Anton,’ came a sibilant whisper from within the blackness that hid behind the huge doors. ‘Are you very brave?’

‘Why don’t you come and find out?’ Anton said.

‘Anatoly,’ the blackness said on a purr. ‘Ivanka and Vanya. An Overland? We expected… more.’

A bang as the doors flew inward and smashed against whatever inner walls were there. The Darkness roared out as a huge shape, a tsunami crawling and wriggling along the sheer mountain above them before reaching out and collapsing on top of them. Too large, blocking out the sky, the sun, cruel laughter approaching and terror hammering so hard in Jack’s body that he dropped to his knees.

He stared up, seeing the impossible wave of Darkness circle them, crash down towards them. They were going to be smothered.

The shriek split his ears. The Darkness smashed against the clouds, the snow that emitted Light, and yanked backwards like an amorphous, twisting creature. It circled them at once, and Jack pushed himself back to his feet with his staff, then held it up to strengthen the clouds. The winds were blocked by the Darkness, but he could feel them seeking cracks in the Shadows, even as the Shadows sought small spaces where it could slither in between the snow.

Around him, Anton, Ivanka, Vanya and Anatoly worked hard, producing steady bursts of Light, cutting holes into the Shadows only for it to be filled with more. Jack could hear the sounds of people crying – children, women and men – and knew they weren’t his loved ones. Knew what the Darkness was trying to do.

‘Jack!’ Pippa shouted. ‘Help me! It’s hurting me!’

It was a lightning strike through his marrow, and the world seemed to stop. Some resonating darkness inside of him opened its eyes, looked at what was going on. The voice of his sister echoed as though he were nothing more than an empty chamber.
‘Pippa,’ Jack whispered.

‘Jackson, please!’

He stopped making the Light, though the clouds continued to carry it, and the snow still glowed as it fell. His vision blurred. He just wanted to—The Darkness was right there, and he just wanted to…

He could feel his free hand shaking, wanting to reach out and touch it, to see if his sister was really in there.

*How could she be? She lives in the snow. In winter. Remember?*

It was foggy, blurry. The others were moving and shouting around him. The Darkness kept trying to slip tiny tentacles through the falling snow. Jack felt the crispness of snowfall, felt ice in his throat, thought of his sister digging beneath the snow with her mittens to look for the little plants that sometimes grew by the boles of trees. There were mosses they could eat, that tasted bready and good once defrosted in their hands, warmed with their breath.

He saw the Darkness, heard it use his sister’s voice, but the panic began to fade away to something quiet and certain.

*Later I’m gonna thank Sharpwood for this.*

He spread his arms, Light gathering along his staff and making it glow, wreathing through his hands. The clouds grew, the Light strengthened, the snow glowed brighter, and they began to beat the surrounding Darkness back.

All at once the fog cleared in his mind and he could hear the Darkness again, shrieking and screaming and fretting and wailing. He could feel its deep rage, could tell that it was somehow furious as a collective hivemind, to be met with a Light it could not conquer. Jack knew in another time, on another planet — like Grisaille — this Darkness wouldn’t be malevolent at all. He knew he wasn’t really trying to defeat the Darkness with the Light anymore, not really. He was trying to remove the Tsar’s influence, and there was no way to do that without destroying the Shadows as well.

So Jack destroyed the Darkness.

Keeping a vortex of whirling snow around them, he sent huge flurries of glowing snow and ice into the black maw of the Asylum. Each one lit up the cavernous walls, showed bones on the floor, showed Nightmare Men trying to escape the Light before they were consumed. Each time, he sent another wave, knowing the Darkness infested the place like a plague. This would not be enough. They would have to go right down inside of it to remove it all.

They had to remove it all.

It took twenty minutes for the Darkness to stop coming for them. Jack was panting by the end of it, having not sustained his Light and snow like that, not ever. Finally, with no carnage to show for their battle, the day went quiet once more. The sky was empty and grey above them, the ground covered glowing snow. The Black Asylum beckoned, appearing quiescent and abandoned.

Anton looked everyone over. ‘Are we good to go further? We can bar the doors and come back with a second wave.’

‘I can keep making the snow,’ Jack said. ‘I’m good.’
‘Yes,’ Ivanka said. ‘I used a lot of my Light, but I have reserves.’

‘I have most of mine,’ Vanya said. ‘Ivanka’s always good for the first push.’

‘And Vanya is best for the second.’ Ivanka’s voice was hard even in its agreement.

‘I am good,’ Anatoly said.

‘Right. Okay then. If any of you burns out of your light, tell me immediately. We’re not being stupid today, okay?’

‘But they are sending you, Anton,’ Anatoly said drily.

‘Hilarious,’ Anton said.

With that, they walked into the gloom. Anton pulled a flashlight out of the pack strapped to his back, and Ivanka did the same. Together, they were able to light up the huge, stone corridor. The stone uneven around them, not even properly levelled beneath their feet. Jack hovered immediately, not wanting to trip or fall and miss something.

The smell was muted in the cold, but got stronger as they walked further into that humid, stale air. The sweetness of old rot, the putrid savoury wrongness of decay. Jack had never smelled a whole mass of rotting flesh all at once before, and yet instinctively knew that’s what he was smelling. Some atavistic thing waking up inside of him and telling him this was wrong, it was awful. He should leave.

How could anyone have survived this?

His mind decided that no one had. It was a quick decision. No one was alive, and they would destroy the Darkness, and Flitmouse was somewhere else anyway, because this was the Asylum for the worst people, and Flitmouse was not one of the worst people.

A strange sort of calm descended over Jack then. It was easy to keep up the snow, the Light, within it. He focused on observing, though he didn’t know if he was really seeing what was around him.

* 

They came across their first series of cells. Within, dead bodies. Jack thought he might have felt surprised, but he was so numb that it sort of drifted past him. It reminded him a lot of the mummified corpses in the mountain. But the smell here was a lot worse.

Then, down another corridor, they saw a grey, shambling figure standing there facing them. The body held an axe, its expression empty. One of its eyes was missing.

‘Fuck,’ Anton muttered, before shooting a wave of Light directly into the figure. Nightmare Men that had been possessing it lurched upwards and then disintegrated as the Light killed them. The body collapsed to the ground like its strings had been cut. The axe clattered to the floor. In the distance, beneath their feet, the Darkness rumbled a laugh.

‘Recoverable?’ Anatoly said crisply.

‘No,’ Anton said. ‘Check for a pulse, I think he’s already dead. Kill him if he’s not.’

This one was already dead, but the next one wasn’t. Jack watched as the woman was decapitated by torchlight.
'We can’t- We can’t save them?' Jack said, feeling like he was asking something incredibly taboo.

‘If they’re possessed by the Shadows for longer than…even a few weeks, they’re unrecoverable. We’ve tried, but…they’re just gone, Jack. We can try saving some, if you want.’

‘No, I… I believe you.’

Jamie had been swallowed by the Darkness only briefly, for only minutes, and he’d been sick for days. Shadow sickness killed people. Even Jack knew these people couldn’t be recovered. The Darkness had eaten their souls and personalities out of their bodies, even if they somehow kept their hearts beating.

‘A terrible way for comrades to die,’ Anatoly said as they passed one of the decapitated bodies. ‘But at least they can rest now. Go in peace, brother.’

‘They’re Golden Warriors?’ Jack said, his voice cracking, the numbness leaking out of him.

‘Of course,’ Anton said flatly. ‘Who else to be our jailers, but ourselves turned inside out? Gavril is good at this.’

They moved on through the corridors, Jack using his snow and the winds to defeat the Darkness before it could reach them. The numbness crept back in, and Jack thought of Eva and Pitch and the others on their own missions, dealing with this. How much harder it would have been without the snow to guide their way.

*'

‘Can we get the lights?’ Jack said on the second level, when the darkness was total, and there was no way of telling what lay beyond the line of torchlight, or Jack’s glowing snow.

‘Jack…’ Anton said. ‘There’s no lights here. The Asylums…’

There was no electrical grid within the Asylum, Jack realised. He shone his torch up towards the ceiling. There were no bulbs to glow. No torches on the walls.

All these people lived in total darkness. Because of course, the Darkness didn’t need light to function, and didn’t want it.

His mouth went dry at the thought of people being taken here for betraying the Tsar, for daring to have a different opinion, for wanting to fight back against the true source of the Darkness, and being locked up with no light source until they died.

Everyone on Lune was afraid of the dark. The Tsar encouraged it. There were campaigns about it. You never knew what was waiting there, in the absence of the Light…

Jack pressed his lips together and shook his head in a tight motion at the enquiring look Anton gave him. He couldn’t talk about it. Not now. He needed to manage his anger. He needed to keep the snow going. At least he could make it inside.

*

The third level saw another wave of Darkness rushing for them, and Jack had to pull hard on his ice powers this deep underground. But the ceilings were huge – Vanya was still out of breath from the number stairs they’d had to descend – and Jack could spread the snow very far.
Down here, they heard more shouting, and Jack’s heart didn’t leap with hope. Why would it? Everyone was dead, and the Darkness kept calling for each of them. Jack now knew that the Darkness would pretend to be three different people to Anton, and that Anton didn’t seem to react to any of their broken, begging voices. Anatoly always heard a child’s voice, and Anatoly sometimes cried, but didn’t stop making his Light. Ivanka and Vanya heard their parents, and they held each other’s hands, except when they had to let go and fight the Darkness off directly.

Jack heard Pippa, sometimes taunting him, sometimes begging, but it was getting easier to tune it out. Even as Jack knew that somewhere, the Darkness really had eaten her soul, was tearing at her to create these cruel moments. It only made him hate Gavrilo more.

They moved towards the voices, and then Jack stood there – stunned – as they opened a cell and found a Golden Warrior who still kept asking for help even as he covered his eyes and scrambled back after the Light had passed through him.

He watched, feeling useless, as Anton went over to him and promised that help was coming. Anatoly recognised him, called him Vlahov, and Vlahov began crying like a child when he heard his name.

‘I can’t stay with you,’ Anatoly said, his voice wretched. ‘I can’t. We have to finish this. You understand? You understand? ’

‘Yes,’ Vlahov cried, like he couldn’t bear them leaving. ‘Yes.’

Then he curled away from the glowing snow, the torchlight, and moaned into the ground and said something about his eyes hurting. Jack’s chest was heaving, and he thought his eyes must be wet, but he didn’t feel anything at all.

They found more Golden Warriors after that. Some were unconscious. Others stoic and reserved, as though they were ready to battle right now, even as they were emaciated and worn and couldn’t lift themselves off the ground let alone a weapon. There were some so scared of being left in the Darkness, that they sobbed and begged for the Light, even as they couldn’t bear to look at it.

Jack made sure to make more snow down here, more Light. He left the place glowing. Made sure there was no corner the Darkness could hide in.

Distantly, he thought he might be reaching his limits. He opened his mouth to say as much to Anton, but he couldn’t find the words.

Anton’s bravery was more than just charging off into battle. It was the way he understood which ones needed to be executed, which ones saved, and which ones saved ‘for now,’ until they knew how bad the damage was. He greeted everyone with kind, compassionate words. He seemed to know which ones needed comforting, which ones needed to be treated like soldiers, and there was even one who seemed broken until Anton began flirting with him, and then that soldier began laughing in a cracked voice and smiled until his lips bled.

‘I know you must be truly desperate, if you’re flirting with me.’

‘Summed me up in a nutshell, my good man.’

They kept going, and Anton used a communication device to tell the rescue team to hold steady, but to have hope. They were going to be bringing people home.

*
Jack’s eyes were getting accustomed to the glare of the Light, the opaque black of the darkness, and within it, the living Shadows. The smell of the place clung to him, a patina of reek he didn’t think he’d ever be able to scrub away.

In the lowest level, they found more dead Golden Warriors. Some still wearing their uniforms, as though they’d been dumped in their full regalia and left there to rot. Jack lost count of mummified forms, bits of skeletons. Against the wall, lit by Ivanka’s torch, a disembodied arm with its fingers splayed, as though its last moments had been ones of agony.

Almost no one here was alive.

Anatoly had thrown up in a dark corner somewhere. Jack had heard him retching and felt a moment of relief that it wasn’t him, the newbie, and then shame that his first feelings weren’t ones of empathy. His face burned cold to think that Anatoly knew some of these people, those alive, and definitely those dead. The others, too. Anton was young, but even he…

Was that what Jack was supposed to face one day? Coming to a place like this? Expecting to see Jamie or Cupcake? His other comrades?

Pitch has known this for centuries.

Jack’s hand tightened on his staff.

Down here it was hot, stifling, humid. Jack felt like he was breathing in bits of dead flesh whenever he inhaled. He tried not to think about it. But he could hear his shaking breathing. He couldn’t stop thinking of the mountain, the initiation. He could feel Shadows around them, clamouring around the perimeters of the snow, waiting to devour them. The hostility was an opaque force, drifting past the Light, wrapping around all of them. Even Anton looked gaunt, though he strode on with confidence, because he was Anton the Brave.

Methodically they looked in every cell, every closed room. The locks were crude, because the doors themselves were heavy and could only be locked from the outside. Because their jailers were Shadows and Nightmare Men.

Jack made sure to seek every last inch of Darkness out with his snow. He could wave his staff in a direction and the snow had almost learned what Jack wanted, arcing gracefully and spreading out wide, burning any Darkness it touched to death, and wrapping around it in serpentine flurries. Jack could back-sweep it behind them, he could send it to the sides, he could conduct it, and he knew that if he wasn’t there, they could never have completed this assignment. He knew, somehow, that the Asylums Pitch and Eva and the others were visiting, weren’t like this one.

They found one Golden Warrior, alive, who didn’t cry, but instead she pointed further down a corridor of darkness.

‘There is a new one, down there. He complains a lot. I think he lives still. He has been silent for some time. But I think I hear him breathing. I could be hallucinating? It’s…easy to do that, in here.’

‘Jack, go on ahead and check,’ Anton said. ‘Go with Anatoly. I want to look Rina over first. She looks injured.’

‘Anton?’ she said, unable to look at him. ‘Is that really you?’

‘Hi gorgeous.’
Jack turned to do what Anton said, even as he caught a glimpse of Rina’s brittle smile.

The corridors here were narrower, as though they’d not had time to properly hollow out the final level. Anatoly’s Light was weaker, but Jack held onto his snow, his Light, and they looked within every cell. It was mostly corpses or empty spaces, and Jack realised that Rina had probably been hallucinating.

Then, in a cell as unremarkable as the others, they came across another naked body that looked like nothing more than a corpse upon the floor. Jack almost turned around, and then he squinted and opened the cell door.

The body shifted, one hand immediately moving to cover between his legs, the other coming up to cover his eyes.

‘If this is the rescue detail,’ the voice said, ‘you took your damned time about it.’

‘Flitmouse?’ Jack said breathlessly.

‘Oh no,’ Flitmouse said, curling up onto his side. Like the others, he couldn’t look at the Light and check. But Jack could hear that scathing recognition. ‘Of course it’s you.’

Jack rushed over, falling by his side, his knees slamming hard into stone. The pain was jarring, but he couldn’t help himself, carefully touching Flitmouse’s shoulder, his back. Flitmouse flinched away, and then weakly batted at Jack’s hands.

It took only seconds to unfasten his cloak, to lay it over Flitmouse’s hip. It didn’t cover much, but at least it was something.

Flitmouse’s spindly fingers – they’d always been narrow, but now they were downright bony – came and brushed over the fabric.

‘Oh,’ he said. ‘I made this.’

‘Yeah.’

‘Jack Frost.’

‘That’s me.’

‘If this is another shitty dream given to me by the Darkness, I’m going to kill you. I’ve murdered hallucinations before.’

‘Why doesn’t that surprise me?’

‘With your survival skills, it shouldn’t surprise me if the Darkness had already taken you and was using your voice.’ Flitmouse laughed at his own comment, and then his breathing wheezed dangerously and he fell silent, shuddering. Jack opened his mouth to call to Anton, but Anton was already there in the doorway, golden hair and shoulders covered in a fine layer of white-gold snow, eyes disbelieving.

‘Alois?’ Anton whispered, staring at Flitmouse.

Jack didn’t know what shocked him more, that Anton knew Flitmouse, or that Flitmouse had a first name and someone was using it.

‘Oh no,’ Flitmouse said, sounding truly despairing. He curled in tighter on himself. ‘Oh no, please,
not you. I can’t stand it, you seeing me like this. Of all people.’

Anton took a few steps into the cell, and then – like Jack – knelt beside him. Anton’s fingers were tender over Flitmouse’s ragged hair, and Flitmouse didn’t attempt to bat him away.

‘Alois, come on now, don’t be ridiculous. You’re holding up pretty well. You manage to make this place look fashionable.’

Flitmouse laughed, a burst of surprise, and then the laughter broke, and several rasping sobs followed. He covered his face with both of his hands, and Anton pressed the palm of his hand to the back of Alois’, like he could protect him.

‘Jack, could you take the others and scour out the rest of the level? There’s not much left now. I think we’ll be done after this.’

Jack nodded, and left, looking over his shoulder to stare at the tender way Anton gazed at Alois. He had a sudden feeling that Anton wasn’t on this mission because he was Anton the Brave, but because…he needed to be the one who found Flitmouse. Was that even possible?

‘I’m so ugly now. Don’t look at me,’ he heard Flitmouse say in a broken voice.

‘I like looking at you,’ Anton said.

Jack didn’t catch Flitmouse’s broken response, because they had to finish off the rest of their mission. But the fondness in Anton’s voice stuck with him. Jack had never heard Anton like that with anyone.

*

They destroyed the Darkness wherever they found it, until finally all the levels still glowed with the residual snow. They sent Light into vents, they retraced their steps, and finally the Darkness went on the retreat and they chased it. After another half hour, Anton declared the site cleared and called in the rescue team.

The rescue ship was loaded up, while Anatoly and Vanya slept. Anton stayed by Alois’ side whenever he could, though Alois collapsed – unconscious – before they’d even gotten him out of the Asylum.

All the survivors had to be blindfolded to protect their eyes from the light. In the fading grey light of the afternoon, their condition looked grim. Jack didn’t know what healing miracles could be worked, but he knew they wouldn’t all survive their ordeal, even after being rescued.

On the clipper back to home base, Jack sat down and didn’t bother looking down at the forests. He was exhausted. He couldn’t even hold his staff. He supposed there was a limit of how much Light and snow he could make.

It was funny though, how he didn’t feel anything at all.
Jack sat by Flitmouse’s bedside in the hospital. It was a multi-storeyed building, and Flitmouse had his own room, a view, a vase with a single flower in it. Two days had passed and Pitch had hardly spoken to Jack or interacted with him, and at the end of the night Jack came back to bed late and Pitch was already asleep, and Pitch woke up early and left before Jack had woken.

Jack couldn’t tell if he was avoiding Pitch, or if Pitch was avoiding him. But they were both doing a bang up job of it.

He’d learned second-hand that Pitch’s team had been attacked. They went to the most accessible of Asylums which actually had a whole community of the Tsar’s people living around it and maintaining it on the inside, and they’d fought back aggressively. Enemies and soldiers had died, though they’d managed to defeat the Asylum and remove the Darkness, many of the enemy side had killed the prisoners in the Asylum before they could be saved. Pitch – they said – had not only slaughtered the Darkness, but murdered over thirty people. They didn’t say murder, they said he killed them in combat, but Jack still thought of it as murder.

He knew Pitch would’ve hated it even as it was happening. He probably thought of it as murder too.

Flitmouse was asleep or unconscious. Jack couldn’t use his first name yet. Not his first name. For a start, no one else did. Not the nurses. Not the matron. Not the doctors. Not the other Warriors. Not anyone else who had come to visit.

Only Anton.

They’d talked about it. Flitmouse was asleep – or unconscious – and Anton had been hovering. He’d brought the single flower, he’d brought some freshly squeezed fruit juice, he’d brought slippers that were nicer than the ones in the hospital and looked like a specific foot size, which meant Anton probably knew the size of his feet.

‘By the Light,’ Anton muttered, standing over Flitmouse’s bed, ‘this is enough to drive one bonkers. I need to go for a walk. Join me?’

‘Sure,’ Jack said. ‘But what if he-’

‘I doubt it.’

They walked around the outside of the hospital grounds. There were others there too, convalescing patients in robes. Some of the ones from the other Asylums were doing much better, and some had already been cleared for release. The ones from the Black Asylum… many of them were lucky to be alive, some hadn’t survived the ship’s journey back to home base.

‘You know him,’ Jack said. ‘Like. You really know him.’
‘I do,’ Anton said. ‘Does that surprise you?’

‘It kinda does,’ Jack said. ‘Is that why-? Is that why you went to the Black Asylum?’

‘Yes,’ Anton said, looking at the sky. ‘I’ve been asking for a while. I’ve been asking since he was taken. Well, covertly, since I knew it would be a while since we had the resources. But everyone knew I wanted to helm the team. Pitch wouldn’t let me until we knew what your powers were like. And then he wouldn’t let me just because…he didn’t want you to go on a mission like that anyway.’

‘I would’ve done it to save Flitmouse. You should’ve told me.’

‘I didn’t know you were friends,’ Anton said, laughing quietly. ‘Alois is very private. Very private. Jack, I didn’t tell you, because it wasn’t my secret to tell.’

‘You sleeping with people isn’t a secret.’

‘For me it’s really not,’ Anton said, stretching his arms above his head, and then yawning. Jack wondered how much rest he’d really gotten, if he stayed up thinking about Flitmouse. Had Anton just confirmed they were sleeping together? ‘For Alois? He’s not like the Golden Warriors. He’s not into what I’m into, exactly. He’s…delicate.’

‘Delicate? That dude we just pulled out of the Black Asylum who was complaining about who rescued him?’

‘That dude,’ Anton echoed. He looked down at Jack and smiled sadly. ‘He has a sad story. He’d murder me for telling you that much.’

‘You mean Husthoun?’ Jack said.

‘Husthoun? What-? Oh…no. Nothing like that. His life hasn’t been easy. None of ours has. But he has things in his past that shouldn’t happen to anyone. So he’s delicate. And private. He’ll gut you with a pencil if he thinks you’re a traitor to the Resistance though.’

Jack thought back to visiting Flitmouse in his attic home. He thought about the couch that he never got to see, buried beneath bolts of fabric as it was. Flitmouse had called it a gift from an ex.

‘Did you get him that couch he hates?’ Jack said. ‘Are you his ex?’

Anton’s eyes flew open. ‘What? Darkness, no! No. He told you about that?’

‘Only that his ex got him a couch he hated because he knew he’d hate it.’

‘That’s…’ Anton sighed. Then he muttered: ‘I’d gut his ex with a pencil.’

Jack had his hands in his pockets. The day was brisk, the skies blue, and the thin clouds on the horizon looked like they were going to fade to nothing rather than build. He wondered if any of them were the ones he’d seeded snow into, during the mission.

‘So you’re…dating? Or like…just really close friends?’

‘Jack,’ Anton said carefully, ‘it’s not really my story to tell.’

‘But you love him.’

‘I do,’ Anton said without hesitation.
‘But you love lots of people. The way you were with him… I’ve never seen you like that with anyone else.’

‘You’ve never seen me save anyone I love before from torture and certain death,’ Anton said, and then he sighed. ‘But it’s still probably true. I don’t know, Jack. It’s complicated. As so many things are! And Alois is truly astounding in his ability to make things complicated. But anyway. He’s alive. And he’s here. It’s all that matters. And you and I survived. They’re going to start calling you Jack the Brave soon! Except it’s taken. Jack the Very Courageous? Jack the…Chosen One!’

‘Nope,’ Jack said. His cheeks flushed.

‘Snow Boy!’ Anton announced loudly and cheerfully enough that several people looked over. Some smiled at Jack. Like that was his name.

‘We’re not flirting anymore,’ Jack said flatly.

‘Jack Frost, then. If I go back to calling you your proper name, will you let me call you dirtier things in the sheets?’

‘I literally just said-’

‘You said ‘we’re’ not flirting anymore, emphasis we. But I can do it, because myself, as a lone ranger, a lonely solo flirt, can never be a we. Not when you’ve decried it so. Tragic. What’s a boy to do but jerk off alone at night, imagining all the things… Well, I’m not one to say what I’d be doing to you.’

‘Seriously? You’re not?’ Jack said, looking at him as they turned a corner towards a small garden that had no one around.

‘You know me, Jack,’ Anton said, hand on his chest. ‘Serious to the very end. Not remotely sexual. Like you but…worse, somehow.’

Jack snorted, and then laughed, couldn’t help himself. Anton was able to make him feel something, and the last two days he’d still felt like he was drifting on that weird nothingness. There was just… emptiness inside of him sometimes. He walked through the hospital and saw so many sick people and instead of feeling scared or empathetic or alarmed, he just felt like nothing mattered.

Of course things mattered but…

He just felt weird.

Anton led them to a bench and Jack expected more shameless flirting. Especially with no one around.

‘Pitch has been in one of his moods,’ Anton said, dragging his heels along the pavement. ‘Has he been like that with you as well?’

‘I haven’t talked with him at all, pretty much.’ Jack said it like it was normal. Because maybe Pitch being like this was normal.

‘What?’ Anton said, looking at Jack in surprise. ‘But you- You sleep in the same room.’

‘Well, I get back late and he’s already asleep. And you know how early he gets up.’

‘Why are you getting back so late? You’re not on any nightwatch rotations.’
‘No- I…’ Jack frowned. ‘I dunno. I just am.’

‘Oh,’ Anton said.

A long, awkward silence. Jack stared at the hospital building. For some reason he just wanted to be back in there. He wanted to be there when Flitmouse woke up. Just wanted to know for himself that Flitmouse would eventually be fine. Didn’t want to think of Flitmouse as that body he’d seen on the stone floor, like all the other bodies on the stone floor.

‘Jack, are you okay?’ Anton said.

‘Yeah,’ Jack said, laughing. ‘Of course! We got all those people out. And I got to finally help Flitmouse. Which y’know, nice to feel useful.’

He sounded like he meant it, but he was separate from himself too. He watched himself doing and saying the right things, and he didn’t even mind that it was all distant and possibly a lie. He had to admit the numbness was awesome. Living in the world the rest of the time was kind of painful.

Jack flinched when Anton’s hand rested on his back. Over his scars. Because Anton didn’t know. Jack felt his skin crawling, but even that faded away too. Then it was like Anton was just a dull weight against him, and not anything bad or weird or meaningful.

‘It’s perfectly normal to not be okay,’ Anton said. ‘It was hard, Jack. And taxing for all of us. Weren’t you tired too?’

‘Been sleeping like a log,’ Jack said.

That wasn’t true either. He’d been having nightmares. He was so tired every night when he finally came to bed, but as soon as he closed his eyes, it was like he was in isolation, but his isolation was an Asylum, and he could hear the Darkness all around him. It always took him too long to shake the nightmare, and then he’d tell himself not to fall asleep for a while, but he was always too tired to fight it off.

He never seemed to wake Pitch up though, so that was something.

Anton rubbed his hand on Jack’s back, a comforting gesture. Anton didn’t know about the scars, and Jack was glad he was numb enough not to cringe away and ask Anton not to do it.

‘You can talk to me,’ Anton said, and then reluctantly drew his hand away. He stood up and placed his hand on Jack’s shoulder. ‘You can talk to me whenever you want. About anything at all. No matter how…crazy you think it is. Eva too. Even Pitch, when he gets his head out of his ass for five seconds. So…whenever you’re ready. Okay?’

‘Yeah,’ Jack said. He looked up. ‘Honestly though, I’m fine. Do you want me to head back in with you?’

‘If you want,’ Anton said.

But Jack didn’t want to. He didn’t want to wait by Flitmouse’s side while Anton was there. He needed some time alone. In the end Jack just shook his head and made a point of leaning back on the wooden bench.

‘Going to enjoy the sun while it’s out.’

Anton smiled, looked up like he was checking the sun was still there, and then tipped a salute to
Jack before turning on his heel and sauntering back towards the hospital entrance.

Jack wondered if he should feel worried about how many lies just spilled out of him, or if it was a good thing, that he was learning how to cope.

*

That night he came back late again, well past midnight, and Pitch was fast asleep. His arm was flung out to Jack’s side of the bed, and the blankets were turned down as though inviting Jack within. It was strangely considerate. Pitch slept deeply when he finally let himself sleep, and Jack stood there watching the steady rise and fall of his chest, and felt something nameless inside of him. Something dark and lonely, and he wondered if he was the one doing this to them. If he’d come back at a normal time, had dinner, stayed in Pitch’s rooms…

Did Pitch wait for him?

Jack changed quickly, leaning his staff against the wall. He slid carefully into the bed, not wanting to wake him, and Pitch shifted a few minutes later and moved closer to Jack. Bizarre. Maybe Pitch had overheated or something and was looking for the coldest point in the room.

Jack spent his nights wandering around. The Resistance never slept. It was a lot like the Palace of Lune. There were always guards and workpeople about. Jack also went into the library sometimes and read. He went into the kitchens and looked at all the food, and tried to understand what all of it was. He trained on his own in one of the many training rooms, trying to keep on top of his physical form.

At one or two in the morning, too tired to keep going, he’d fly quietly back and hope Pitch was asleep, and hope he wasn’t.

Eyes closed, he thought of the Black Asylum. His last thoughts were that they’d defeated everything in there, and they’d lost no one in the process. Well, no one who wasn’t going to die anyway.

*

He walked through dark corridors. The only source of light came from his staff, his shepherd’s crook, whatever it was he’d found in the mountain. It wasn’t a normal light, but the Light. Sharpwood walked quietly behind him in the shadows, and Jack shone the light into every cell as he went.

The dread was distant, even though the horror was right there in front of him. First Cupcake, dead and naked, not even allowed the dignity of clothing. Then Eva. Seraphina in the cell next to hers, cut in half. Then in another cell, Anton, sitting and staring blankly at Jack, a possessed vessel of the Darkness. He’d have to be killed, but it didn’t matter, because he was already dead. Everything that mattered about him was gone. Mihail was next, Agnessa too, their hands not quite touching where they lay broken on the floor. The next cell held only bits of someone’s body. Jack knew it was Jamie.

He stared at the tiny pieces of viscera and felt nothing at all.

‘Is it like this for you?’ Jack said into the emptiness.

‘No,’ Sharpwood said. ‘I just don’t care about your people.’

‘I don’t care either.’
Sharpwood didn’t respond to that, and Jack felt a twinge of something uncomfortable as he kept walking along the dark corridor.

Flitmouse was dead too, North was possessed, Toothiana was hanging from a skewer, Bunnymund strangled with one of his own whips dangling in the dark. Then, dead in another cell – impossibly – Sharpwood. Jack turned, but Sharpwood was still standing there, and Jack thought then that he was probably in a dream.

Jack stood in front of Pitch’s cell. He could have been sleeping, except that his chest wasn’t moving. His eyes were closed though. Jack wanted to touch his face, but he knew it’d be cold.

A hand on his shoulder. ‘It’s not so bad.’

The voice wasn’t Sharpwood’s at all. Jack tensed. He refused to look behind him. The fingers on his shoulder were soft, invasive, petting him.

‘It’s not so bad,’ said Gavril. ‘Honestly, everything will get a lot easier now.’

‘Are you going to do this to me too?’

‘Darkness knows I’ve been trying.’

Jack woke with a start, a flash of pain in his chest like he’d just been stabbed with a knife. He made a sound of shock to movement on the bed and pushed upright immediately, panicking, only to see Seraphina and Mihail crawling onto the rumpled covers. Pitch was gone. A small lamp was on and the room was still dim. It wasn’t even morning yet.

‘What’s wrong?’ Jack said, trying to swallow, trying to force some moisture back into his throat.

‘We had bad dreams,’ Seraphina said, sounding prim, even though her voice was shaking. ‘We’re sleeping here now. For now. Just for this morning? Papa wakes up early but we knew you’d be here.’

‘Oh,’ Jack said.

Mihail burrowed under the covers and disappeared, taking Pitch’s warm spot. Seraphina forced her way between them both – clampering over Jack’s legs and getting her knees in his shins in the process – and then fussed with the sheets and the blankets until they were neatly tucked around her shoulders. She stared wide-eyed up at the ceiling. Then she turned to Jack and stared at him instead.

‘Are you okay?’ Jack said.

Seraphina arched one eyebrow as if to say: Would we be here if we were? She was so like her father. So like her mother. Jack smiled a little, and carefully reached over and shifted the pillow beneath her head until it looked more comfortable.

After a minute, Mihail’s small head popped up from beneath the blankets and he looked over Seraphina’s arm at Jack’s chest, staring with some curiosity. Jack wondered if that was as close as he ever got to eye contact with anyone who wasn’t his mother.

The Tsar’s son.

‘I had a nightmare too,’ Jack said.
'They’re awful,’ Seraphina said. ‘Just awful. I don’t get them every night anymore. And I didn’t think I’d get them at all with Mihail staying over. We’re having a sleepover. He lets me brush his hair and I sometimes put plaits in it but I didn’t last night because he’s had a haircut and he wasn’t in the mood for me to try.’

Seraphina looked over as Mihail signed, and then shook her head. She didn’t bother translating, so Jack figured whatever Mihail said wasn’t meant for him. She stared up at the ceiling again, and then rolled her eyes at something.

‘I shan’t be falling asleep again today. Evidently,’ Seraphina said.

‘Me either,’ Jack said.

‘That’s good then.’ She pushed herself up into a sitting position and looked at Jack, eyes twinkling. ‘I like that you live here now. I’ve tried to see you the last two nights but Papa says you’ve been very busy and not to bother you. But this isn’t bothering you, is it? You weren’t going to fall asleep again anyway. And if you’ve just had a nightmare, you also need someone next to you afterwards. That’s the rules.’

‘Is it?’ Jack said, bewildered.

‘Of course!’

‘Do you get nightmares too?’ Jack said to Mihail. He was trying to remember what Agnessa said, about Mihail being just a boy, and not…the heir of Lune. Not some sacred gift to the whole planet. A boy.

‘Not every night,’ Seraphina said, translating Mihail’s signs. ‘And not tonight. But he was already awake. He doesn’t sleep well. He gets insomnia.’

‘That sucks.’

‘It’s so annoying,’ Seraphina said. ‘He tosses and turns. I keep telling Aunt Agnessa that I’m just going to make some sedative from the plants I grow and knock him out. He wouldn’t even mind.’

Mihail shrugged. He looked at Seraphina’s arm, and shrugged again. Jack got the distinct impression he really wouldn’t mind.

‘You still grow plants?’ Jack said.

‘You don’t know anything,’ Seraphina said, wrinkling her nose at him. ‘I always forget how little you know. We have to start our lessons again! I have only a small garden here, and a glasshouse, and I have a few windowsills that people let me grow plants on, and there’s a section of the roof. It isn’t much. But I make do.’

‘I’d love to do the classes again,’ Jack said. ‘I’ve missed them.’

‘Have you?’ She sounded a little breathless. ‘Oh, good. Then we’ll start again. I know you’re very busy, so maybe it might have to wait a couple of days. Maybe just a day. But it’s important. You have to know how to read.’

‘I know how to read.’

‘I mean, aside from the stupid peasant alphabet,’ Seraphina said dismissively. Jack stared at her, and she stared back, and then colour rose to her cheeks that was visible even in the dim yellow
light. She looked down. ‘Sorry.’

‘It’s okay,’ Jack said. Was it? He didn’t know what to say sometimes, at how easily she just
accepted that Jack’s position, his upbringing, was lesser. That was just about what everyone
thought all the time. It still stung.

‘Mm.’ Seraphina didn’t sound convinced. ‘Anyway, the Lune alphabet can be helpful, because it’s
used a lot, and for…things that other alphabets don’t cover as well. And- What was that, Mihail?’
Seraphina watched him as he signed, and then frowned. She looked between Jack and Mihail a few
times before she sighed and said:

‘Mihail wants to know if you touched the orb in the mountain.’

Jack remembered this from what felt like a long time ago. Mihail had asked him about the
mountain before. Jack didn’t really feel like there was much of a point keeping it secret anymore.
Mihail had a game look on his face, steadily looking down, eyebrows knitted together in
determination.

‘I did,’ Jack said. ‘That’s why I’m Jack Frost now. It gave me all this ice and snow.’

Mihail nodded, signed again.

‘He wants to know if you heard the voices in the mountain. The ones that aren’t the Darkness.’

‘I did,’ Jack said. ‘I heard my sister. It tried to corrupt her, but she still spoke to me.’

Mihail was signing, and Seraphina wasn’t looking, she just stared at Jack. Eventually, Mihail
reached out and tugged repeatedly on Seraphina’s sleeve.

‘What? Oh- Sorry, Mihail. He wants to know if you’re going to kill his…’ Seraphina trailed off.
She took a breath. ‘If you’re going to kill the Tsar.’

Jack stared at him. Seraphina must have changed the translation halfway through. What would it
have been?

*I want to know if you’re going to kill my Dad.*

‘I don’t know,’ Jack said. The right response was no. He should have said *no*. You didn’t look at a
small child and say, ‘I don’t know, buddy, maybe I will kill your Dad.’ He felt queasy. He felt like
Gavril’s hand was still on his shoulder. The air was thick.

Mihail was signing, and Seraphina was watching the movements closely. So was Jack, like he
could meaning in the eloquent rise and fall of Mihail’s fingers and wrists.

‘He says…’ Seraphina turned and looked at Jack only for a second, before she looked at Mihail’s
continued movements. ‘He says he won’t be angry if you do. He’s heard his father talking about
the orb in the mountain before, what it is and what it’s for, back when his father thought Mihail
was stupid and didn’t understand words or language. He says as long as you leave his Mama alone,
you can do it. He thinks- He thinks someone who has touched the orb should be the one to do it.
Mihail, I don’t- What…? *Papa* is probably going to be the one who does it. *No*, Jack doesn’t even
know that you’re supposed to have people there after a nightmare! He doesn’t *know-*’

Mihail signed more animatedly than before, and finally he stopped with a sharp movement, folding
his arms. Seraphina did the same thing moments later. Apparently Jack had two children in a huff
on his bed over whether or not Jack should kill the Tsar. Mihail’s father.
There is really not any part of my life that’s normal anymore, Jack thought with some exasperation.

‘What don’t I know?’ Jack said.

‘He says you’ve killed someone before,’ Seraphina said, refusing to look at Mihail, who was also refusing to look anywhere near her and was instead staring at the bed. Jack thought he’d feel something intense then, at the image of Crossholt’s open, unseeing eyes. Instead, he only thought about how Gavril kept people around him to make sure things like that couldn’t happen. Jack had killed before, but…

‘Look, you have literally just had a nightmare,’ Jack said, fed up. He turned to Mihail. ‘And you have insomnia, or whatever. You’re both stressed and need to calm down. I have like, a million meetings to get to today, and whatever happens with the Tsar, it will probably be ultra-planned by some of the smartest people here. If they want me involved, I’ll be involved, but the two of you aren’t going to be any happier or find the nights any easier if you’re fighting with each other. So you should both apologise for hurting each other’s feelings.’

Seraphina directed a wounded look at Jack, and Jack wondered how often she tried that on her parents. Jack gazed steadily at her.

‘Oh fine!’ she said. ‘Mihail, I’m sorry I don’t want to talk about murder first thing in the morning.’

Mihail’s hands flashed sullenly and she stared at them, and then bristled.

‘That was last week! And you wanted to hear that story! It’s not my fault it frightened you- What do you mean I should have known! You-’

‘Hey,’ Jack said. ‘Both of you. Apologise. That means you as well, Mihail. I don’t care if you don’t mean it, you can at least try not hurting each other’s feelings for like five seconds.’

Mihail took a deep breath and signed something that looked almost offhand, and Jack could have laughed, because he remembered times when he and his sister were made to apologise to each other. Pippa would drawl the most insincere apology she could manage, and Jack would hate it and then laugh moments later because he was so proud of her. So proud of her for being so rebellious even then. Mihail’s apology was the same.

‘I’m sorry too,’ Seraphina said, managing to infuse the words with venom.

Even so, a few seconds later, Mihail touched the tip of his finger to her side, and instead of ignoring him, she leaned into the touch. It must have been some ritual they had, because she appeared mollified.

‘I have to get up now,’ Jack said, dropping the stern act and making some tiny glacier goats appear on the blankets. Mihail gasped, and Seraphina smiled, her eyes lighting up. Jack slid out of bed and walked towards the shower, ruffling his hair to see how bad it was. He sighed. At least Seraphina and Mihail hadn’t laughed at his spectacular bedhead. ‘If you’re still behaving when I’m out of the shower, I’ll make some more of these for you before I head off. Deal?’

‘See? I told you, Mihail,’ Seraphina said, without acknowledging Jack.

Jack closed the bathroom door behind him and leaned against it, staring at nothing for several moments.

He thought of the City of Lune being attacked by the Darkness. Thought of that dream and Gavril’s hand on his shoulder. Thought of the huge fireplace and collapsing afterwards, vomiting and
nauseous and feverish and then weak for days. He thought of Pitch, with all his comrades down
there in the Darkness, broken and apathetic and a string of dead friends and lovers behind him.

Was he going to kill Mihail’s father? Probably not. But did he want to?

He was glad Mihail hadn’t asked him that question.

*

On his way out of Pitch’s rooms – Seraphina and Mihail tangled together and sleeping, blankets
covering them to protect them from the cold of what had been six little glacier goats running
around before Jack vanished them – he saw Sharpwood standing there, holding some books. Three
soldiers were standing around him and Jack could tell they must have been giving him a hard time
just from the way they stopped and stared at Jack, as though trying to guess if he’d be an ally.

‘Hey guys,’ Jack said, floating towards them. Sharpwood didn’t even look at Jack. He stared
ahead. Jack thought his hand looked tight on the books though. His clothing looked more rumpled
than normal.

Given Jack had been able to help save Flitmouse due to Sharpwood assisting him when they were
hiding out in the cottage, he felt rather more favourable towards Sharpwood. The idea of these
people giving Sharpwood a hard time made him feel an ugliness he didn’t want to deal with on top
of everything else.

‘What’s going on?’

‘This evil sack of shit was snooping in the library.’

Jack looked down at the books in Sharpwood’s hands. From what he could tell, they were more
illustrated children’s books. And there was one thicker book about the philosophy of the Light. It
was written in the common alphabet, Jack remembered passing it over as a kid because it was so
mind-numbingly boring. Every creche had one.

‘Yeah, someone should get this asshole a leash,’ said another soldier.

‘Send him back to his owner. Bet the Tsar’s missing him.’

Jack knew Sharpwood had noticed Jack was there. He knew because Sharpwood noticed things
like that. But he stared so blankly ahead with his black, opaque eyes, that even Jack’s skin crawled.
The possessed had looked like that in the Black Asylum. Only they’d been dead. Sharpwood’s
chest rose and fell with his breaths. He wasn’t…he wasn’t dead. He was just ignoring them.

In the creche, Jack had been told to ignore the bullies and eventually they’d go away. It was the
stupidest advice he’d ever heard. Sure, some bullies might pay attention to that. But the worst ones
just took it as a challenge and sometimes a personal insult, as though the cruellest thing that had
ever been done to them was to be ignored, and they’d best up the stakes until they definitely got a
reaction. There were some things no person could ignore, and then the bully would feel vindicated,
and know what they had to bring to every fight thereafter.

Jack had the feeling that anyone who had it out for Sharpwood, wouldn’t leave him alone just
because Sharpwood stared into the middle distance like he was above everything.

‘Come on, get out of here,’ Jack said to the soldiers. ‘We don’t have time for this.’

‘Then we should get rid of him,’ said the soldier closest to Sharpwood. The soldier yanked one of
the books and dropped it as the rest fell to the ground. Sharpwood’s hand spasmed and then hung lax.

‘No one’s gonna be sad,’ said another soldier. ‘And we’re meant to be fighting against real people, aren’t we? Wouldn’t hurt to have a real person to fight against. He could be like…our test.’

Jack didn’t bend down to pick up the books. He stared at the soldiers. He didn’t know them. They weren’t Golden Warriors. They were people who had defected a long time ago, now in their forties, living and breathing and eating the Resistance rhetoric until they, too, couldn’t see anything but the non-existent perfection of their philosophy in an imperfect world.

‘Look, leave him alone. He’s…’ Sharpwood wasn’t defenceless at all, and yet Jack had been about to say it. He looked swiftly at Sharpwood, feeling like he’d been duped somehow, but Sharpwood stared ahead. He looked unaffected by any of it, but somehow, Jack could tell that he was. Not only that, but he thought the others could too. It was as reliable as animals scenting blood. There was no way they’d stop until they either got the reaction they want, or destroyed him. ‘He’s here as Pitch’s guest. If you care about the Admiral, then you’ll get lost with this bullshit.’

‘Whatever,’ one of them muttered. ‘Watch yourself, Sharpwood.’

‘Yeah, make sure the pet knows where he belongs.’

‘Don’t think you can just go wandering wherever!’

They walked off down the corridor. Jack watched them until they were gone, then bent down and picked up Sharpwood’s books. He handed them to Sharpwood, who took them and only then acknowledged Jack’s presence by looking at him.

‘Are you okay?’ Jack said.

Sharpwood stared, then his eyebrows pulled together in confusion.

‘Why would I not be okay?’

‘Um, because they want to kill you?’ Jack said.

Sharpwood stared at Jack for a few minutes longer, and then finally his lips lifted into the tiniest little shit-eating smirk. Jack could’ve punched him for it, even if it did fill him with something like relief.

‘Do you think they would have succeeded?’ Sharpwood said blandly. ‘Interesting.’

He walked off back to Pitch’s rooms, and Jack resisted the urge to drag his hands through his hair. It was shaping up to be one of those days.

* *

Jack was kept busy throughout the day. He had multiple meetings with a bunch of people, and Pitch was in two of them. In the first, he noticed Pitch staring at him a few times and didn’t know what he was meant to do. He was mostly there to listen and stay quiet anyway. In the second, Pitch was busy talking and didn’t seem to notice Jack was there at all.

In the evening, Jack wondered if Pitch was already back in his rooms, and if he was waiting for Jack.
Jack went to the hospital.

Flitmouse was awake. Jack stood there in the doorway as they both looked at each other in surprise. The clothing Flitmouse had been given hung from him, leaving shadowy corners beneath his chin, in the hollows of his collarbones. He wore oversized spectacles that didn’t suit his face at all, but Jack figured it was more important that he see. But like this he just looked…too thin, too vulnerable.

‘Can I come in?’

‘I’m not shouting at you all the way over there, if that’s what you mean,’ Flitmouse said archly.

Jack entered the room. The flower in the vase had changed. Jack could see a fine metal container of tea by the bedside. The room smelled antiseptic. It smelled a lot like the creches used to.

Flitmouse rubbed at his forehead with the heel of his hand. He leaned back in the bed, which had been adjusted so that Flitmouse was still in a sitting position. His other hand rested on the sheets, his fingers tapping endlessly.

‘The tea is terrible,’ Flitmouse said. ‘I’ve been brought something not as terrible, but still, you could have brought some with you. I recall you had good taste.’

‘Some servant did,’ Jack said. ‘I didn’t choose it.’

‘Then go back to the Palace and get the servant,’ Flitmouse said tiredly.

Jack sat there, smiling a little, because it was good to see him like this. Tailor Flitmouse, who was supposed to be grumpy and irascible, and who apparently kept his first name a secret from most people except Anton.

‘These spectacles aren’t the right prescription. They’re just better than nothing. The- this nonsense-’ Flitmouse plucked at the thin cloth he was dressed in, ‘no better than rags. Utter rubbish. So. You’re here. Everyone has been telling me an awful lot about you. Apparently you’ve grown into quite the little rebel, haven’t you?’

Flitmouse squinted at him, and then closed his eyes. He looked exhausted. Jack wanted to reach out and touch the back of his hand, reassure him. But Jack was cold, and he couldn’t imagine how that would be good for anyone who had been kept down in the Darkness for such a long time.

‘I suppose,’ Jack said.

‘Gormless,’ Flitmouse said. Jack had no idea what that meant, but it didn’t sound like a compliment.

Flitmouse took several deep breaths after that, and Jack realised that Flitmouse was still really weak. Just sitting up and talking was exhausting for him. It was hard to imagine. He’d always been filled with a wired, nervous energy, and his hazel eyes were still alight with it. But there were lines of fatigue around them, and his mouth pulled down at the edges more than usual. Jack wondered if he should leave.

‘I can tell you have questions,’ Flitmouse said, pulling blankets up over his waist. He rested a hand over his belly. The nails were chipped, though they’d been filed back since Jack had last seen them.

‘Anton…’ Jack said.
‘Wait.’ Flitmouse squinted at him. ‘You want to talk about- What do you *know* about that? I thought you were going to ask about my role as…Toothiana’s spy.’

‘Oh that too,’ Jack said. ‘I don’t know much. I just saw how you guys were with each other in the Asylum. I asked Anton about it.’

‘We’re nothing with each other,’ Flitmouse said dismissively, looking away. It was clearly a lie. ‘He has his millions of relationships, and I’m certain he’s very pretty to look at on a regular basis, I have seen the propaganda posters after all, but we’re nothing to each other.’

‘That’s not what he said,’ Jack said.

‘That man likely thinks that anyone who smiles at him is in a relationship with him. I’m not.’

Flitmouse picked at the little nubby bits of cloth on the blanket, and turned to look back at Jack, as though daring him to say anything else. After a while, the silence growing tense between them, Flitmouse’s lips quirked in an empty, sharp smile.

‘I’m a servant. He’s… He is what he is. If we fail, we’ll all be dead anyway. If we win, he’ll likely become the Captain of the Fleet, and I’ll still be Tailor Flitmouse. Who would ever want a servant – even one such as I? – when you’ve had everything that he has? Besides, he likes things that are revolting. Those bedroom games…’ Flitmouse shook his head and then looked down at the fabric he was picking apart. There was a little ball of lint and fluff growing on the bed. He flicked it away with his fingers, and then began picking at the blanket again.

Jack thought about how he liked those bedroom games, and Pitch and Anton did, and that he didn’t know how to feel about Flitmouse finding it revolting. But he could definitely see why that put a wedge in things between Flitmouse and Anton, except…

‘He told me he loves you,’ Jack said.

Flitmouse’s face softened for just a second, and then his hands went still. He folded his arms.

‘You really think he cares about the fact that you’re a servant?’ Jack said.

‘I care,’ Flitmouse said. ‘I care about that. I’m also done with this conversation.’

‘So I should just go?’

‘*No,*’ Flitmouse said, waspish. ‘I’m done with *this* part of the conversation. Just put me back in the Asylum again, it would be easier than dealing with your faux innocent lines of questioning, would you? And get me some good tea while you’re at it.’

‘Don’t see how you’re gonna brew it in the Asylum,’ Jack said, rolling his eyes.

‘I am flawless and thus I shall find a way.’

Jack couldn’t help smiling, and Flitmouse saw his expression and smiled back. He was lying back against the bed properly now, though still reclining upright. He turned to face Jack, looking him over, staring at different points of his body, his clothing, his face.

‘Your hair is marvellous,’ Flitmouse said eventually. ‘Being a mountain mutation suits you.’

‘Thanks,’ Jack said.

‘I’ve heard that you were particularly incessant about rescuing me.’
‘I got shut down really fast,’ Jack said, laughing. ‘Anton was more incessant than I was, I think, at least behind the scenes. And…have you seen Toothiana? Are you mad at her?’

‘For what?’

‘I mean- She admitted herself, that she…’ Jack wondered if Flitmouse knew. ‘She put you in the line of fire.’

Flitmouse’s expression changed to one of profound disappointment, and Jack squirmed when he realised it was meant for him.

‘I was always going to be her stooge,’ Flitmouse said. His voice slowed down, he sounded far more patient than he normally did. ‘I knew where it would all lead. I just never expected to get rescued. I mean I somewhat did, but I also didn’t. I knew it was a possibility no one would come. Keep in mind, when I was taken, none of the big players had yet defected to home base and as far as I knew, everyone was still keeping up appearances in the Palace. I believe Paravi sped along the timeline so she could get to me sooner. She’s getting soft in her dotage.’

_I believe Paravi sped along the timeline…_

Jack thought of how she’d machinated the death-by-whipping with Bunnymund. Thought about how that forced Pitch’s hand, and ended up being the catalyst for all of them leaving and going to the Resistance home base. It never occurred to Jack that she might have had a reason for it beyond just…tactically seeing it as the right thing to do at the right time. Toothiana had always been detached about Flitmouse’s capture, though Jack knew she felt something about it. Did she alter the timeline to hurry along the rescue?

‘Is that what she told you?’ Jack said, wondering if Flitmouse was somehow being manipulated to feel more special than she actually thought he was.

‘She’d never say something like that,’ Flitmouse said, lips quirking. ‘That’s not her way. Nikolai told me.’

‘So you like, know all the Guardians then,’ Jack said.

‘I don’t know Aster very well, or Sanderson,’ Flitmouse said. ‘But you, Paravi and Nikolai? Yes, I’d say so.’

‘I’m not a Guardian.’

‘I don’t think that’s how it works,’ Flitmouse said, tilting his chin up and looking very superior. Jack sighed. It was true, in growing numbers people had started calling Jack a Guardian of Lune. The new one, who – apparently – just about single-handedly defeated the Black Asylum. Jack tried to say that Anton was the one who made sure they all got out alive, and then it turned out that Anton had been the one helping to spread the rumour.

Jack leaned back in the uncomfortable hardback chair – did they just not want visitors to stay? – and looked around Flitmouse’s room again.

‘Is it true that Pitch brought Sharpwood?’ Flitmouse said. The question sounded simple enough, but Jack felt his nerves sharpen all the same.

‘You know he did.’

‘I just wanted to see your face when I asked,’ Flitmouse said. ‘You know what he is, don’t you?’
‘A refugee.’

Flitmouse scoffed, and then picked at the blanket again, more aggressively than before. ‘Is that the sad story he spun for you? Poor helpless Sharpwood, a refugee from another planet, just accidentally being completely evil for hundreds of years.’

‘I think I can decide for myself what to think about him, thanks,’ Jack said. ‘It’s not like all my encounters with him were sunshine and flowers before he came here. Like, he did shoot me out of the sky with one of his blue magical arrows. I know what he’s capable of.’

Flitmouse’s arm went limp, his hand splayed on the blanket. He closed his eyes and then looked off towards the window with its darkened view beyond. Jack wondered if he was no longer welcome, or if Flitmouse was just too tired for the kind of conversations he wanted to have.

‘You’ve always had teeth,’ Flitmouse said pensively, his voice much weaker than before. ‘That’s what I am, you know. One of Toothiana’s Little Fangs, her Baby Tooth. So she calls me. If you say Sharpwood isn’t simply an evil little pinhead, then I might think about considering it.’

‘Without him, I wouldn’t have rescued you. He made it so that I could make my Light and snow around the Darkness properly – like, under my control. Because I’d never been able to properly control it around the Darkness. I’d never been able to make it around him or Gavril.’

‘It’s Gavril now?’ Flitmouse’s eyelashes fluttered, settled as his eyes closed. His breathing came heavier, slower. ‘I’ve missed…so much of you.’

‘You haven’t missed much,’ Jack said. ‘It was a fast learning curve.’

‘That wasn’t what I meant. Don’t let them turn the lights out,’ Flitmouse said, not even taking his glasses off, his voice becoming a whisper. ‘It hurts my eyes but…I do so hate the darkness right now. Don’t tell…anyone…’

Jack stood, worried, but only a minute later Flitmouse was asleep, his hands resting above the blankets and his shoulders slumping. Jack bit the inside of his lip. He walked over and touched his fingers to the back of Flitmouse’s hand. He felt cold. Most people’s skin felt hot now, but Flitmouse was chilled.

Jack gently placed Flitmouse’s hands and arms beneath the blankets, then drew them up to his chin. As he did so, he noticed a little figurine of a hummingbird, carved from some valuable stone he’d never seen before. It almost looked like a pearl – he’d seen them now in the Palace – but in colours he didn’t know pearls could come in. It shone in violet, jade green and a brilliant teal blue, changing in the light. Tucked by Flitmouse’s pillow.

Toothiana must have given it to him. It was in her colours, and she’d always been associated with birds, with feathers. Jack stared at it a moment longer, and then went to find a nurse to tell them not to turn the lights off.

* 

Jack couldn’t say what made him do it, exactly. What made him wander up to Bunnymund’s rooms and stand before the plaque before the round, wooden door that looked harmless, even cute.

Perhaps it was that he still didn’t feel anything. He could feel his heart beating harder, but he didn’t know if it was fear, nausea or something else. Only that it was past midnight, he wasn’t ready to go back to Pitch’s rooms, wasn’t ready to see Pitch fast asleep and that arm reaching to Jack’s side of the bed.
His staff turned in slow circles in his hand, frost spread out from beneath his feet, his scars felt like they crackled against the material of his shirt.

He was maybe a little irritated, in a distant way. Why did Bunnymund get to avoid everyone? Why did he get to shirk? Everyone else had to pull their weight and Bunnymund got to hide away. Maybe they all felt sorry for him.

What a joke.

Jack placed his hand on the doorknob, and briefly wondered what Pitch’s reaction would be. He doubted Pitch would approve, but Pitch wasn’t here.

The door swung open without a creak. Dim lights set into the round corridor were already alight, an inviting golden glow leading inside. The walls were painted in grass greens, pale pinks, yellows, violets and oranges. Colours that Jack had seen on propaganda posters in the past. Colours he associated with the Resistance, colours that Bunnymund had always favoured. Even here, on the threshold, he could smell that smoky richness of alchemy and magic.

Jack walked in and closed the door behind him. He got onto the winds then, not even knowing if Bunnymund was here. He still nursed a suspicion that maybe Bunnymund had never left the City of Lune, and was the reason the Tsar had unleashed the Darkness in the first place. No one had been able to prove otherwise, and everyone just expected Jack to believe them when they said Bunnymund was around, but under orders to keep out of Jack’s way.

The corridor opened into a large circular living space with what could only be a nest of pillows on the left, and a strange wooden desk covered in alchemical splashes and residue, pots of colour bubbling away even now. Bits of paperwork littered the ground. Diagrams and technical illustrations of animals Jack had never seen before, alongside blueprints and what looked like slogan ideas for the Resistance. Jack looked up. The round room tapered towards the top, into a smaller dome with a skylight that opened up to the stars. There was a telescope facing upwards. The whole room was shaped like an egg.

Three round wooden doors were set into the circular wall, one painted with a motif of bright leaves, another painted with an explosion of flowers, and the next painted with coloured eggs. Jack wrapped an arm around his other arm as he floated there. It was…nothing like the Disciplinarian’s Tower. It was actually weirdly inviting.

But he could smell alcohol in the air, and he didn’t think the rooms had been cleaned for some time.

He picked the door with the coloured eggs. Why would anyone paint eggs? It was the one that made him the most curious. He entered another corridor – shorter this time – and carefully floated along it.

There, at the end, slumped in a chair facing screen upon screen of radars, messages, codes, blinking lights and more, was E. Aster Bunnymund. A bottle of liquor on the counter, and empty ones on the floor. His ears were lax. Jack thought he might be sleeping.

Even so, Jack’s mouth went dry.

Just seeing those ears, seeing the shape of him, it was like a layer of skin had been peeled off him and he could feel again. Could feel too much. Could hear the whip cutting through the air before it ripped into his flesh. Could hear Bunnymund’s anger that Jack wasn’t dying.
‘Who’s it?’ Bunnymund said, not turning around.

Jack wanted to float backwards, but he couldn’t move at all. He could taste winter in his throat. Could feel splinters of ice in his blood. Every one of them hurt. What had possessed him to do this?

‘It’s me,’ Jack said, his voice shaking.

‘Strewth,’ Bunnymund muttered, after a pause. Then, his shoulders bunched and he spun away from the radar and peered at Jack, his eyes bloodshot, his whiskers drooping. A few seconds later his eyes widened and he swallowed thickly enough that Jack heard it. ‘Crikey, it is you.’

Initially, Jack had been worried he’d lose it completely the first time he saw Bunnymund after the whipping. He worried he’d try and kill him, that he’d legitimately use his ice to destroy one of the voices of the Resistance. Instead, he felt small. He felt like a snowflake. Bunnymund could say one word, and Jack would blow away.

‘You killed me,’ Jack said.

It wasn’t what he meant to say. He meant to say: You as good as killed me. But at the last minute, he said what it’d felt like all along. Not almost, not nearly, but definitely, if he hadn’t been saved with miraculous powers stolen from another planet.

‘I know,’ Bunnymund said, his voice breaking. ‘I know.

Bunnymund turned back to the screens, he reached for the bottle of liquor, but instead his palm just landed near it. Jack stared at the hand that was part paw. The hand that had wielded the whip. Turned Jack’s entire life into a mess of unending pain, tearing skin, shredded muscle and fat and nerves.

‘I know,’ Bunnymund said. ‘What are you doing here? You shouldn’t be here. It’s not good for you.’

‘I thought…they were lying to me, when they said you were here. That you’d be back with the City of Lune.’

‘If only,’ Bunnymund said, sounding not…arrogant or patronising but something else entirely. ‘If only. Maybe I could- But I’m useless, you see. Bloody useless right now.’

‘Are you-? Are you even sorry?’

Bunnymund lifted his arm again, dropped it, then lifted it and pressed his palm to his face. Finally, he turned back to Jack, and his eyes were wet.

‘Would it matter if I was?’ Bunnymund said.

Would it? Would Bunnymund being sorry undo anything? Jack knew it couldn’t. Other people got to love Bunnymund apparently, and care about him, and Jack only got to know him as a torturer, a murderer. Everyone talked about how hard Bunnymund had it, but Jack only knew how hard he’d had it because of Bunnymund’s wicked whip hand, that always struck harder than anyone else’s.

He floated down to the floor, the winds leaving him. He couldn’t manage to stay afloat. He grasped his staff and watched as Bunnymund thumbed away the tears from his eyes, muttering something and looking away, as though he was frustrated with himself.

‘It matters,’ Jack said.
‘Of course- Of course I am,’ Bunnymund said. He laughed, a single rise and fall of his shoulders. He wouldn’t meet Jack’s eyes. ‘I’m so…I’m so sorry. But it doesn’t change anything. I know it too, y’know. I’m not blind. And I think of them not believing that I’d do it. Tooth, bleedin’ North. Them two doubting Koz, until I made it here and had to tell it to their faces that I’d basically done it anyway. That you were as good as dead. I don’t know how they could’ve believed different.’

Jack almost asked him why, but he knew why. He knew why. It was the same reason Toothiana could dismiss the citizens in the City of Lune in favour of rescuing those in the Asylums. Bunnymund made a call. In that moment, he believed it was for the greater good. Jack thought that might make him more sympathetic, but he began to hollow out again, as though he’d been pricked with a pin. He was deflating. He shouldn’t have come.

‘So you sit up here and get drunk, because you feel sorry for yourself,’ Jack said flatly.

Bunnymund tensed, and Jack tensed too.

‘You rejected Pitch,’ Jack said, ‘like he was the morally corrupt one. None of you let him be a Guardian. But you’re lower than he is.’

‘I know,’ Bunnymund said. His voice was calm. ‘I know. I’ve been doing a lot of thinking, guess I had a lot to learn. In amongst feeling sorry for myself.’

It wasn’t even bait. He just said it like it was the truth. Jack wanted more somehow, wanted less, wanted to be walking the grounds instead of up here. He could feel his scars. He imagined he could feel all of them, individually, which he knew couldn’t be true, because on some parts of his back…

‘You know,’ Jack said, swallowing, ‘the nerves are dead on some parts of my back, right? They’re just dead.’

Bunnymund said nothing, and Jack clenched his staff.

‘You always said it was because I never let myself rest. You always made it… Like it never occurred to you that Crossholt made me do drills or run around after you beat me, specifically because he knew it would make it worse. Like you were so stupid.’

Bunnymund then turned back to Jack, eyes glossy.

‘I killed him,’ Jack said. ‘That was what you wanted to know back then, wasn’t it? Whether I killed him. Whether I was the one who did it, because I was the one that had all the scars on his back and was written up every other day for something. You must’ve thought it was just something I’d do. Jackson Overland, from the Overland creche, of course he murdered Crossholt.’

‘I didn’t think that,’ Bunnymund said. ‘I was worried.’

‘About who? Me? You asked me if I wanted to report him, the second last time. But what would’ve happened if I did? You know, don’t you? You knew I had to say no. And you still let me go back. Over and over again. Because of your precious City. And now it’s in ruins, and people are dying, and your best friends won’t do anything about it, for the greater good. How’s it feel?’

Bunnymund stared, and Jack stared back, feeling hard and flinty inside.

‘Fuckin’ miserable, actually,’ Bunnymund said, and then he half-smiled and rubbed his face and then rubbed one of his ears. ‘They say I’ve gone too soft, now. Paravi, well, she’s both mad as a cut snake that I was too hard with you, and now she’s pissed that I’m soft instead.’
‘Too soft?’

‘I can’t sit in on the meetings anyway. I don’t know what decision to make anymore. I don’t trust myself. Probably shouldn’t have listened to myself for months, honestly. Years maybe. Even Paravi didn’t think I’d actually do it. I think she thought I’d see it as some signal to get ready to defect, and instead I just upped and whipped you to death. Koz was right. He’s like that. You never want to listen to him and he’ll drive you up the wall, but every now and then, he’s just right.’

Jack didn’t know what to say. He didn’t remember everything that Pitch had said to Bunnymund, but he remembered Pitch calling him a cold-blooded murderer, an abuser, a betrayer.

‘I just can’t decide which lives are worth more now,’ Bunnymund said, shaking his head and looking down. ‘I just can’t decide. I should never have been allowed to decide. It was never meant to be what I was about. Mate, you don’t ever have to believe me. I don’t expect a lick of respect from you, and I’m not gonna make excuses, because everyone can do that. That’s what just about everyone’s good at doing. Making excuses. I was the best at it. I made excuses for every damned thing I ever did to you. You’ve heard some of them. I had more. And now here I am, a sorry old sooky la la, and they can’t have me in the meetings, so here I am. Here I’ve been.’

The stones beneath him, as he sat down, were warm. Jack wondered if they were heated from underneath. He lay his staff on his lap and stared up at Bunnymund.

‘I hate what’s happening with the City of Lune,’ Jack said finally.

‘Strewth, me too, me too. What a crock of shit it is. If I had your powers, I’d fly there myself and just…light the place up. I heard what you did in that Black Asylum. But I’d just go there and do it, just…something. But no, I’ll listen to my betters in this. I’ll stay here and watch them send messages from the City. I’ll decode their codes and know how many of them are dying.’

Jack pressed his lips together, squinted down at the stones.

How hard could it be? To just fly there, to just light the place up like he did in the Black Asylum? He’d go at night, he could use cloud cover, and he knew that he had so much snow, so much Light now. He could give the City of Lune a fighting chance. The Darkness couldn’t attack the citizens while it was snowing. It would give them a chance to escape. And Jack wasn’t a Guardian – no matter what the others said – and he had a will of his own. He could go and come back, and by the time they were mad at him, they’d realised how much he could help.

He carefully didn’t think about Pitch’s reaction. Sometimes decisions had to be made for the greater good. Wasn’t that what they’d taught him?

‘I can’t believe you came up here,’ Bunnymund said. ‘I bet Koz had something to say about it.’

‘He doesn’t know.’

A long silence, and Jack looked up to see Bunnymund’s head tilted, his direct gaze considering. ‘Y’know, mate, he’s gonna have something to say about it.’

‘That’s kind of what he does.’

‘Yep, that’s- Judgemental prick at times, still the best mate I ever had.’

Jack dug his nails into his staff. It only bent his nails. ‘You were…close friends?’

‘I know, I know, it’s hard to imagine, isn’t it?’ Bunnymund said, shifting in his chair. ‘I formed it,
y’know. The Resistance. It was my idea. Koz took up with it. The others followed. But you should’ve seen him back then. The fire in Koz’s eyes. When you saw Gav and Koz walking side by side anywhere, fair dinkum, it was like two kings or princes ready to conquer the world. But then they did conquer the world, and other worlds, and Koz picked his side.’

‘He gave up,’ Jack said. ‘He gave up because Gavril’s invincible.’

‘Yeah,’ Bunnymund said heavily. ‘I guess I gave up too. But you still need someone to hate sometimes, even when you’re despairing, and Koz was a good target, because he’s stubborn enough to take it without wearing down.’

‘Except he was kind of destroyed by all of you turning against him. I don’t even think it was just Gavril. I think it was- I don’t know. I mean I wasn’t there.’

‘Sometimes it’s the ones that aren’t in the middle of it that can see it true anyway,’ Bunnymund said. ‘Shouldn’t you be, I dunno, heading along now? Going to bed? It’s late. I know they don’t just have you sleeping in and laying about.’

‘No,’ Jack said. He stood up and looked around the room again. He was numb once more. He felt a little ill, and he felt like he needed to know exactly what protective measures were around the home base. He could leave and come back in a single night. He knew how fast he could fly. He could definitely go faster than a clipper or hydrofoil. ‘Hey, is it true that people are monitored leaving home base? Like, not just on the ground, but in the sky?’

‘Yep,’ Bunnymund said, pointing to the radars.

‘So someone like me couldn’t even leave to like…help the City of Lune, even if they wanted to?’ Bunnymund’s whiskers pushed forwards, his ears twitched. He didn’t look at Jack, he kept looking at the radars.

‘Someone like you shouldn’t,’ Bunnymund said slowly.

‘It’s what I’m here for, isn’t it? No one else can do it.’

‘You’d be putting your life in danger. It is absolutely a bloody trap, and Gavril will be ready for us, and he will be ready for you.’

‘If he was so ready for me, then how come we defeated all the Asylums we went up against? Maybe he thinks he’s ready, but we’ve all escaped him. We even stole Sharpwood. You couldn’t buy me some cover could you? It’s not like you don’t owe me or anything.’

Bunnymund’s mouth slanted, his eyes narrowed. He looked unhappy, and Jack’s back tensed. He refused to look away.

‘I could do it in one night,’ Jack said. ‘Be there and come back before anyone knew I was gone.’

‘Nope,’ Bunnymund said abruptly. ‘No. I shouldn’t’ve said anything. If I put this damn fool idea in your head-’

‘You’ll what? Whip me again?’

Bunnymund opened his mouth, Jack could see the moment that he’d pushed Bunnymund too far, and he almost wanted it. Wanted Bunnymund to yell at him and argue and show his true ugly colours. Instead, Bunnymund closed his mouth, he blew out a heavy breath through his nostrils,
and then looked at the radars again.

‘You’ll get no help from me,’ Bunnymund said finally.

‘Yeah,’ Jack said, gripping his staff so hard his palm hurt. ‘Well, it’s not like I’ve ever needed it.’

He turned and flew back down the corridors, getting out of Bunnymund’s rooms as fast as he could. Once the wooden door behind him slammed shut – the wind helping him out – Jack raced outside onto the grounds and stared up at the night sky. His heart was beating so hard, his throat felt like it was closing, and he gazed up at the stars and tapped his staff on the ground.

*Tap. Tap. Tap.*

Bunnymund had never done him a single favour, and Jack didn’t trust him not to warn the others of Jack’s plan.

So if he was going to do it, he’d have to do it now.
By the time the alarms sounded, Jack was far above and away from the base camp, even as he looked over his shoulder and saw the glow of floodlights behind him.

He travelled on the fastest winds, he didn’t even need to know where he was going. This high up in the night sky, the gales that shoved him along knew every corner of Lune. He only had to say where he wanted to go to be tugged and pushed in that direction. It was as though the winds knew how urgent this was, how important it was that he move quickly.

Pitch said that Fyodor was always half-cocked, that he never had a plan. Jack didn’t have a plan either. He laughed a brief bubble of noise that was snatched up by the frigid blasting winds around him, his body far colder than usual. He had no plan. But what was there to plan? He was going to give the City of Lune a snowstorm it would never forget.

He thought there may have been the slightest chance that Bunnymund was trying to manipulate him into doing this, he didn’t even care. He’d wanted to from the beginning. He’d tried their way, it wasn’t good enough. It was impossible to sit by and do nothing, just because the others couldn’t see a way out. None of them came out of that mountain with his ice powers, and if they were going to go around saying that he was a Guardian, that he was someone slightly separate to the authority systems around him, then it wasn’t like they could be surprised when he did something like this, was it?

They’re gonna be so mad.

He tried not to think about Pitch’s reaction. He tried not to think about the inevitable comparisons with Fyodor, or the anger, or anything like that. Amongst the numbness and the exhilaration of being so high in the night sky, of travelling so fast the ground beneath him blurred – he was faster than any ship had ever been – were the inklings of guilt. Pitch probably deserved better than this.

Jack should’ve told him first.

Later.

He’d deal with all of that later.

The staff in his hands only got colder, a rime of frost spiralling out from it and covering Jack’s clothing, crawling up his hand, coating his hair. He could feel the thundering of a storm in his heart, he felt that if he opened his mouth, a hurricane would come.

Hadin’t the Tsar always wanted to see what Jack was capable of?

It was what he’d asked for in the beginning.

And you always do what the Tsar asks for, don’t you, Jack?

Jack grinned, and flew faster to his goal.

* 

In a ship it would have taken maybe a day. But Jack sped to his destination like a bullet, the winds around him only too happy to roar alongside him like invisible behemoths galloping across the sky.
So it was only two hours later that Jack saw the Palace and City lights in the distance and began to will clouds to form. He had no idea what the City was supposed to look like at night, from a distance. He had no idea what to expect in terms of how bad it was, how devastated the City might be. Maybe not devastated at all, even with people dying or being taken and possessed – it wasn’t like the Darkness knocked down buildings.

He flew higher. They’d know he was coming, wouldn’t they? Bunnymund had said they’d be ready. Besides, they’d see the clouds forming out of nothing and they’d know. He wanted them to. Hadn’t he been shown off at the Parade anyway? Jack hovered above the clouds and called the Light to himself. His staff glowed. The clouds began to suffuse with it.

Then, when he knew he was over the City of Lune itself, he ducked down beneath the cloud cover – looking at the rooftops, the streets. He couldn’t see everything, but from here he knew there weren’t as many lights on as there should be. As he looked around, alert for ships, soldiers, anything, he spotted sections of street that were a solid, inky black, as though roads had been permanently cast into shadow.

His brow furrowed, and then he blinked hard when he realised what it was, where he’d seen that before. In the Tsar’s fourth treasury, the ground smouldering with Darkness, lying along the floor like a lake.

Was this how the Tsar was keeping people in their homes? Not just fearlings and nightmare men anymore, but this?

He flew lower, and then shot down towards the ground and skimmed some of the streets, noting that the Darkness covered some of the major thoroughfares, and any alleyways that led towards the outer reaches of the City, preventing escape.

A loud, hollow screaming reverberated through the air, and Jack sped upwards, sure it was an attack.

But the screaming didn’t stop and Jack realised it was the alert sirens. He’d never heard them before. The alert sirens were being sounded because of him.

Once, he would have felt horror at his own daring. Maybe he still did, deep down. Instead, he only felt an odd, distant kind of grief that the sirens would sound for him, but not for the cloak of Darkness forcing people to stay back in their homes.

Don’t worry guys, I’ve got you covered.

The clouds began to pick up the Light he carried as he flew through them. He felt – in his chest, in the sky around him – huge stores of snow forming. He let the cold pour straight out of him, until the Light hurt his eyes. The snow began to fall lightly at first, small glowing pieces whipped about in the winds that didn’t want to settle, responding to Jack’s desire to spread the snow far and wide. Then fatter, heavier pieces that shone down onto the tiled rooftops.

He thought of his sister, imagined the look on her face if she saw what he could do. But she was the one who’d directed him to that orb of power, absorbed by the Darkness as she had been, she’d kept enough of herself to let him find that. She’d given him all of winter, a gift that he wouldn’t waste. She’d want him to use it like this. He just knew she would.

Beneath him, an unearthly growl, then a shrieking. It was distant, but Jack would always know the sound of the Darkness. Knew it from Endan, knew it from the mountain, knew it from the Black Asylum, and now he knew it here in the City, responding to Jack’s snow.
He hoped Gavril felt it.

He kept a constant eye on the City even as he kept the clouds fat and full. He watched streets of Darkness try to pull itself away from the snow that kept falling, trying to find defensive shapes, and nodded in some satisfaction – even as the sirens kept screaming – when it couldn’t hold itself together. Those tiny pieces of snow were enough to burn holes in it, and where the snow landed on the cleared ground, it continued to glow, preventing the Darkness from returning.

* 

It was easy at first, and Jack even swept down a couple of times to create frost creatures – deer and goats, even the giant bears that didn’t exist anymore, because they’d all been hunted for their fur. He had them amble along the Darkness free streets, glowing golden, a signal that if there was any time to leave, it was now.

He saw hundreds of Resistance posters, **thousands** of them. All in delicate bright colours – pinks and blues, yellows and greens. Contrasting against the black, gold and red standard of the Tsar’s propaganda posters. They were plastered even onto the cobblestones, revealed as the Darkness died away. They were on rooftops and over shop windows. Bunnymund’s posters – but far more than even Jack had seen that day in North’s tower. The people must have been making them, it was chaos, no wonder the Tsar had responded so swiftly, worked to curtail them.

He saw people pressing their scared faces to the windows and staring in wonder. He saw one or two children pointing up at him, even as he raced back up into the relative safety of cloud cover.

If he didn’t fly down towards the ground, he might have missed it, the gables and hydrofoils approaching in the air, gamely moving towards the cloud cover even though the snow would mess with their engines. He heard the thrum of their machinery as they came closer. Enemy ships.

Jack stared, heart hammering, even as he shot back up into the clouds and thickened the snow, aware of a faint tendril of fatigue winding through him. He had enough cloud cover and Light going to cover the whole City.

Holes punched through the clouds around him, punctuated by sharp booms. Jack watched as a cannonball moved right past him, streaks of cloud clinging to the projectile before the wisps vapourised. The rest of the cloud cover held, but another series of booms sounded, attacking a patch of cloud nearby, and Jack heaved for breath, thinking quickly.

They were attacking the clouds, assuming he was in there. How must it look to the citizens of the City? That the thing that came and took the Darkness away was being attacked by the Tsar’s men?

‘Think, think,’ Jack whispered. ‘Think.’

The Palace. He hadn’t extended the cloud cover that far. They’d surely be expecting an attack, but Jack felt savage and giddy with the power he was spreading over the land. It was as vicious and sharp as the winds sweeping his hair back, as the spikes of frost that clung to his staff. They were expecting an attack, yes, but they were used to his snow.

Jack had ice too. He was Jack **Frost**, after all.

First, he swept above the cloud cover, and saw some of the speedy little ships already waiting for him. He grinned, spread his arms, knew he looked every inch the target. But he needed to spread his arms to direct the ice where he needed it to go. A crunching, crackling noise as ice grew into the inner workings of the ships around him, and then shouts of distress as the ships began to drop
from the sky.

The ships were manned with real people. He didn’t want them to die. But most of the small ships had a manual override and could be glided back down to the ground. Besides, they were trying to kill him. They were trying to keep the Darkness in the City. In that moment, he knew they were people with lives and families, but he found it hard to care.

It was one more thing he didn’t feel properly. Another thing he could sweep away into that empty space. Maybe this was how Pitch did it. Managed to get everything done while still keeping a level head.

Jack flew towards the Palace, digging deep into himself for the coldest core that he knew lurked. The part of him that had thrown up huge monstrosities of ice when the darkness had pushed him to, before he knew how to work with it properly. The snow was softer, didn’t require him to delve as hard for the malice that still lived inside of himself. The ice… Ever since the induction with Sharpwood, it no longer felt like it threatened his very sense of self, but it was still there…a background buzz of knowing how easy it was to consume, to take, to devour with shadows, with ice.

The blaring of the sirens got louder as he approached. He could see the huge loudspeakers on their poles and flung his hands towards them, ice crawling out from the inside of the metal structures, distorting the noise and rendering it tinny.

‘Are you home?’ Jack said, the words vanishing into the winds, as he looked towards the Palace. ‘Are you here, watching?’

He hoped.

He flew in spirals around the Palace, needing to freeze the engines of several more ships as he went. He knew there was ground crew, saw them and their bows and arrows, kept himself a difficult target as he masked himself with a whirlwind of snow. Blue lightning crackled out from the tip of his staff, raced electric along his body, and the ground below thudded dimly. It made the same noise again, and people on the ground – looking like insects from this distance – began to lose their focus, wondering what was happening.

It wasn’t easy to ice the Palace. The place was huge, a metropolis in its own right. Jack grew the huge spikes of ice as he went, first coating the bricks and tiles and golden columns with a fine layer of frost, and then drawing it up and out as he flew, letting the winds and the cold in him shape its structure.

A trance found him as he worked. He’d never used his ice like this – not so much, for so long. He felt the symbiosis between himself and his bizarre shepherd’s crook, once only a stick he’d somehow found in the mountain. Felt the way it conducted the ice, how it amplified everything and made it stronger. He thought of North calling him a weapon, and how that had once bothered him.

Now, the power of it was dizzying.

He hovered high above the encased Palace, now looking like a giant mountain of ice. It glowed faintly. He didn’t infuse it with as much Light as the snowstorm, knowing the citizens in the City of Lune needed the Light the most. He gasped down huge breaths, feeling a tremor move through his left wrist. He looked down at it briefly, confused, and then stared back at the ground around him, keeping an eye out for ships, for enemies.

Down below, he saw some people emerge from a trapdoor by the Palace walls, lifting themselves
out of the ground. He squinted at them, pointed his staff towards them. In turn they faced him, and then one of them lifted their hand.

Jack moved backwards, prepared for arrows, cannonballs, anything. Instead, a flare of green, whirling energy shot past him, an ominous hum clinging to the air around him.

*Magic.*

Jack was shoved by the winds, flung metres away, just as the hum exploded into a streak of vicious fire. The noise deafened him, turned everything fuzzy, even the strange background hum of the sirens still attempted to gamely sound through their ice stoppers.

*Time to get out of here.*

The winds were way ahead of him, yanking him backwards, away from the Palace and back towards the City. He didn’t want to turn his back on what must have been the Tsar’s magicians, but he couldn’t go as fast flying backwards.

He turned, fled, and saw another green streak – like a tiny comet – shoot past him. The hum clung to the air once more, and Jack let himself drop like a stone, shouting as fire erupted into the sky above him. He could feel the heat of it. The percussive force tore holes into his clothing.

A few seconds to try and shake his head clear, and he saw the cobblestones rushing up too fast. He threw his will forward, *pushed* as hard as he could, and managed to slow his descent enough that he didn’t snap his bones on impact. But it still shoved the air out of his lungs, and paralysed, he clutched at his stomach and stared wide-eyed up at the ball of fire still hanging in the sky, ruining that section of cloud.

Footsteps pelting towards him, and Jack shoved out with his staff, blue lightning crackling through it, arcing over him protectively.

He turned, saw not soldiers, not the Tsar’s people, but folk in simple dress. A woman wearing the kind of tunic one wore to bed. Another still wearing her hairnet. A man with a beard wrapped in curlers. He watched in alarm, not knowing if he could trust them.

‘Jack Frost!’ said the woman with the hairnet. Her eyes were wide, huge, as she stared up at the glowing clouds above them, then pulled him up to his feet. Jack was still wheezing. ‘Are you hurt? Here, come inside, we’ll look after you.’

‘I have- I have…’ Jack took a huge breath and coughed, the force of it scraping his throat raw. He looked quickly in the direction of the Palace, but he couldn’t see anyone coming. Not yet. ‘I have to go. It’s not safe for you. Leave the City. Or find…somewhere safe. It won’t be here. The Tsar won’t stop with the Darkness until you’re gone, or until you wished he’d killed you.’

The woman with the tunic placed a hand over her mouth, her eyes sheening with tears. Jack couldn’t tell what words of his alarmed her more, and he hoped they were – at least – not as ignorant as he’d been when he’d first gone into the mountain.

Jack hopped back into the air again, feeling like it was harder than normal to do that much. Maybe he’d been hit somehow and he looked down at his clothing. Aside from a few singe marks, he didn’t look injured. He frowned. His left hand continued to tremor, shaking by his side even when he clenched his fist.

‘Go,’ said the woman with the hairnet. ‘Go now. Be safe. Tell the others we’re grateful, we’re grateful that they sent you. The snow has already given us plenty of cover to get more out.'
Please…” She cupped his cheeks with both of her hands. Though he was floating in the air, he’d always been short, and she was tall and looked like a matriarch might. ‘Be safe.’

‘I will.’

Jack spiralled up towards the clouds and then grit his teeth together and used what remained of his energy to grow more snow within them, to seed more Light, to make them last as long as they could against whatever magicians the Tsar had protecting him.

Then he pushed ahead into the night sky, away from the City, away from the Palace that was now an ice spire.

He called a small amount of snow to cover him, and after a few minutes realised it wasn’t coming. He looked up and saw no snow whirling around him, not even a thin wisp of cloud cover.

Behind him, though, the sky was positively shining. Jack had never seen anything like it in his life. The golden glow of it was so strong, the snow falling so bright, that it almost looked like the City had been encased in a protective bubble. He hoped it lasted for days, even though he suspected the Tsar’s people would be strong enough to have it gone by morning.

He wished he could stay and help them more.

He continued to wheeze for breath, blaming it on whatever magic the magicians had used. The winds pushed him along quickly, mercilessly, and he was grateful that they were still there around him. He didn’t try to call ice to his hands anymore. He didn’t try to call the blue lightning, or any Light.

He knew how futile it would be.

*

The journey back to the Resistance’s base camp seemed to take three times as long, and Jack – paranoid – kept looking behind him as he flew. But no one seemed to be coming. He scrubbed at his face with his hands and was surprised that his palm was wet, and then felt a thick thump of dread, wondering if he’d somehow burned through his ice and then, at the end, overheated.

A mild shadow of what he’d experienced after the Tsar had put him in front of that fireplace, but Jack could feel the nausea of it in his gut and throat. Could tell his body didn’t feel quite right.

Maybe it wasn’t the magic. Maybe this was what it felt like to be spent. To use all his Light, everything else, and be left with…himself.

He felt strange then. He was hollow, but he could feel every inch of the emptiness and he didn’t like it. The winds around him were rattling inside of him too, showing that once he’d burned through his snow and ice and Light, there was nothing but darkness. The inside of his body as awful and black as the Black Asylum had been.

Jack grit his teeth together, groaning as he forced down a stronger wave of nausea. He could finally see home base on the horizon, but the winds against him were flagging. He slowed, and then felt himself begin to lose altitude.

‘Come on, *come on*, we’ve done this much right?’ Jack said, his voice strained. The fact that he could hear himself wasn’t a good sign, it meant the winds weren’t strong enough to steal sound away, it meant they were weakening.
'Please, come on,' Jack whispered, pulling from some deep reserve in himself, widening the emptiness as he scraped whatever bits of power were left inside of himself. The winds bolstered, he flew forwards and looked behind him again – no one coming, nothing but clear night sky. Maybe Jack had scrambled too many of the Tsar’s smaller, faster ships for them to follow. Or perhaps the snow and clouds had done it. Jack hardly cared.

He had a faint fantasy that he could land without anyone having noticed he was gone. That he could go to bed now. It was nearly dawn. Pitch would be there, and Jack would crawl under the covers, and Pitch would inch closer to him, and Jack would wonder what kind of person he was, to be scared of Pitch when he was soft like that.

*  

Instead, as the winds began to fail him again, he saw that he was being lowered towards tumult. Warriors and soldiers out on the grounds, not looking up at him, but fighting fearlings, nightmare men, Darkness. Jack stared, perplexed. Did the Tsar organise this? But it was only the Darkness, and it was being fought back.

Pitch was out there, in uniform, sword glowing. He looked beautiful. Jack could hardly believe that Pitch had ever touched him tenderly, ever looked at him with that gentle expression. Pitch fought like he could single-handedly destroy everything evil that had ever touched Lune or any other planet.

Then, shouting, and Jack heard Anton’s voice and saw Pitch turning towards him, even as the winds failed completely and Jack fell over twenty feet to the ground, wrists crunching into stone. Shafts of pain rocketed up to his shoulders, stole his breath away, and he looked down at his hands. His wrists didn’t look broken, but he could feel it.

They were broken.

He almost laughed then. He’d done so much, and now he’d broken his own stupid wrists.

Pitch was running over, dragged Jack up by the collar of his shirt and stared at him, and Jack stared back, feeling like he might laugh or throw up. Instead, he said:

‘Is it my fault? The attack?’

Pitch’s eyebrows drew together, he looked stunned, as though they were the last words he ever expected Jack to say.

‘No. The Darkness has always attacked us here.’

‘Like Pippa,’ Jack said. Pitch’s eyes narrowed. Jack thought that eyes like that shouldn’t hold so many different things in them. He could tell Pitch had a million things he wanted to say. He could tell Pitch was angry. Jack wanted to apologise, but didn’t know which of his wrongs he’d be apologising for.

He couldn’t move his fingers. He couldn’t hold his staff. It was still on the ground. It didn’t matter. He couldn’t call snow or ice with it anyway. He hiccupped, and the sound changed as he choked on the pain coursing through him.

‘Broke my wrists,’ Jack said.

More shouting, and Jack looked around, even as Pitch lowered him to the ground.
‘Stay there,’ Pitch snarled.

Jack couldn’t do much else. His head lowered, he stared blankly at his left hand, no longer shaking, because – he suspected – the limb had gone truly numb. He’d just have to fall better next time, if this ever happened again. Seemed silly though, getting all those ice powers and still being crappy at hitting the ground. Seemed like someone who could fly through the air should be good at landing.

He blinked the shadows out of the corner of his vision, not wanting to lose consciousness, not ready.

The shadow returned, creeping closer, and Jack stared at it, dread building acidic in the back of his throat.

A tiny tentacle of Darkness, weaving towards him, and Jack reached for his Light absently. Nothing responded. He looked up, but he couldn’t see Pitch, or anyone he recognised. No one was paying attention to him. His whole body throbbed with pain.

‘Well, shit,’ Jack said. His mouth was already dry. His body was already covered in sweat. He didn’t know how the fear inside him could build when there was nowhere left for it to go, but it managed.

Shit.

He reached backwards automatically, through the flaring pain, and tried to push himself upwards, away, and his scream died in his throat as the Darkness looped around his ankle.

A few moments to feel it pushing into him, breaching that skin barrier in a way that was easy for it – but astonishingly hard for Jack – and then it was in him. In his blood, his marrow, his eyes, his mouth. Then it was in his mind, and Jack felt his vision cloud smoky black.

*Probably a good thing I’m surrounded by so many Golden Warriors though, right?*

Jack didn’t know if he screamed aloud or silently, he only knew that he screamed.

A world foggy and bleak and frightening. Jack could see out of his eyes but couldn’t at the same time. He could feel the pain in his wrists, but couldn’t, even as the Darkness jerked him upright and cared not at all for broken bones. He staggered forwards, pushed towards his own staff, and saw himself picking it up. Saw his fingers curling around it.

He needed to warn them.

The thought was nothing more than a passing thing. The Darkness had no use for it.

Then he was walking towards Pitch. The Darkness knew all of him now, was plucking at his soul and instead of eating it, only possessing the parts it needed. He could feel its malevolent glee that Jack had some connection to Pitch. The Royal Admiral over there – one of the primary enemies of the Darkness – and Jack observed it all far above himself, through a pinprick of remaining awareness.

Pitch turned towards him, noticed immediately that something was wrong. Those wide, wide eyes. Pitch’s coat fluttering, his face slack, his mouth open in disbelief.
The Darkness raised Jack’s staff, drew so hard from Jack’s power that Jack screamed internally, wailed at the feeling of being turned inside out like an empty bag and shaken for anything that might be left. There was nothing there to draw on. Jack really had spent it all.

He felt a moment of hesitation from the Darkness. Then a redirection, and Jack began to lose track of everything as the Darkness ate at him. It must have realised it couldn’t use him after all, and would simply take whatever could be taken; mind, body and soul.

It hurt more than he thought it should, given he was so far away from himself. It hurt more than his wrists. He thought of Pippa, and wondered if it hurt as much as losing her and decided it did, because now he was losing himself, too.

His last vision was of Pitch raising the sword, and he thought of Anton in the Black Asylum, cutting down Golden Warriors. He wondered if there would be anything of him left to save once the Darkness was done, and couldn’t stop imagining the sword slicing into him, instead of the Light.
Jack was too weak to open his eyes. For a while, he didn’t even know if he was awake. His wrists ached, but they weren’t broken anymore. His body ached, but no one had killed him. He knew he was lying in a hospital bed, but only after he spent some time sure he was back in the creche, unable to decide if it was before Pippa had gone, or afterwards.

Nurses and occasionally doctors came and went. Jack slept through most of it. He couldn’t care for himself. There were sponge baths. He was blessedly asleep for most of those too. Whenever he was conscious enough to realise he was a person, he couldn’t stand who he was and waited for the darkness to take him again. It always did.

It had taken him.

Hadn’t it?

He couldn’t feel it there anymore, but it had been there. Sometimes he spent time searching for it, imagining it in his toes or in the spaces between his fingers or hiding in his eyelids and he would mentally touch upon every part of his body until exhausted, he’d have to sleep again.

One day, or evening – Jack couldn’t tell the time – he heard footsteps and the sound of someone sitting next to him. It seemed that people often sat next to him. But he usually only heard nurses talking, and a lot of the time their voices were muffled or distorted, and when they picked up his wrist to check his pulse or touched their fingers to his neck, he felt it through cotton wool. There was one nurse who placed his large, warm hand to Jack’s forehead and kept it there, like checking for a fever, but far too long for it to be professional. Jack didn’t know why, but he liked that. Sometimes he swum out of the murk just for that.

Another pair of footsteps, and Jack listened behind his still eyelids, his still body, only interrupted by the labour of breathing in and out. He didn’t even feel cold. He didn’t feel warm.

‘Alois, you should be in bed.’ That was Anton. Jack realised he must be closer to the surface now, if he could tell who it was. If he could hear the concern in Anton’s voice.

‘Don’t mollycoddle me, Anton. I’m a grown man, I know what I’m doing.’

Flitmouse’s sharp voice, and Anton sighed, and Flitmouse sighed a moment later.

‘Soon,’ Flitmouse said. ‘The nurses said he might wake up today, tomorrow. Soon.’

‘He will,’ Anton said. ‘Of course he will, but you have to- Come on, you’ve been ill.’

‘I’m surprised you’re able to notice, with all the carousing you’ve been doing.’

‘Yes, well,’ Anton said, ‘I have my ways of dealing with things, and you have your ways, which mostly involve sniping at me and anyone else you come across. But I try not to give you a hard time about that, Alois. So maybe you could back off me for like five seconds, okay? I’m worried about you.’

‘You don’t-’ Flitmouse must have cut himself off. Then the sound of a chair creaking, and Flitmouse grunting as he must have stood. ‘Fine. Fine.’

‘Come here,’ Anton said, his voice quieter. ‘He’ll be fine.’
The sound of clothing creasing, rumpling. A gentle sigh. And then Flitmouse said: ‘You don’t know that.’

‘I know it,’ Anton said. ‘I swear it. And I’ve never broken a promise with you, have I? I promise he’ll be fine.’

A miserable little laugh, Flitmouse’s voice sharp and pained, and then he made a faint grumbling sound, like a disturbed animal.

‘Fine,’ Flitmouse said again. ‘You’d best escort me, walking has been a chore. I keep asking for a walking stick to hit people with, but the nurses won’t give me one.’

‘Probably because you said ‘I want a walking stick to hit people with’ while staring at the nurse rather meaningfully. I mean, don’t get me wrong, I find that very attractive and it’s one of the things I love about you. But casual violence doesn’t turn everyone on, Alois, you know that.’

Their voices trailed away, and Jack realised they were leaving. His lips twitched, he almost wanted to smile, but then he remembered he was stuck in himself, and he couldn’t get away from the misery of his own mind, his own body. He was trapped.

He missed Pitch.

He didn’t think he deserved to see Pitch.

But Pitch hadn’t killed him. Pitch was probably the one who healed his wrists.

Jack wished he was there.

*

Over the next two days, he began to rouse. Nurses sometimes came and pressed on his shoulder or touched his chest and called his name. They called him ‘Jack Frost’ and Jack wondered if they’d have more success if they called him Jackson. Probably not. He wanted to listen to them when they told him to open his eyes, when they told him where he was and that he was going to be okay with some rest and that he had shadow sickness. Jack. Shadow sickness.

It made him want to laugh. So that’s what it was. The heaviness, the misery, the weakness. But he couldn’t feel his ice, and he didn’t want to think about that. It had always come back. It would have to come back.

He needed it.

When his eyelids fluttered open, a nurse was there to see it, and she called for another nurse and they asked him to communicate by blinking and then asked him if he knew his name and where he was and what year it was and if he remembered what he’d done in the City of Lune. Then the other nurse’s eyes had filled with tears and she’d said:

‘You’re a hero.’

Jack stared at her, and she’d stared back, and eventually the nurse bombarding him with questions decided it was too unprofessional and shooed the other nurse away, so that she could keep making sure Jack was lucid and aware.

The whole exercise was so exhausting that Jack fell asleep soon afterwards.
After that, he woke up more and more. He began to spend more than thirty minutes at a time awake. He tested his voice. They gave him water. He kept looking at the door for visitors, expecting Pitch. The first thing he said:

‘The Royal Admiral…’

‘Is busy,’ that particular nurse said, voice clipped. ‘He’ll be by when he can.’

Jack’s chest hurt so much that he pressed the heel of his hand to it and his knees jerked up, and the nurse thought something was wrong with Jack’s heart and it became a whole thing where Jack was just too tired and low to bother explaining and let the nurse panic until the nurse listened to Jack’s heart and just furrowed her brows at him.

Busy. Too busy for Jack. But it made sense, didn’t it? Jack had been avoiding him for ages. Maybe Pitch thought it was all over with. Maybe he wanted it to be. Jack had done something so stupid. So…so foolish. He could hardly imagine what he’d been thinking.

Quietly, he went through his routine of mentally looking in his body for the Darkness, and now, at the same time, he looked for his ice. It was tiring enough that he fell asleep.

*  

He was able to sit up – with the assistance of the moveable bed – and he woke up like that, to Jamie sitting next to him, a tired smile on his face. He looked so much older. There was a small bowl of dried fruits next to Jack’s bed, and a vase with flowers in it. At first Jack thought it might have been Anton, but then he realised from the variety and the eye-burning colours, that it was probably Seraphina.

‘So,’ Jamie said, stretching, ‘this is familiar, huh?’

‘I like it…’ Jack said, taking a breath, ‘I like it when I’m sitting in the chair and you’re the one in bed.’

‘Yeah, it’s the worst,’ Jamie said, grimacing. ‘It’s the worst, Jack. I’m sorry. They say you’ve had a really bad case. It was really touch and go there for about two weeks. So I’m gonna- I’ll get you up to speed, okay? So, the Darkness attacked, but we’re all fine, no one was lost or died or anything. The City of Lune was under your incredible snowstorm for about a day and a half before the Tsar got everything back under control, but it was enough for the citizens to actually fight back. Even ones that had never been part of the Resistance, Jack, imagine. They were so mad that the Tsar had barricaded them in their homes like that, with the Darkness, they realised…they realised things that even I didn’t know until I came here.’

Jack blinked at him, felt like he shouldn’t be feeling as sad as he did. Wasn’t he feeling nothing, just a little while ago? What had happened to that?

‘The other Guardians are building up towards something,’ Jamie said. ‘Everyone’s waiting for you to get well.’

‘Pitch?’

‘I dunno,’ Jamie said. ‘Hasn’t he been to see you?’

‘They said he was busy.’
Jamie frowned, and then shook his head like he didn’t understand. ‘Seems as busy as he ever does, but I don’t have much to do with him directly.’

‘What… What did you mean it was touch and go?’

‘Some people don’t recover, Jack. You know that. Even from brief exposure, if it’s bad, they just don’t make it.’ Jamie touched his own hair, checking it was in place, an old habit that made Jack want to smile, except he thought he was too tired to manage it. Jamie looked good. He was in uniform, he looked…like a soldier. But he looked like Jamie.

‘But me?’ Jack said, feeling stupid.

Jamie stared at him, and Jack stared back. Had it really been that close? Maybe Pitch was scared of him. Maybe Pitch didn’t want anything to do with him anymore because Jack was basically just a stupider version of Fyodor. What was it that Bunnymund had said? Not even worth as much.

‘I killed Crossholt,’ Jack said.

Jamie’s eyes widened. Jack nodded once, then had to close his eyes. By the Light, it was exhausting just talking to people. He couldn’t even call the winds to him.

‘Jack…’ Jamie said, and Jack waited for the condemnation. Waited to hear what he was meant to hear, what someone should have said to him all along. ‘Jack, fuck, what did he do to you?’

‘Mm. What?’

‘What did he do to you?’

‘Oh,’ Jack said, his breath a puff of air. ‘Just…tried to kill me. I guess. Cuz I came out wrong, out of the mountain. Cuz I came out wrong.’

Jamie said something insistent, almost angry, and Jack was past it. Falling down into the narrow spiral that meant sleep, he let go of the room and then himself.

* *

A murky few days after that, and Jack felt much more alert the next time he woke, able to push himself upright and feed himself and even sit on a chair in a lukewarm shower. He didn’t know if his powers had gone completely, but he definitely couldn’t handle normal human temperatures. Maybe if he’d lost his ice, he’d still be colder than usual. That didn’t seem fair at all.

When Alois came again, he was alone. Jack was surprised to see him in hospital issue pyjamas, wearing the slippers Anton had gotten for him.

‘You haven’t been released yet?’ Jack said. It had been weeks. Flitmouse had been…conscious and aware for a lot of that time, hadn’t he?

‘Apparently my organs tried to fail,’ Flitmouse said, waving a hand impatiently as he pulled a chair up to Jack’s bed. ‘I don’t know. They told me, but it was too tedious to listen to. Something about starvation and not being an enlightened Golden Warrior and getting to live forever and so on.’

‘It’s nice that you’re visiting me.’

‘I’m here to tell you how stupid you were,’ Flitmouse said sharply, glaring at Jack. ‘And I’ve done that now, so I suppose I’d best go back to my own room.’
Flitmouse didn’t move, even though Jack was momentarily scared he’d disappear and was prepared to beg him to stay. He was bored. Pitch hadn’t come. No one was giving him straight answers. Eventually, Flitmouse’s mouth twitched up into something that wouldn’t have been a smile for anyone else, but was passable for Flitmouse.

‘You were unbelievably stupid,’ Flitmouse said.

‘Yeah,’ Jack said, looking up at the ceiling. ‘I get it.’

‘No, oh no, you don’t. Do you know the sequence of events? Anton told me. It was hilarious. He didn’t think it was that funny, but I keep laughing about it whenever I think about it. Firstly, Epiphanes Aster Bunnymund himself – Sir Persona Non Grata I believe – alerted Pitch that you’d gone. Pitch – about ready to murder Bunnymund – rushed up to the tower and they listened over communication devices regarding you saving Lune. Can you imagine? The two of them up there, hunched over those tinny little radios, hearing about how stupid one boy can be.’

Jack didn’t know that Bunnymund had been the one to alert Pitch. He’d not given it much thought, but it surprised him to know that Bunnymund hadn’t just…hidden away and pretended he’d had nothing to do with it. The latter seemed more like the old Bunnymund. But actually telling Pitch…

Maybe he was just worried about their mission and the City of Lune, and didn’t care about Jack. That was probably it.

‘When the Tsar told me to make your uniform, I don’t think he realised he was making you a true mascot of the City of Lune. Do you know how many communiques we’re getting from residents who have escaped? All ‘Tell ‘Jack Frost’ what hope he’s given us. Tell the Guardians we believe in them. Tell the Resistance they have new allies.’ But none of them realise that you nearly killed yourself doing it.’

‘You’ve been too sick to realise that too,’ Jack said, feeling a bit annoyed. Why did Flitmouse always do this?

‘I have not,’ Flitmouse said archly. ‘Listen, when I got myself put in an Asylum because Tooth needed someone to throw under the wheels, I thought that was stupid. I also thought it was brave and very self-sacrificing and I think my pride got me through at least a month of that hideous place. But I didn’t get shadow sickness. Like an idiot.’

‘Huh? How?’

‘Well, it doesn’t benefit them to make you too sick to be afraid of them, does it now? They feed on our fear after all. They’re locked in the Asylum too. Shadow sickness makes you too tired and sad to do much at all except be tired and sad. So they scare you, but leave you alone, until they decide to eat you. I must not be very palatable.’

Jack nodded vaguely. He hadn’t known that about the Asylums. He’d thought the Darkness had kind of gone into most of the prisoners. But it hadn’t gone into Flitmouse at all.

Flitmouse stood, his body shaking, and then he pressed his hand into Jack’s mattress and stared down at him.

‘Don’t do it again,’ Flitmouse said, his eyes fever bright. ‘Don’t you dare! I don’t care that it makes you a hero and I don’t care that it makes you special and confirms you’re a Guardian and all the other things we’re saying. You were stupid.’

‘I know,’ Jack said, staring at him, feeling like the apology he wanted to say was too thick, too
hard to say. If he said it, he’d probably start crying. He’d felt strangely close to tears for a few days now. Sometimes he looked towards the empty doorway and had to swallow a lump in his throat and felt pathetic. ‘I know, Flitmouse.’

‘Shadow sickness,’ Flitmouse said to himself, reaching out like he was going to stroke Jack’s hair, before pulling his hand back. ‘Honestly. It kills people, Jack!’

‘I couldn’t fight the Darkness. I would’ve.’

‘I’ve heard rumours about that,’ Flitmouse said, pushing himself backwards until he could fall back into the chair. ‘I hope it’s not true that everything’s gone.’

Jack couldn’t think of anything to say. No joke, no jibe, nothing except a dull horror that maybe it was all gone. He couldn’t make his Light, either. He’d tried. It was like he’d been scrubbed inside with metal wool. He was bruised within, like the Darkness had split him open trying to find something to attack Pitch with.

Pitch, who still hadn’t come to visit. Jack shrunk lower beneath the blankets and closed his eyes, shutting out everything, including Flitmouse’s worried, tired face.

‘Pitch hasn’t come,’ Jack said.

‘Then he’s stupid too, isn’t he?’ Flitmouse said sharply.

Jack didn’t know why, but it helped. He drifted, and Flitmouse sat next to him until the nurse came and yelled at him for leaving his bed.

* * *

Sharpwood came to visit late one evening, escorted by a Golden Warrior who stood in the doorway and refused to leave. Sharpwood stood by Jack’s bed and stared down at him, his black, opaque eyes the sign that he had taken the Darkness into himself. Or some kind of darkness. Jack wasn’t scared of it anymore. He realised he hadn’t really been scared of it for a while. It just seemed natural for Sharpwood to look like that. His darkness wasn’t the Tsar’s Darkness.

‘You’ve been ill for some time,’ Sharpwood said.

‘Pitch didn’t escort you.’

‘No, he did not,’ Sharpwood said. ‘He is angry, and should not be here.’

‘Angry with me?’

‘Angry at a great deal,’ Sharpwood said. ‘But he does not share with me the specifics. He has had questions for me, the last few days, about Gavril’s general movements.’

‘Is that why you’re here?’

‘No,’ Sharpwood said. ‘I wanted to ask you what it was like, to be taken by the Darkness that isn’t the darkness I’ve always known.’

‘Crappy,’ Jack said. He resigned himself to a weird encounter. His encounters with Sharpwood were always weird. He ignored the bruised feeling in his heart until the pain expanded and he couldn’t concentrate properly on anything else. What was Pitch angry at? Why was he too angry to come?
You know. You know why.

Jack clenched his hands into the blankets and knew Sharpwood was waiting for a longer answer.

‘It was…I dunno. It wanted to kill Pitch. It just- It just uses things. And when it can’t use them anymore, it absorbs them and becomes stronger. It was malicious, but actually like, not as terrible as it was in the mountain, I guess? In the mountain it was really mean. But it didn’t even talk to me when it got into me, it just didn’t care, I guess.’

‘That’s familiar,’ Sharpwood said. ‘But it should not have singular motive like that – to destroy Kozmotis in this way. That is Gavril’s corrupting influence. Felt the world over. It’s why you became so ill.’

‘Can you help me? You’ve helped me with everything else.’

A pause, where Sharpwood seemed to be genuinely considering his answer. ‘Jackson, if I could remove the corruption from the Darkness, I would have done so by now. I can do nothing for shadow sickness. My presence might even make it worse. It is, after all, my soul’s affinity, and the truth in my being. I enhance its presence, I do not detract from it.’

The Golden Warrior in the doorway made a derisive scoffing noise, and Sharpwood ignored him.

‘How’s Pitch doing?’ Jack said, unable to help himself. He wasn’t going to push, but Sharpwood lived with him.

‘He doesn’t share his emotional states with me. But I can make an educated guess. He is afraid for you. He is afraid for himself. He is afraid.’

Jack didn’t think that was the whole story. Not when Sharpwood had just said Pitch was angry at a great deal too. Maybe he was angry because Jack had scared him like that. Maybe he was angry because he deserved better than that. Of course he did. Why hadn’t Jack just said something before he’d left? Even if Pitch had refused, at least he would’ve known where Jack was going. At least he wouldn’t have had to hear it from Bunnymund.

Sharpwood stared at him, and Jack tried to shake himself away from his thoughts with some forced cheer.

‘You came to visit me.’

‘I did.’

‘You must like me a little,’ Jack said, mouth twitching on a smile. ‘Maybe even a whole lot. You know, for a Lune citizen.’

Sharpwood’s expression dripped a kind of indifferent disdain, and Jack’s smile widened. Eventually, Sharpwood let out a tiny huffed breath, and he folded his arms in front of himself, breaking eye contact.

‘I only wanted to know what shadow sickness was like. I shall be leaving now.’

‘That’s cool. It’s just good to know you like me so much.’

Sharpwood left without another word, without even a backwards glance, and Jack’s smile broadened before it vanished completely. He sagged back into the bed. He closed his eyes. Sharpwood probably didn’t like him at all.
Jack pulled the blankets up to his chin. He didn’t know why his brain kept doing this, but he could think nothing good for long.

*  

At three in the morning, long past expecting the mercy of sleep, Jack tried to imagine what it would be like to lose Pitch. He sat there, drawing six figured spokes onto his palm – as though he could make a charm to make his frost magically return – and imagined it until his chest ached and his toes curled and his eyes began to burn. He imagined what it would be like to see Pitch’s dead body, to realise that he was gone and he was never coming back. He knew that he wouldn’t want to love anyone else again. In his mind, there would only be Pitch. That was all.

Then, he imagined what it would be like to – by some miracle – fall in love again so many years later that he had maybe forgotten how much it had hurt the first time. Falling in love with someone just like Pitch, all the while quietly nursing fears that the new person would somehow meet the same end. If the rest of the world hadn’t changed, then why should anything else? Jack stared at the six figured points in his hand that he kept tracing and blinked his eyes clear and blew out a tired breath.

Jack didn’t like to be compared to Fyodor, but he could see why Pitch kept doing it. He’d gone to the City of Lune and he hadn’t let Pitch’s heart or his fears or anything like that stop him. He’d tried not to think about it. He’d just…cast it aside.

But now that Jack had the time to think about it, he spent his time understanding why Pitch hadn’t come to visit, and wondering if Pitch was just trying to do the best thing for himself.

Since it sure seemed like Jack wasn’t going to do it.

*  

At first Jack started to get antsy that no one was coming for him, telling him what he needed to do. Then he realised he was pretty much useless without his ice anyway. He’d never been that good at training or drills, he’d not done any of the manoeuvres that his fellows were doing at home base, he wasn’t…useful. He needed the ice, the Light, and without it, they didn’t press for him.

Someone told him that Pitch had gone away on a mission, but wouldn’t tell him what the mission was, how long it would last, when he would return.

Jack spent several days getting increasingly anxious that Pitch just wouldn’t come back. Anxious until he couldn’t breathe. Anxious until he was locked in the horrid thought that maybe Pitch would die, and Jack would deserve it, he’d deserve it, but no one else would. He couldn’t stop himself from panicking.

He lapsed into a spiralling darkness that held him in its fog for a day. He only woke vaguely, groggily, unable to open his eyes, to someone pinning him down and shaking him.

‘Do you know how hard it is to fucking get time off? Do you?! And you’re lying here and what in Darkness, Jack, come on! I didn’t carry your tired heavy ass through a mountain for you to give up now, asshole!’

Eventually the person was pulled away and everything went quiet again, and Jack fell asleep.

*  

Toothiana smoking clove cigarettes by his bedside, one leg over the other, and she looked half-
asleep when Jack rolled to look at her. At his movement, she became alert. Jack didn’t think he’d ever seen her look so tired before.

‘You knew you could die from it, didn’t you?’ She said. ‘Going to the City of Lune like that.’

‘I guess I did,’ Jack said, rubbing at his face. His body felt colder than normal, and while it was tempting to snuggle more deeply into the blankets, he instead looked at his hand and tried to call his ice. It didn’t come, but he felt like he was calling something, instead of nothing at all. His heart beat harder, and he was scared to hope it was coming back.

‘And you still went anyway?’

‘Seemed important.’

Toothiana smiled, then shook her head like she couldn’t quite believe him. A tired sort of good humour, which made Jack realise he wasn’t in trouble like he thought he was.

‘You’re not mad?’

‘My darling,’ Toothiana said, beaming at him, her eyes crinkling at the corners. ‘Yes. No. What do you wish me to say? How foolish. Yet there was strategy in it too, wasn’t there? You didn’t try to find Gavril. You didn’t stay to help every individual out. You stayed above the Darkness. You left when you angered Gavril enough that he sent his magicians after you. Ill-considered and yet considered. What a paradox you are.’

Jack pushed himself up until he was sitting, and bunched the pillows behind him. ‘I’m still not better.’

‘It can take time,’ Toothiana said, smoothing her brown hands down her thigh, as though removing creases in the fabric even though there were none. ‘It takes time. Consider, too, what you expended before the Darkness attacked you. Shadow sickness in a healthy person can kill someone. When you landed here, you were not healthy. You’d found the limits of your powers, hadn’t you? Pitch said you’d broken your wrists upon landing, he didn’t realise until afterwards what that meant.’

‘He won’t see me,’ Jack whispered hoarsely.

‘He’s worried,’ Toothiana said, after a pause. ‘And he is trying to save you from the force of his anger. It’s the last thing you need.’

‘Okay,’ Jack said, doubting her, doubting everything. He’d rather Pitch stand there and yell at him for day after day, than this absence.

Toothiana stood up and walked over, taking one of his hands in her warm ones. Her fingers were long and slender. Her nails were painted in teal blue. She reached out with her other hand touched her fingertips to the underside of his chin.

‘When you’re this sick with shadow sickness, being around too much anger can cause relapses. Any strong emotion can. Yours or that of others.’

‘He’s angry at me. And I get it,’ Jack said, his voice breaking. ‘I get what it reminds him of. I get it. I don’t even know if he wants me back. Can you-? Can you just tell him-?’

She placed a finger on his lips and made a hushing sound, and Jack felt whatever bright, painful thing that had been winding up inside of him settle, become a cold lump in his chest.
'We had to capitalise, quickly, on the ground you’d unwittingly gained by bolstering the Resistance, helping the City, even gathering intel – you destroyed some fifty gables and hydrofoils, did you know? He has not been idle. He’s not often even been here. He and myself, North and many others, we’ve all been off to make sure that what you’d achieved wasn’t wasted. There have been rescue missions. Surveillance and reconnaissance while the Palace has been so weakened.’

She sat on the edge of the bed, facing Jack, and smoothed his hair back from his head. Jack had no idea she could be like this. He wondered if this was how she was with Flitmouse. If she sat on his bed and touched him tenderly, and gave him a small hummingbird and called him her Baby Tooth. If she hid her softness until it was like this, at night by dimmed lights, so that if Jack told others what he’d experienced, they could doubt him. Her fingertips were calloused, and her palm was warm and even a little damp, and she kept smoothing his hair back.

‘He will come,’ Toothiana said. ‘He is, in many ways, just a boy as you are. He’s tried to turn himself into stone. He’s tried to be too old to care. But when he’s wounded, he’s wounded as a boy whose heart is as fresh as the heart that was betrayed by Gavril, then Epiphanes, and then each of us Guardians, and then Fyodor.’

‘And now me,’ Jack said.

‘I believe in you both,’ Toothiana said. ‘Did you know that? I do.’

‘I didn’t know you could be like this,’ Jack admitted.

She lowered her hand from his head but kept it on his forearm, resting it there. Her smile was sad.

‘Maybe I’m still just a girl, somewhere,’ she said. ‘Did you know, I used to dream that after the war, I’d record people’s memories and their stories. I’d hear their hurts and their triumphs, and I’d be their keeper. The Keeper of Memories. I began dreaming that such a long time ago. My vocation after the war. It gave me hope. But then, Jack, the war kept going. And going. I worked by Gavril’s side, the war never stopped. The war has gone on for so long, I realised that what I dreamed of was just that, a dream. A fantasy.’

‘I don’t think it’s a fantasy,’ Jack said, awkwardly reaching out and touching his fingers to the back of her hand. The skin there was smooth. ‘I saw them in the City. I saw the hope they had. The posters. The way they’re ready for…something. Maybe they weren’t ready the first time, but they’re ready now.’

‘Did you know, I’d forgotten what real joy felt like until I met you,’ Toothiana said. ‘It’s funny how that works, isn’t it? I used to have so much fun. And in bright bursts, and with my Little Fangs, I sometimes remember it like a nostalgia. But you’re not like a nostalgia at all.’

‘You could…tell me about it,’ Jack said. ‘What it used to be like, before you were like, an ultra-double agent and stuff.’

‘I could, couldn’t I?’

She spent the next few hours talking to him quietly, an animated light entering her eyes at times. Sometimes she would lean back and spread her arms to indicate the size of something, or her hands would move animatedly to indicate patterns of battle when she fought with her sister warriors. She talked of birds with rainbow feathers who would grant temporary flight to those who held a single quill, and soaring through the skies, and how it felt to watch Jack do the same.

Jack held his breath when she held hers. He laughed when she laughed. He felt his eyes prickle
when she became teary. When she reached out to grasp his hand when describing a moment of solidarity on a battlefront, he was already reaching for hers.

Finally, unable to stop himself from yawning a few times towards the end, she stood and smoothed his hair one last time.

At the doorway she paused and looked over her shoulder at him, smiling.

He smiled back, and then unable to help himself, said:

‘I don’t know if I can make my ice again.’

She shook her head and her smile widened. ‘Well, I don’t think that’s true. But if it is, how joyful, that the last thing you used your powers for was to perform a miracle. On that scale! I hope you’re remembering that, in amongst the shadowy corners of your mind, Jackson Overland – Jack Frost. We may not know what to do with you, but it turns out you knew perfectly what to do with yourself. Good night. Get some sleep.’

She nodded her head at him and left, and Jack lay back down and listened to her footsteps, and was asleep before they’d faded.

*

It was raining, when Pitch finally came.

He stood in the doorway, tall enough – shoulders broad enough – to make it seem as though he was blocking the exit. He looked tired. He looked grim. Jack stared at him and felt like he couldn’t breathe.

Questions piled up inside of him.

Why haven’t you visited yet? Is it over? Are you okay? What missions did they send you on? Is it okay? Is the City okay? Can I still sleep with you in your rooms? I mean I get it, I get it, but please don’t tell me it’s over, please? Have you been looking after yourself? How’s Seraphina? Is she having nightmares? Why haven’t you come? Are you angry with me? Do you hate me?

Pitch stared at him. His eyes roved. Took in Jack’s body in the hospital bed, from the tips of his feet beneath the blankets, to his hands clenched in his lap to the very top of his head. He didn’t say anything and Jack started biting his lip, because he couldn’t tell if he felt awful because he was right about things being over, or because of the shadow sickness, or something else.

He felt awful.

He wanted to be able to snark about it and pretend it was okay. He wanted to say: It’s been so long I almost forgot what you looked like. Or: I suppose now we’re gonna fight about stuff like we always do. Or: Took you long enough.

A horrible sense that if he so much as opened his mouth, he might start crying. Just like that. Just from seeing him. Jack couldn’t make himself look away, but he hoped Pitch wasn’t noticing that Jack’s eyes were a bit wetter than before. He could blame that on the shadow sickness, couldn’t he?

‘I’ve missed you,’ Pitch said, his voice rough. ‘But I started missing you before you left.’

No, Jack thought. He wasn’t strong enough to hear this. His legs drew up, his knees bent. He hid
the way he locked his fingers together against his gut.

‘I’ve spent…the past few weeks…’ Pitch paused. Then he walked into the room and closed the door – that was never closed – behind him. He stood in the room, and Jack only then noticed how strangely casual he looked. He wasn’t in his uniform. He wasn’t wearing his coat. He was wearing a black knitted sweater, black denim pants, a grey scarf embroidered at the ends with red flowers. Jack automatically knew it must have been a gift from Seraphina.

Jack had never seen him like this. Why didn’t Pitch ever wear this stuff?

‘I’ve spent the past few weeks quite busy,’ Pitch said, ‘but not busy enough that I couldn’t have visited you before now.’

Jack stared at his knees and couldn’t look at Pitch’s face anymore.

‘I’ve spent the past few weeks asking myself how I’m supposed to trust you. To trust you to tell me if something is wrong. To tell me if you’re going to do something that certainly put your life in danger, if not the lives of others. To tell me when you’ve run out of your Light, instead of telling me that your wrists are broken. If I can trust you to tell me…how you’re feeling, what you’re doing, what you’re thinking. I can’t, Jack.’

There was nothing to say to that. Jack’s eyes burned.

‘I don’t even know if I can trust that you want whatever we have,’ Pitch said. ‘In the days following the Asylum rescues, I’d come to the conclusion that perhaps the reality of your situation had caught up with you, and you’d decided you were beyond a relationship with a monster.’

Jack stiffened, and Pitch continued, relentless.

‘Do you know what I hate?’ Pitch said softly, and Jack almost shook his head. No, he didn’t want to know. He didn’t want to know all the things he knew already – that he wasn’t trustworthy, and he was a poor choice of partner, and he was like Fyodor, and he was broken somehow and Pitch didn’t want him anymore. That Jack was made wrong. That Pitch had finally realised it. ‘I hate that even though I can’t trust you, I have learned that I want whatever it is we have. I still want it. Which was not a pleasant thing to realise, was not painless. It hurts, Jack. It hurts to know that you’re dying, and then you’re getting better, and then I am expected to come and visit you, all while knowing you could put me through this again. Whenever you feel like it. Whenever you…’

A sound, and Jack looked up to see Pitch dragging his hand through his hair, staring at Jack like he couldn’t look away.

‘I cannot always be there to save your life,’ Pitch said. ‘I cannot always save you from the Darkness. Sometimes, Jack, I’m in danger too! Do you know…Can you imagine how it feels, to stand here before you, a monster, knowing what it does to someone with shadow sickness – I’ve had it before – and say these things? Am I wounding you even now? In a perfect world I throw my arms around you and I tell you that everything is going to be all right, but you- You keep hurting me.’

Jack stared at him, mouth open, and he wanted to throw his own arms around Pitch and tell him that everything would be okay except he couldn’t. He couldn’t, not if he was the one…

He hadn’t imagined that he’d been affecting Pitch like this. He didn’t know he could affect people like this. He wasn’t supposed to be able to hurt anyone, he didn’t matter enough to hurt them like this!
‘I know I am not without my many, many flaws,’ Pitch said, his voice quieter and worse for it. ‘That I can be remote and unfriendly, but I thought I had been trying. Perhaps it wasn’t enough. At first I couldn’t come here because I couldn’t watch you die. Then I couldn’t, because I didn’t know if I wanted to look at you. Then…I couldn’t, because I don’t know what to do, Jack. I’m here, right now, at home base, because of how much I love you. I had to sit there with Epiphanes in his blasted tower, listening to the people of the city saying you were doing wondrous things. Waiting – waiting and knowing you would be attacked – and listening to the reports of you falling from the sky. Do you know how long it was between messages of you falling after being bombed out of the air, to hearing that you were at least alive? Twenty seven minutes, Jack. Twenty seven minutes, next to someone I frankly cannot stand, while we both waited to find out if you were dead. Epiphanes because he couldn’t stand to feel guilty, and me, because I was terrified, because I love you.’

Jack’s eyes filled with tears. He couldn’t even pretend it wasn’t happening anymore. He could feel the way the muscles across his chest tightened into a band. The way his throat narrowed.

‘Do you know how insufferably small it makes me feel,’ Pitch said, his voice breaking, ‘to feel like I need you, and know that you don’t need me?’

Jack’s shoulders heaved, and he locked a quick arm around his knees, pressing his lips together, trying not to make any noise. It hurt, it hurt, and the worst part was that Pitch was right about so much, and wrong about so much. By the Light, Jack needed him so much he was terrified to be around him sometimes, in case Pitch just vanished. In case Jack got so much good, he wasn’t allowed any more of it. Surely there was a quota, and Jack would reach the end of how much love he was allowed?

Maybe you’ve reached it now.

But Jack knew that wasn’t true. Knew, because he could hear the hurt in Pitch’s voice.

The sob escaped before he could stop it, ugly and short. He had to speak now, before he lost the ability to talk at all.

‘I’m sorry,’ Jack said, forcing himself to look at Pitch. Forcing himself to meet his eyes and hope Pitch could see that Jack meant it. But he had to look away as the second sob messed up his attempt to say it again. He had to squeeze his eyes shut. He couldn’t stop the way his ribs went into spasm. Then, he was crying, distantly wondering if it was unfair somehow, that he was doing this.

A weight on the side of the hospital bed. Pitch wrapping wide arms around him. Pulling Jack close. The gentle wool of Pitch’s sweater against Jack’s face, and warmth all around him. Jack needed it so much he thought he’d burst and he clutched handfuls of Pitch’s sweater and wanted to be calm and explain himself and instead he couldn’t stop crying.

‘It’s all right,’ Pitch was saying. ‘It’s all right, Jack. I’m sorry too.’

‘You weren’t here,’ Jack heard himself saying through his sobs, and no, that wasn’t fair. It wasn’t! He hadn’t been there for Pitch at all after the Asylums. He’d just vanished.

Pitch shifted them both so that he was on the bed properly, his feet hanging off the edge. Jack was half tangled in blankets and pressed so close to Pitch’s body that the grip hurt and he didn’t care. It felt so necessary, so good, Jack just wanted to breathe it in until he was somehow unbroken. Like that might ever happen.

Pitch’s hand rested around the back of his neck, and he was there, offering comfort even now, and
Jack hadn’t even said that he wanted to be with Pitch, that he needed him, that Pitch wasn’t a monster. So he said all of those things, the words spilling out on top of each other, and Pitch’s breath did something weird and strangled and fingers were digging into him and Jack knew it wasn’t even anger, but the same stupid desperation he was feeling too.

He kept saying he was sorry, and Pitch would say it was all right, and then Pitch would say he was sorry, and Jack would say he was sorry again, and so it went until Jack almost laughed at one point, except he felt miserable.

‘It’s okay,’ Pitch was saying. ‘It’s okay. Some of it’s shadow sickness, Jack. Some of it’s… It magnifies every terrible thing you’ve ever thought about yourself. It’s hard to explain. It’s hard to go through. I had no idea you’d burnt through your powers like that. I’ve never seen you spend your Light before. I didn’t- I should have known, but-’

‘How could you have known?’ Jack said, wiping his eyes and face on Pitch’s sweater and thinking he was making a mess and not even caring. ‘We haven’t spent any time together, just- just the two of us, since before the Asylums.’

‘I had noticed.’

‘I don’t know what happened. I just didn’t feel anything. And I didn’t want to feel anything. And I didn’t- I didn’t think it was hurting you. I didn’t think it would hurt anyone.’

More shifting, Pitch yanking at the blankets until they were covering the both of them. At one point a nurse opened the door a crack and Pitch must have given her a look, because she disappeared quickly. Then Pitch was holding Jack against his side, settling blankets over themselves even though he must have been very warm in his scarf, his sweater, his shoes that he hadn’t bothered to remove.

Pitch had an arm around Jack’s side. He placed his other hand on Jack’s forehead. Broad and warm and perfect. Jack recognised the feeling of it instantly. From his earliest days in the hospital. The nurse.

It hadn’t been a nurse at all.

‘You did come,’ Jack said, and his eyes flew open in amazement. ‘You did.’

Pitch’s fingers curled gently against Jack’s skin. ‘I did. You…were barely even here. How do you remember?’

‘I remember,’ Jack said, reaching up and placing his hands against Pitch’s hand. ‘Sometimes it was the only reason I bothered trying to be conscious. For that.’

‘They’d told me to prepare myself for you succumbing to the shadow sickness. I should have stayed away. I couldn’t.’

Jack moved closer, and Pitch stroked his forehead, and Jack thought about everything, trying to concentrate. It was hard to think at all. It was hard to think beyond the fact that Pitch had come, and Pitch hadn’t gotten rid of him at all, even if Jack worried that maybe Pitch should. If only for his own wellbeing.

‘I didn’t want you to be ashamed of me,’ Jack said. ‘After the Asylums.’

‘What?’
'I didn’t want to be that naïve person that everyone knows I am. Not realising how bad things were. How bad they can be. I didn’t realise. And I didn’t want you to just be an Admiral about it, and tell me to be a soldier. I knew I just needed to harden up, and then I thought I had. I didn’t want to talk about it either. I didn’t want- I just wanted it to go away. Everyone else seemed fine.’

‘There’s a lot in that,’ Pitch said mildly. ‘But you forget that debriefs are part of what we experience. It is not our way to simply tell each other to harden up after an event like that. Remember? We debriefed not all that long ago.’

‘No,’ Jack said. ‘I don’t remember. I hate them.’

Pitch sighed, scratched lightly at Jack’s scalp and then pressed his chin to the top of Jack’s head.

‘I wish I could stop everything for a week, a month, so I can give you the attention I want to. So that I am not always finding out these things after some catastrophe has happened.’

‘Do you hate me?’

‘Did I tell you I hated you?’

You said you love me, Jack thought, shivering. Pitch had said it more than once. He’d never once said loved. It was never past tense.

‘Do you still want me to- Am I allowed back in your bed?’

‘It’s our bed, so yes.’

Jack’s shoulders jerked on another sob, even as he’d started to calm down. He’d not once imagined – not once – in the past few weeks that he’d ever get this. That there would be something like forgiveness, or if not that, then…a willingness to keep on, to keep working on things, to keep whatever they had alive.

‘Everything’s so broken,’ Jack said.

‘I know,’ Pitch said. ‘I know. But you’re the only person I’ve ever met who takes that brokenness and goes and saves an entire city. I just wish you’d save some of that for me sometimes. I am selfish, in that way.’

It broke Jack’s heart.

‘For now, at least, fuck the war,’ Pitch said. Jack blinked, to hear him swear like that. He never swore like that. ‘I hope you’re tired, as I think I’m going to fall asleep now. I’ve been remiss in basic functions lately.’

‘That’s not like you.’

‘I know,’ Pitch said. ‘It’s very frustrating. I didn’t even get to have breakfast this morning.’

‘That sucks. But I could sleep. I’m always tired lately.’

‘That will pass,’ Pitch said, yawning. ‘It passes.’

‘And my powers?’

‘I’ll consult some oracle, shall I?’ Pitch said. ‘No, in all seriousness, I cannot see how they wouldn’t return. They’ve only taken a knock. No one’s ever permanently lost their Light. Even
after shadow sickness. I wish sometimes that your powers wouldn’t come back. I’m selfish in that way, too. I could keep you safer, that way.’

Pitch twitched the blankets until they were to his liking, which was half over Jack’s face. Pitch seemed completely impervious to baking himself in multiple layers of fabric. He traced the backs of his knuckles over Jack’s face. It made Jack’s cheek tingle.

‘It is broken,’ he said softly. ‘But we are both very determined, stubborn people. We can make this work. I suspect I have hurt you too, somehow, before you went to the City of Lune. You didn’t tell me then, but maybe you’ll tell me now that some time has passed.’

‘But not now,’ Jack said, just wanting to sleep in the quiet, bittersweet strength of Pitch’s arms.

‘Oh no, not now,’ Pitch said.

‘Because fuck the war,’ Jack said.

‘Yes. My mantra. I highly recommend it.’

Jack breathed in the smell of him. The other smells too, the lanolin of the sweater, some perfume clinging to the scarf – maybe he’d embraced Eva or something, or Seraphina had brushed flowers against the soft fabric. The faintly bitter scent of someone who hadn’t eaten enough, very faint, enough to arouse a tired thread of worry all the same.

His shadow sickness wasn’t cured. He was still tired, sad and melancholy as he fell asleep. But even so, for the first time in weeks, he felt more content too. After everything Pitch had said, he was still here. After everything that had happened, they were both still here, pressed against each other, willing to face the coming storm together. It was enough.
Tell Me

Chapter Notes

Tags for the BDSM scene in this chapter are at the end. The tension/surprise/not-knowing factor for Jack is a big part of what he experiences, so for people who don't need to know what's coming, keep reading. For people who do, go to the end notes!

HOLY SHIT THIS CHAPTER IS 15k HOLY - Also, there's like 7 chapters left after this. O.O

Within a week of being discharged from the hospital – still weak and easily tired – Jack’s ice came back naturally. One morning he was tracing patterns on Pitch’s coffee table with his fingers, leaning back against the chair, watching the others eating breakfast, and frost began spiralling out on the wood. He didn’t notice at first, and when he did, he paused and stared at it. He turned his hand and looked at the frost that covered his skin, and then felt it creeping down his clothing like it usually did.

Pitch looked up, smiled like he knew it would happen all along and went back to eating toast.

It had been weird between them though. They were sleeping in the same bed at night again, but during the day it was awkward. Jack didn’t know how to start conversations with him, and Pitch would sometimes make forays, and Jack wouldn’t know what to say. What was he supposed to say when Pitch asked how he was feeling? Jack didn’t know. Inevitably Jack would just talk about what he’d done that day, and Pitch’s expression would turn impassive, and sometimes he’d look disappointed.

The guilt in Jack’s gut would curdle and grow.

Everyone else treated him like he was a celebrity. In the same way people stiffened with respect whenever Toothiana was around, or began to smile whenever they saw North, they stared at Jack wide-eyed, and then would grin or wave.

Even Seraphina seemed a bit awe-struck around him, which was absurd. But he hadn’t seen her much. He still needed to sleep a lot, and he felt strange sitting in a room that was occupied with Eva, Anton, Seraphina, Mihail, Pitch and Sharpwood. That wasn’t any kind of party, it was just bizarre.

Eva always shot Sharpwood deeply suspicious looks. Sharpwood hardly noticed, except when he did, and then he’d stare levelly back without blinking which just seemed to make Eva angry. Mihail infrequently tugged on Sharpwood’s black pants for attention, at which point Sharpwood would just pet him on the head once without looking at him and Mihail would run off to join Seraphina’s side again. Anton, Eva and Pitch would often talk politics under their breath, or Anton would flirt with both of them – Jack never really cared about that, though he envied Anton’s ease with it. Anton just…started conversations with everyone, and he made it look so easy.

Jack sat there and thought of how he’d hurt Pitch – maybe even the rest of them – and words piled up in useless junk-heaps in his chest and made him feel like he was suffocating. It wasn’t just that
he ran away to help the City of Lune, it was that he just didn’t know how to fit. He knew they wanted him to be a part of whatever they had, and felt that just by being there and not being friendly and content like the rest of them, he was failing them. He was spoiling the mood.

He’d claim tiredness, go into Pitch’s room and close the door, curling up on the bed after resting his staff against the wall. The problem wasn’t any of them.

The problem was him.

He felt like he was a bomb waiting to go off. At some point, because of the way he thought, the way he acted, he’d do something else that would hurt Pitch or the others. He’d do something wrong, they’d notice and realise they’d made a mistake in letting him in.

He placed his hands over his face and slept, wished he could just be back in the hospital bed with Pitch, somehow outside of time and the dragging bruise of the every day.

*

It was late afternoon, and Pitch was polishing his sword, talking to Seraphina about flowers. Mostly, she talked and he nodded, and occasionally asked a pertinent question here and there. Eva watched them, and sometimes she turned and looked at Jack.

‘Jack?’ she said.

‘Yeah?’

‘Can you come with me for a minute? I’d like to talk to you.’

A sinking feeling in his chest. He looked over to Seraphina and Pitch. Seraphina looked long enough to determine that she didn’t care what was happening, before going back to talking about some yellow flower that should be white. Pitch only nodded to indicate that Jack should go.

So Jack followed her through the door out of Pitch’s rooms that presumably led to her living space. Down a dark corridor until they reached a plain door. Eva opened it with a sigh, then gestured for Jack to walk into what was a sprawling, comfortable lounge.

Eva’s rooms were really nice. Jack looked around them, realised he’d never been in any of Eva’s living spaces before. Seraphina’s drawings were around the place. The décor was all warm tones, reds and oranges, wooden bookcases and tables. Clutter was everywhere, but everything was meaningful, from the dolls resting on the dining table to the messy pile of military manuals and books on the overstuffed couch.

‘Here,’ Eva said, drawing him over to the dining table and clucking her tongue at the dolls. Instead of removing them, she just lined them all up so they were alongside one another. ‘Come sit.’

‘She’s still just a kid in a lot of ways, isn’t she?’

‘She would tear you limb from limb for saying it,’ Eva said, languidly resting her head against her hand, ‘but yes, she is. I love that about her. She keeps me grounded. Now, Jack, tell me why you seem so sad? Do you prefer Jack or Jackson?’

‘I dunno,’ Jack said in response to the last question, shifting and looking away. ‘Some people still call me Jackson and I don’t mind it. I guess both are my name. I mean Jack’s a nickname anyway, right? People called me Jack before too.’
‘Excellent,’ Eva said. ‘And as to the sadness?’

‘I’m not,’ Jack said. ‘Everything’s good. Pitch and I are good. I mean the war maybe.’

Jack felt guilty for still feeling so low – like things were bad with Pitch – after they’d reconciled. Because they had reconciled, hadn’t they? But he couldn’t escape the look on Pitch’s face when he’d said that Jack kept hurting him. When he said that Jack didn’t need him. When he’d laid his heart bare and revealed wounds that Jack had widened without ever knowing. Jack didn’t know how to fix them now, he kept feeling like a knife poised to cut and he didn’t like it.

‘You and Pitch are good, are you?’ Eva said, laughing under her breath. ‘Goodness, I hope not. What a terrible yardstick for us to all measure ourselves by. Darling, talk to me.’

‘I thought you were all about how I should talk to you when I’m ready.’

‘I tried that,’ Eva said, ‘and you don’t ever seem to be ready, but you do need to talk. So spit it out.’

Jack traced patterns of frost on the table as he thought about what to say. It was a little intimidating, because it was hard not to imagine Eva being dominating like this. Jack knew she’d never cross a line with him or anything, he just also felt like he didn’t want to get anything wrong.

‘Pitch says it’s okay,’ Jack said, ‘but I don’t feel like what I did is okay. I don’t know how to just… I mean I don’t know that I’ll never do it again, right? Go haring off like that. I want to be what he wants me to be, but I don’t know how.’

‘Well, you’re a work in progress, and – might I add – so is Pitch. Moreso than most. But if he says it’s okay, then it’s okay. He is not the kind of person to falsely reassure.’

‘He just let me off the hook though?’ Jack said. ‘Like maybe he feels sorry for me. I don’t know. It’s not… I just…’

‘If it’s closure you seek, or a sense that you haven’t yet paid a high enough price, ask him to punish you.’

Jack had expected Eva to tell him to open up to Pitch. To just accept that he wasn’t actually guilty. He blinked when he realised she hadn’t done either of those things and met her bright green-golden gaze.

‘Um, what?’

‘Ask him to punish you for it,’ Eva said. ‘That’s what I’d do if it were Anton, anyway. He twists in the wind sometimes too, you see. If he does something wrong and doesn’t know where to turn, he’ll front up on my doorstep and ask for it. Or he’ll ask Pitch, if he needs something meaner, because Pitch is rougher with Anton than I imagine he ever is with you. But…honestly, Jack, that’s what that side of your relationship is there for, in part. It’s not all orgasms and sunshine, or pain in your case. There’s catharsis in it too. An opportunity for rediscovery. He has rooms here he can use. Ask him.’

‘Just…like that?’ Jack said.

His skin crawled. **Punishment.** Like what Bunnymund did? Or what Crossholt said he deserved? Like that? But surely she didn’t mean like that.

‘Don’t you ask him?’ Eva said, frowning. ‘For other things?’
‘I did, I guess, back at the Palace. By the Light, I must’ve asked him to like…to fuck me, like a thousand times before he actually did.’

Eva smiled briefly at him, and then the expression fell away as she looked thoughtful instead. Jack felt like squirming in his seat. He was talking about his sex life with Pitch with someone else. With the mother of Pitch’s daughter. Who was like Pitch. Who hurt Anton, because Anton liked it. Jack wondered if he’d ever get used to this.

‘Darling, it’s far more than that, I’m sure you’re realising if you haven’t realised it yet. If something overwhelms you, and you need more than a conversation about it, go to him and ask him for a scene. If you feel lost, ask him to find you, wherever you’re hiding away. If you’re frightened, ask him to redirect that fear. Or…if you don’t know how to ask him, tell him that he needs to offer it more. He holds back with you, I think in part because he knows you’re new to all of this. But you’re a young man who knows at least some parts of his mind, and it will only benefit you to talk to Pitch. He does so much better with direct conversation than guesswork, you know. Except in a scene, and then he’s very savvy. I like to think he keeps that part of his brain switched off the rest of the time.’

Jack pressed his lips together. ‘Punishment, though? Like, what…? I don’t want it to be bad. I mean I feel guilty, but I don’t want—’

‘I know,’ Eva said, reaching out and placing her hand on Jack’s wrist, her fingers curling lightly. ‘I know, Jack. And you don’t have to ask him, but it likely won’t be what you expect either. You’ll have the words you can say to stop him. Truthfully I feel like you should both spend some time physically reconnecting because you don’t talk well enough the rest of the time. In a scene with him, he can make you open up to him. Maybe you’re desperately frightened of it, but he craves it. He’d want to help you, if he could.’

‘Punishment sounds mean though,’ Jack said. ‘You know a lot of the stuff he does kind of hurts anyway.’

Eva laughed, the sound pealing out. ‘Oh, and you hate that, darling? Is that so terrible for you?’ She grinned at him, a gleam in her eyes like some kind of predator. Jack stared back, momentarily hypnotised, and then he made himself look away, because Eva was Eva, and he was so not into her.

‘I jest.’

‘Sure you do,’ Jack muttered.

‘All right, let me give you an example. Say Anton goes on mission with Pitch, and he sees someone in trouble and he determines to help them because that is the kind of person he is. But in the process, he ignores Pitch’s orders. He might earn some strokes on the flogging post, but he’s still disappointed in himself because he knows that sometimes he makes the wrong call, and he really should be listening to Pitch’s orders in the field. It plays on him until he feels so guilty about it, he can’t concentrate properly, and he can’t enjoy his relationships as he should, because maybe he feels he doesn’t deserve any of the good things until he’s suffered some more. Oh, I don’t know. Something like that.

‘Then imagine that he comes to me and says the he needs me to stop that for him. A scene that will stop that for him. I call that scene a ‘punishment’ scene. I don’t want to punish him, it’s for him. Though of course I get intimacy and connection and well…hurting him out of it, all wonderful things. You could call it a scene to stop his thoughts from running away from him like that. Even if just for a night, to reset the record in his mind. You could call it a scene to ground him back into his body, so that he has no choice but to focus on the present and stop getting caught up in his guilt and the past. You could call it a scene where he remembers that people love him for who he is,
flaws and all, even if he has to hurt first to remember it. And, yes, sometimes I can be cruel, because sometimes it takes an awful lot to get someone to *concentrate* on what’s important. And with Anton, he needs a great deal of sensory feedback to quieten his thoughts when he’s in that state.’

Eva leaned back in the chair and then sighed.

‘So you see, it’s not like a military punishment. It’s not like what was done to you in military training, or with Bunnymund. And it’s not for everyone. But when it happens, it is an act of love. Some punishments are light and simple and not really punishments at all. Some are serious and grave without ever physically hurting. Some are painful on every level, but you feel like you *earned* your penance afterwards and leave knowing that you gave something beautiful, sacred, to your partner. Whether that’s your suffering, your grief, your trust, your love.’

‘Pitch never talks to me like this, about this stuff,’ Jack said, staring at her.

‘Of course he doesn’t,’ Eva said, shaking her head. ‘Have you *met* him? He doesn’t talk at all until he *has* to, and then suddenly you’re hearing an *essay* of all his grievances that he’s kept quiet for days or weeks or months or years or *decades*. Honestly. The only time he’s halfway functional is in a scene, Jack. Take advantage of it, because it unlocks his softer, rawer side afterwards.’

Jack thought he got to see that in the hospital, but it was true he hadn’t been seeing it much since. It was like Pitch had ripped a plaster off a wound, exposed it, and then because he’d done that, he could also hold Jack close and pet him and ward off the rest of the world. But as soon as Pitch went back to being Admiral again, he was aloof and closed off, like he couldn’t bear anyone to see what was beneath the surface. Jack had thought Pitch was doing it on purpose, but…maybe that was just Pitch.

Maybe he couldn’t help it, after all this time.

‘Perhaps you just need him to fuck you,’ Eva said airily. ‘I don’t actually *know*. But whatever it is that you need, you actually have to find a way to tell him that you need something. That’s what love is, Jack. It’s learning how to do that.’

‘I already take so much from him.’

‘Do you? Really? Because I see all the things you’ve *given* him.’

‘Like stress?’ Jack said, playfully, and then he subsided at the no-nonsense look she gave him. She was often so sarcastic and wry, that when she got like this, he found himself flailing a little under that direct attention. He imagined it was a look she gave Seraphina sometimes. And Pitch probably. And Anton.

‘It might take you decades to learn how wonderful you are,’ Eva said softly, looking down and breaking the gaze. When she looked up, she shook her head a little. ‘I forget how young you are, and how much you’ve been through, which doesn’t even include all those things I can’t conceive of. But, Jack, trust me when I say that you asking Pitch for something you need is not *taking* from him. You give him your openness, your willingness to try, your need for him. And while he’d rather pretend he didn’t, he *needs* that. At the very least just try it. A little experiment. Try asking him for something. Anything at all. If it goes hideously wrong I *promise* that you can come back here and yell at me about it for as long as you wish. All right?’

Jack chewed on the inside of his lip. Eva let go of his wrist, but not before tapping it a few times with her finger, as though reinforcing her point.
‘Now, since I’m giving you a lot of challenges today, I want to give you one more,’ she said, her lips quirking up.

‘Seriously?’ Jack said, because his brain hurt a little already.

‘I want you to tell me something you need from me, or want from me. Just one thing.’

‘Oh, but–’

‘Think, before refuting out of hand,’ Eva cautioned him, raising her finger. ‘I’ve just said I want you to do this, so try first before you tell me you can’t.’

Jack thought that she must be damned terrifying actually, in a scene.

So he thought. What did he need – or want – from Eva? It was a hard question. He didn’t want to ask for something she couldn’t give, or maybe didn’t want to give? He could tell her that he only wanted what she already gave him, because it seemed like pretty good advice actually, and he wasn’t sure anyone else could have given it. It broke his brain, wanting to please her, but knowing that doing so would involve asking for something. He really…wasn’t used to it at all.

Then his mind touched upon something, and he pressed his lips together, because he suddenly knew what he wanted to ask for.

Eva knew too.

‘Tell me,’ she said.

‘It’s silly.’

‘I didn’t say only tell me if it wasn’t silly,’ Eva said. ‘I said tell me.’

Yep, she’d be super intimidating in a scene. How on Lune did Anton handle Eva and Pitch at once? Did he die?

‘Um,’ Jack said. ‘It’s just- Remember when you just kind of randomly hugged me a while back, and… I just kind of liked it and was wondering if you could maybe do it again some-’

Eva was out of her chair, wrapping her arms fiercely about Jack’s neck and drawing him upright into a hug so complete that he felt surrounded by her. He blinked into her coat, even as her fingers splayed and brought him closer, her cheek coming to rest in his hair.

‘I love you,’ she said, her voice rich. ‘You may not know you’re a part of this family, but you’re a part of my family, and I love that you are.’

‘Oh,’ Jack said, his voice small, feeling suddenly overcome.

Yeah, this was probably what he liked so much about it last time.

Was this what it was supposed to be like to have a mother?

Don’t think about that.

‘Okay,’ Jack said.

She hugged him until his chest stopped hurting and he sagged into her, smelling cloves and smoke and damp fabric. She must have been out in the rain. She hugged him until he had to apologise for
accidentally sending frost along the back of her coat, and she hummed like it didn’t matter.

When she let him go, her eyes were sparkling.

‘Now, you can stay here, or go back to Pitch, or do whatever you like. I only wished to know why you seemed so sad. But one last thing,’ she gripped his shoulders and stared down at him, ‘I’d like it if you told me what you wanted more often, even when it feels silly. We are a silly bunch behind closed doors, and you’d really just be able to count yourself in prized company.’

Jack smiled at that, and she smiled back.

‘Maybe I’ll talk to Pitch,’ Jack said. ‘But he’s probably got meetings to go to soon, or I don’t know… I don’t want to—’

‘Then wait for him. He’ll make time for you.’ Jack nodded, turned to leave. Before he got to the door, Eva cleared her throat. ‘Wait, a very last thing. I don’t know if you’re at all interested in extended relationships, but if you ever take Anton up on his offer to top you, I think you’ll find you get a great deal out of it. He cherishes you, Jack.’

‘Oh,’ Jack said, turning, looking at her, feeling breathless.

‘If you wanted it,’ Eva said, ‘you could let him cherish you more. It’s not going to hurt any of us in the process. Not Pitch, not myself. I don’t know if you’re monogamous or not, but if you’re not and were waiting for permission, you have it.’

Jack nodded, cheeks flushing. She smiled at him, and then waved in a way that meant he was free to leave. He looked around the rooms again, and walked to the door, back down the corridor, towards Pitch’s room.

Once there, he sat at the table and watched Seraphina talking to Pitch, and couldn’t shake the nerves already bubbling in his chest.

*

Jack waited until the end of the night. He waited until Pitch had changed for bed, and he tried not to pace or float about the room or make ice to excess and wished they could just…fuck or something, so he didn’t have to say anything. He didn’t want to say anything. Everything Eva said had made sense, but now Jack felt edgy and frightened and he didn’t like it.

‘Is everything all right?’ Pitch asked as he placed some journals on the drawers by the side of his bed.

‘Um,’ Jack said.

Just ask him. Ask him for something.

Pitch looked at him expectantly, and Jack wanted to crawl under the bed and hide there. He stood on the other side of the bed and ground his staff into the floor and hated this.

‘Would you…?’ he said, and then felt so stupid. He had to just say something or he was going to drown in his own mind. ‘Would you punish me?’

Oh, cool, so I’m asking for that. Great.

Pitch went still, and then he straightened fully and looked at Jack like he was examining him.
‘For what?’ Pitch said. ‘And how?’

‘Um,’ Jack said again, and then laughed shakily. ‘I don’t really… I mean I can’t- I just think that- Actually, you know what, don’t worry about—’

‘Come here,’ Pitch said, pointing to the bed.

A wave of relief at being told to do something, and Jack walked over and sat where Pitch was pointing. Pitch walked away and picked up a chair, bringing it back so they were sitting in front of each other. Pitch’s knees touched the bed, Jack had to spread his legs to accommodate them. Then Pitch rested his hands on Jack’s thighs. Warm. He was always so warm.

‘You want me to punish you,’ Pitch repeated, ‘in a scene?’

Jack nodded.

‘Did this, by any chance, have to do with the conversation you had with Eva this morning?’

Jack nodded again. He thought Pitch might be angry at that, but instead Pitch only smiled a little, and his fingers squeezed Jack’s thighs in reassurance. Okay, Jack realised, this might be…not terrible. Pitch didn’t seem mad anyway. Maybe because he wanted to punish Jack?

Was that…?

Jack closed his eyes.

‘I keep feeling like I’m going to do something bad,’ Jack said. ‘Like you deserve better than that.’ Than me. ‘But Eva said that if I asked you…for something, maybe it’d help? Which seems weird, right? Probably not to you. She said I didn’t have to ask to be punished. She just said I should ask you for things? Which is you know, kind of…strange, I guess.’

Pitch gently stroked his thumbs down over Jack’s knees. When Jack met his eyes, Pitch looked unhappy, and Jack wondered if he’d said the wrong thing.

‘I don’t know if a punishment is what you need,’ Pitch said musingly. ‘You’re…fragile, at the moment, and—’

‘I’m not,’ Jack said indignantly. ‘Just because I don’t know all the things you guys do, doesn’t mean I’m fragile!’

‘I just meant—’

‘So I ask you for something and you won’t even—’

‘Jack,’ Pitch said, his gentle touches stilling. ‘Listen to me.’

‘You know, Eva said I could yell at her if this went badly, so I’m gonna go do that right now.’

‘I’m not saying no,’ Pitch said. ‘I’m trying to walk you through this part of the process, which is where I share my thoughts, and you share yours. It’s called a conversation. I need to know if it will help you. I’m not trying to shut you down. But make no mistake, it’s my call to make.’

Jack frowned at him, and Pitch frowned back.

‘I don’t even know what I need,’ Jack said, laughing. ‘I don’t even know if I should stop feeling bad about things.’
Pitch’s gold gaze flashed. He pushed the chair back, standing between Jack’s legs. He touched his fingers to Jack’s chin, tilting his head back, staring down at him.

‘Don’t fight me,’ Pitch said.

Jack wasn’t sure what he meant until he felt the fear building. He gasped, Pitch’s eyes narrowed, and then terror ratcheted up inside of Jack’s whole body. A flash of betrayal alongside it. Pitch hadn’t used the fear trick against him in so long. Jack felt like he was choking on it, beginning to hyperventilate, beginning to shake, as Pitch kept Jack’s head up and paralysed him with fear.

Then, it was gone, and Jack was gasping for breath as Pitch brushed his thumbs beneath Jack’s eyes and wiped the tears away.

‘All right,’ Pitch said grimly. ‘I’ll do it.’

‘What?’ Jack’s voice was rough, just from that.

‘I’ll punish you.’

Jack felt his body turn cold and then warm. It was better, really, to have someone else make the choice for him. But he wished he knew what Pitch had seen, rifling through Jack’s fears like that. He wished he knew what it was that made Pitch sound so certain.

‘Now?’ Jack said nervously.

‘No,’ Pitch said, bending down and pressing his lips to the top of Jack’s head. ‘I’ll need to clear some time for both of us, some time to think about how I want to do this.’

‘Oh.’

‘You are worth far too much to me, for me to not give this my full attention.’

‘Will it hurt?’

‘Yes,’ Pitch said frankly.

‘What if I change my mind? What if I decide I don’t want that?’

‘Then we won’t go ahead,’ Pitch said, and then he got onto the bed and took Jack’s hand, pulling him back with him. Jack ended up with Pitch lying half on top of him, a knee between his legs, and Jack wondering how he could go from terrified to feeling vaguely turned on, even though his heart was still thumping in terror. ‘You’ll have your words, too. I have one request, from now until the punishment.’

Pitch’s knee pressed up further, nudging up against Jack’s balls, and Jack’s eyes drifted shut.

‘What’s that?’

‘No orgasms until then.’

‘Oh, cool,’ Jack said. ‘Wait, including now? Are we-? Are you just teasing me?’

‘Oh no,’ Pitch said, sotto voce. ‘I’m teasing you. Whatever shall you do?’

Pitch continued to tease him, moving his knee between Jack’s legs until he was fully hard. At that, he stopped and rolled off him, laughing at the sound Jack made. He pulled Jack closer, only
stopping to take the staff off the bed where Jack had dropped it, placing it against the wall.

Jack ended up with his back to Pitch’s chest, his breathing slowing, Pitch’s breathing against his neck and shoulder.

‘I wish it could always be like this,’ Jack said.

‘As do I,’ Pitch said, pressing closer.

* 

A couple of days later, Jack got to see the room the punishment would be taking place in.

The room that Pitch had put aside for his scenes was different to the one back at the Palace. It wasn’t as open, wasn’t as huge. There wasn’t a wall of whips and flogging instruments. There weren’t benches all over the place. Though there were two, upholstered in leather, places where wrists and ankles could be cuffed down clear. There was a bed with the kind of headboard and baseboard that one could be tied to. A space of wall where metal hooks had been screwed in, where someone might be tied or restrained.

Otherwise, it had carpet, not floorboards. The walls had – of all things – wallpaper on them. Wallpaper was expensive, Jack wondered if Pitch had paid for this himself. How long ago had he made this room? How long had he been part of the Resistance, to think ahead and make this space for himself?

‘Did you pick the wallpaper? Did someone else?’

‘I did,’ Pitch said.

He’d had a whole life away from the Palace and the Guardians had still rejected him for his relationship with the Tsar. They’d probably treated him the way a lot of the soldiers now treated Sharpwood. Unwelcome, untrustworthy, a constant source of suspicion and enmity.

Jack swallowed and walked over to one of the benches, reaching out and touching the leather. He was scared. Pitch would’ve known. Pitch probably liked it. Jack turned and looked at him, and Pitch just watched. Jack couldn’t read his expression.

‘The rules,’ Pitch said, and Jack’s fingers brushed the leather as he stood up straighter and paid attention. ‘You call me Sir, or Admiral. You will use your safewords if you feel you need to, and will not force yourself to endure something beyond your limits just because you think you should. That’s important, Jack.’

‘Okay,’ Jack said.

‘That’s one,’ Pitch said quietly, smirking.

One what? Jack’s eyes widened, and then he realised and bit the inside of his lip nervously.

‘Okay, Sir,’ Jack amended.

One what? Jack was afraid to ask.

‘Next, if I ask you a question, you are to endeavour to answer it. If I ask you to be silent, you will endeavour to do that. We both know that you often non-answer, or evade direct questions. There will be consequences for that today, do you understand?’
‘Yes, Sir,’ Jack said. It was easier to remember the ‘Sir’ this time, and he felt his mind begin to slip towards that state it sometimes found, where it was just…natural to talk to Pitch like that. To give him the honorifics. But he still worried. What would Pitch ask him?

But it wasn’t supposed to be easy, was it? It was supposed to be a punishment.

‘Put your staff down and strip,’ Pitch said. ‘And while you’re doing that, tell me what you want me to punish you for.’

Pitch walked off as Jack lowered his staff and then moved his hands to the strings that secured his small cape. Jack watched as Pitch opened drawers and drew things out of them, including what looked like lengths of rope. Jack felt the string slide through the knot, and thought about the strangeness of removing himself from one set of restraints in the form of his clothing, for another.

‘Um,’ Jack said. ‘I…I didn’t tell you about going to the City of Lune, and I should’ve.’

‘That’s two,’ Pitch said.

‘Whoops, Sir,’ Jack added, wanting to swear. He wasn’t even doing it on purpose.

‘But you had reasons for not telling me. Or at least a reason. What was it?’

Jack slowly worked off his shirt and tried to hide not wanting to talk behind undressing. That was all fine until:

‘Are you undressed yet?’

‘No, Sir,’ Jack said.

‘That’s three,’ Pitch said, amusement in his voice.

Fuck, Jack thought, rushing to get undressed. Pitch walked across the room, and a moment later the space was plunged into almost complete darkness, but for a single candle that had already been lit when Jack had walked in.

Jack froze.

He’d been avoiding the whole ‘near total darkness’ thing since the Black Asylum. It wasn’t hard to do. Most places were designed to have constant ambient light, even at night. Everyone in Lune didn’t like total darkness.

‘Uh,’ Jack said. ‘…Sir, I…’

‘Are you undressed yet?’

‘No, Sir. Is that four?’

‘It certainly is,’ Pitch said. ‘You won’t want the number to get too high. Concentrate.’

Jack quietly seethed as he kicked away his pants, underwear. And then he was naked, cloaked by darkness, staring at the candle desperately. The room didn’t have any windows. If Pitch blew out the candlelight, he’d be in total darkness.

He recalled that Pitch used to do meditation in total darkness, that he’d cultivated a kind of fearlessness about it. Jack hadn’t.
‘You didn’t answer my question,’ Pitch said. ‘That’s five.’

A question? There had been a question? Jack panicked as he stumbled back through the orders and remembered that Pitch had asked him why Jack hadn’t told him about leaving for the City of Lune.

‘You would’ve said no, Sir,’ Jack said, his voice rasping a little. Okay, so he wasn’t really enjoying this. He wasn’t supposed to, he knew that, but none of this felt fair. Pitch was pushing him off balance on purpose. And now he was supposed to talk about stuff? It was just going to make Pitch mad.

_He’s already mad._

‘Any other reasons?’ Pitch asked. Jack could hear him moving around the room. He opened something, closed it. Pulled out a drawer, closed that. The sound of something being thrown onto the bed. Then Jack saw the shadowy form of Pitch holding ropes, tossing those onto the bed too. Pitch hadn’t touched him at all yet.

Normally Pitch had touched him a lot by now. Pitch _knew_ Jack liked that.

Was that part of the punishment too?

‘Concentrate, Jack,’ Pitch said.

‘No, I…’ Any other reasons? ‘I didn’t want to talk myself out of it, Sir.’

‘So you deliberately went as soon as you thought of the idea?’ Pitch said. His tone wasn’t even mean. It was just light, curious. Jack rested his weight on the ball of one foot, than the other, shifting because he couldn’t stand still.

‘Bunnymund tried to tell me no,’ Jack said. ‘I thought if I waited, he’d tell on me, and then I’d never be able to do it. And I just- I mean… I know it was the wrong thing to do, but-’

‘Do you?’ Pitch said.

‘What?’

‘That’s six. Oh, Jack, I thought you were obedient, but you’re not very good at this at all, are you?’

Jack folded his arms over his chest. He twisted to see Pitch and he couldn’t. He didn’t even know what six meant.

‘What, _Sir_?’ Jack said.

‘You’re lucky I haven’t added a rule where if you’re _insubordinate_, there’d be consequences for that too. Of course, I’m not trying to _kill_ you.’ Pitch laughed. The sound was vaguely mocking. Jack stepped sideways, an automatic protest against that laughter. Didn’t he- Hadn’t he _asked_? And he’d wanted… Pitch was _right_ to treat him like this.

‘Did you really think it was the wrong thing to do? Or are you just telling me that because you think that’s what everyone else believes?’

Jack looked down at the murky shape of his own feet. Shadows. His toes scraped across the floor as he tried to make sure nothing alien was touching him. It was just dead darkness.

‘Why is it so dark?’ Jack said.
‘That’s seven, and now eight,’ Pitch said. ‘No honorific, and you didn’t answer my question. Now-’

‘Lumen,’ Jack said. He stilled as he said it, one foot still only resting on its toes. He closed his eyes. Damn it. Damn it. It’d only been some stupid questions. Shit. Why couldn’t he just answer them? Why was he forgetting the most basic things?

Pitch walked up to him, and stood behind him, then placed a hand on Jack’s flank instead of his scars. His touch was warm. Jack wanted to lean into him, but by the Darkness, he’d already said one of the words. Already!

‘I’m sorry,’ Jack said. ‘I’ll do better.’

‘I know,’ Pitch said. ‘I expect you to use the word again, today. That is, if you don’t wish to stop entirely.’

Jack stiffened, he turned to look up at Pitch, but could only see shadows, the glint of gold. He couldn’t make out a proper expression, the candle was too far away for that. Pitch was looking down at him. Jack wondered how well he could see in the dark.

‘Deeper breaths,’ Pitch said. ‘I know this is hard for you.’

‘It’s just words,’ Jack said, annoyed at himself. ‘I shouldn’t- It’s not even- I’m just-’

‘Here’s something I’ve noticed about you,’ Pitch said, bracing Jack on the other side with his other hand, and standing close enough that Jack didn’t need to sag back into him anymore. ‘You’ll often happily protest something you don’t like, so it’s easy to get the impression that you’re an open person, when it’s not true at all. To say nothing of the fact that you often don’t know your own mind before you make a decision and you don’t like to articulate what you’re thinking to others, even when you do. Today’s punishment is simple. I want you to talk to me. And you’re going to. When you don’t, you will earn things you will not enjoy. And no, you won’t get to know what they are until they’ve happened. Rest assured, Jack, everything you earn will make it much easier for you to talk.’

That wasn’t reassuring at all.

‘I don’t want to talk about things.’

‘If you’d chosen to talk about things, perhaps I would have said no to you going off to the City of Lune. Maybe you’d have gone anyway. At least I would have known what you were doing. We could have prepared for your return. We could have sent you with a communication device. Even if you had gone too quickly for any of that, at least I would have known that you were more determined to die for Lune than live your life.’

‘Fuck you,’ Jack said. ‘Is that nine?’

‘No,’ Pitch said, laughing softly. ‘It’s not. You said lumen, we’re taking a break. Enjoy it. Unless you want to stop?’

‘I just don’t want-’

‘Here’s the other thing I’ve noticed about you,’ Pitch said. ‘How far back did it go, Jack? What drove you to Bunnymund in the first place? Last time you lowered yourself to talk to me about it, you hated him. So why him? And why alone? Or, perhaps, more saliently, you haven’t properly talked to me since I told you pull yourself together before I sent you to the Black Asylum. Maybe
you were angry with me. Maybe you were upset. Maybe you were afraid. I have absolutely no way of knowing, except guessing. Do you want to stop, Jack? Is that something you can answer?

Jack hesitated. He thought it over. Really thought about it. In the meantime he bristled at the things Pitch was saying. It wasn’t like that. He didn’t hide that much from Pitch. He’d just not...he wasn’t someone who just spilled out every little thing. Neither was Pitch!

But then...

Pitch hadn’t gone off to the City of Lune and nearly died for it. Jack’s forehead furrowed. He wanted to trust in what was happening.

‘I don’t think I want to stop,’ Jack said. ‘I mean, no- Not if I…can say the words again.’

Pitch leaned down and pressed his mouth to Jack’s ear. ‘Oh, Jack, I expect you’ll be saying them again.’

Jack tensed, felt Pitch’s lips twist into a smile. Then he walked away, leaving Jack naked in the middle of the room again.

‘We’re starting again,’ Pitch said. ‘Tell me the rules I gave you before. I need to know you haven’t forgotten them.’

‘Um, honorifics like Sir or Admiral. I have to use the words if I feel like I need to. I have to answer your questions. And if you ask me to be quiet, I have to do that too, Sir.’

‘If you can remember the rules, remember to obey them,’ Pitch said. ‘Now. Answer the question: Did you really think going to the City of Lune was the wrong thing to do?’

Fuck. I hate this.

‘No, Sir,’ Jack said.

‘That’s good, Jack. Kneel, please.’

Jack knelt, biting his lip with a kind of nervous pleasure that Pitch had told him he’d done something well. Even if he thought the answer was the one Pitch didn’t want to hear.

‘I’ll tell you something too,’ Pitch said. ‘I don’t think it was the wrong thing to do, either.’

The ‘What?’ almost spilled before Jack remembered at the last minute that it needed an honorific. Instead, he swallowed the word down.

‘I think you should have told me,’ Pitch said. ‘And I think you should have done me the courtesy of seeing how much I didn’t want you to die before you decided it was still worthwhile. That’s what this is about, isn’t it? Not that you went to the City of Lune at all, but that you didn’t tell me.’

Pitch walked back to Jack and stood before him. Jack expected Pitch to pull his cock out of his pants or something, expected to give him a blowjob, but instead, Pitch only traced Jack’s lips with his fingers. His fingertips smelled of something a little spicy. He must’ve been able to see pretty well in the dark. He knew exactly where Jack’s lips were. Jack’s knees ached a little on the carpet.

‘Open your mouth,’ Pitch said.

Jack opened it, left it open, remembering that Pitch had asked for this before. Just for Jack to open his mouth, even if nothing was coming to fill it.
Pitch pushed something thin – like a finger – into Jack’s mouth. It was so thin that it didn’t touch Jack’s tongue or the roof of his mouth, because it was too open. Pitch held the other end of it, and that seemed much wider from the way Pitch’s knuckles bumped into his mouth.

‘Close your mouth carefully, get this wet. Don’t bite or suck on it.’

So Jack slowly closed his mouth, confused, and then felt something cold and strange. The flavour was noticeable. Jack didn’t suck on it, but the sharpness of its taste – spicy and almost sweet but not-quite – brought saliva flooding into his mouth. He made a faint sound as his tongue began to burn. Was it ginger? Jack’s breath rushed out of his nostrils. The sting was building.

‘Open,’ Pitch said. ‘Stand up.’

As soon as Jack opened his mouth, the thing slid out of it, and Jack could still taste it lingering on his tongue, in the cold burn on the roof of his mouth, in the saliva he swallowed down his throat.

But he remembered to stand, and Pitch pulled him close enough that Jack’s chest bumped into Pitch’s torso.

‘Hold still,’ Pitch said. He reached his arms around Jack, and Jack – at first – thought it was an embrace. Then he felt Pitch spread his ass cheeks apart, and Jack gasped when he felt whatever had been placed into his mouth slide firmly into his ass, wet from the saliva he’d slicked it with. Pitch pushed it until it widened to faintly uncomfortable stretch, then rapidly narrowed, so that a thicker point was left outside of his ass, and it was plugged in place. Jack’s eyes widened, and his hands immediately came up to Pitch’s side, holding onto his coat.

He could still feel the burn in his mouth.

Pitch let go of it, and squeezed Jack’s ass-cheeks closed.

‘That’s one,’ Pitch said. ‘Which brings you down to seven. Like I said, you don’t want the number to keep climbing.’

Jack stiffened when he felt the burn start. First at his tender rim, like little plucking stings, and then spreading, like it was winding through all the surrounding nerves too. He gasped again, then again. When he went to step backwards, Pitch’s hands came up and tightened on his forearms and held him in place.

‘Hold still,’ Pitch said again.

‘It’s- But it’s-’ Jack swallowed that burning saliva in his mouth even as the stinging became pain. Became fire. ‘Take it out.’

‘That’s eight,’ Pitch said. ‘You didn’t say Sir.’

This was unfair. Jack had never done anything like this in his life. He hadn’t even imagined something like this could be done. He began to tremble, grit his teeth together to keep the sounds down, one of his feet scraping automatically against the carpet. He hummed to try and displace the tension, but it didn’t work. It was just building. It was just-

‘Take it out, Sir?’ Jack said, his voice cracking. When he opened his mouth to speak, the air pressed against the fiery insides of his mouth and made the burn temporarily worse.

‘No.’
Jack’s legs didn’t want to hold him anymore. He wanted to fall to the ground, curl over himself and yank whatever it was out of him. It had to be ginger, surely, but he didn’t know it could do this. He knew Pitch wouldn’t do him any damage, and even if Pitch did, he had that Light he’d used in the past. But it felt dangerous, and Jack could feel the burning pressing inside of him, felt like his gut was churning.

He opened his mouth, panting, shifting from foot to foot which only made it worse. So did clenching, but he couldn’t help it. He’d absently try to push it out, and then the burn would worsen, and then he’d tell himself not to do that, but he couldn’t stop.

‘Now,’ Pitch said. ‘Let’s see if this is enough to get you talking. Why did you avoid me after the Asylum mission?’

What in all Darkness- I’m going to murder him. For real.

Jack’s exhale through his nose was sharp, he couldn’t even think of how to answer. He couldn’t say that he didn’t avoid Pitch. Maybe he could just lie? Or say that it was something else? Did he even know? He could just…

Pitch yanked Jack back into his chest and bent over him. With one hand pinning him by the lower back, his other came and spanked his ass firmly. The first blow shocked a cry out of his throat, and the next he processed in silence, the claps of sound splitting through his body and mind, too shocked to understand what was happening.

But Pitch didn’t stop, and the pain flooded back, the burning was worse. Jack struggled automatically, kicked out, opened his mouth and cried out raggedly, and Pitch didn’t stop.

‘Wait!’ Jack shouted.

‘That’s nine,’ Pitch said. His last blow landed firmly over the plug in his ass, and Jack hiccupped a sound at that and pressed his face into Pitch’s chest, hiding there.

Pitch straightened again. Now the burn of the ginger was confused with the burn of everything else. Jack really didn’t want to be standing. He sagged and Pitch kept him upright, then made a sound of disgust under his breath.

‘Stand,’ Pitch said.

Jack shook as he got his knees to lock, then closed his eyes.

‘Let’s try this again,’ Pitch said. ‘Why did you avoid me after the asylum mission?’

‘I don’t know why!’ Jack shouted.

‘That’s ten,’ Pitch said. Jack thought he might even be smiling. He made a sound of frustration and thumped his fist against Pitch’s side several times, aiming the knuckles in. Pitch hissed, but by some miracle didn’t punish him for it.

Ten what, though?

‘This isn’t fair, Sir,’ Jack said.

‘It’s really not,’ Pitch said. ‘I completely agree. Let’s try another question. Why did you visit Bunnymund on your own? Without telling anyone?’
‘I just wanted to,’ Jack said. ‘He didn’t show up to anything, I thought you were all lying to me and he wasn’t even there. I didn’t even know he’d be there until I saw him there, Sir.’

Jack squirmed. Everything still fire. He thought it might be lessening, but it wasn’t lessening enough. He couldn’t keep track of his answers, thought he might be saying things he wasn’t sure he should be saying. But Pitch didn’t give nice little playful slaps when he was spanking, he spanked hard enough that it brought Jack to the tips of his toes sometimes. It hurt.

‘Thank you,’ Pitch said, briefly stroking Jack’s arm. ‘I didn’t realise you thought we might be lying to you. As you learned, we weren’t. Have we earned so little of your trust, Jack?’

‘It’s not like that. I thought maybe you were trying to…I dunno, maybe you’d been told to go along with it or something. Or maybe you all decided I needed to think he was sad or something when he was really in the City of Lune, working super hard. I dunno. I just- It wasn’t about trust, Sir.’

‘Hm. All right then. Come along.’

Pitch drew Jack forwards, and Jack hesitated, not wanting to walk while the thing was inside him. Pitch pulled hard enough at Jack’s wrists that he took a stumbling step. The burn increased, he whimpered.

‘Onto the bed,’ Pitch said, as Jack’s knees bumped against it. ‘I want you on all fours, please. You can rest on your hands or your elbows, but not on your chest.’

Jack grunted as he got into position. Jostling the ginger made everything worse again, and he shuddered as the burn worsened. It felt like he was rubbing him raw. Seemed deep, somehow, like it connected at a point between his throat and his ass. It wasn’t possible, but it twanged inside of him all the same. He propped himself up on his hands, spreading his knees a little. It didn’t help.

Pitch joined him, then curved his hand gently around the back of Jack’s ass. He prodded at the plug of ginger with his fingers, and Jack rocked, fingers clenching hard into the bed as he made sure he didn’t collapse forwards, didn’t move to get away.

Pitch’s other hand came around and curved around his cock, weighing its softness in his palm, thumb dragging down the sensitive skin. Jack sighed at that. It was nice, it cut through everything else. His head dropped a little.

Then fingers moved further down between his legs, taking up his balls, rolling them carefully, and then pulling down a little. Jack winced, turned to look over his shoulder, but couldn’t see much and besides, it didn’t stop what Pitch was doing.

‘They’re sensitive,’ Pitch said.

It wasn’t a question, so Jack didn’t have to answer. Of course they were, they were his fucking balls.

‘Good,’ Pitch said.

Then, he began looping rope around the top, above his testes. Jack blinked, eyes so wide they began to water. His hips locked into place, even as he wanted to kick Pitch’s arms away.

‘What are you doing, Sir?’ Jack said. He hadn’t been told he couldn’t speak out of turn. He hadn’t been told to be quiet. He could ask a question.

‘Oh, this is number ten,’ Pitch said. ‘This will bring us down to nine.’
'Is this gonna hurt, Sir?'

‘A little,’ Pitch said. ‘It should be nothing more than an ache. Anything worse will be all your
doing.’

Shit.

‘What do the numbers mean, Sir?’

‘They refer to consequences,’ Pitch said mildly. ‘They’ll all be things that you won’t particularly
enjoy.’

Yeah. Right. Got that message, thanks.

The rope continued to loop until Jack’s balls were pulled further away from his body than was
comfortable and he groaned softly. Pitch secured the rope somehow – Jack wasn’t looking, he
didn’t want to look down at all – and pulled the rope, and Jack’s balls, backwards. Jack went with
the movement just enough to try and have some control over it, and Pitch only placed his other
hand on Jack’s ass and pushed him forwards again. It wasn’t until Jack began to pant that Pitch let
the rope go.

Jack shifted from hand to hand. Another length of rope was being wound around his ankles, first
one and then the other. They were tied so that they were connected to each other, but not touching
each other. Pitch tugged on the loose pieces of rope remaining as though checking how tight, how
secure it was. That didn’t hurt at all. The rope there was comfortable.

Then Pitch lifted the loose ends of the rope at his ankles and took up the thinner piece of rope
dangling between his legs, pulling Jack’s balls backwards. He secured the pieces of rope together
and Jack felt his skin crawl.

If he moved forwards now, for any reason – if he tried to stretch his legs even just a little – he’d
yank his balls back towards his feet.

‘I don’t like this,’ Jack said.

‘That’s ten,’ Pitch said. ‘You are honestly terrible at this.’

Jack’s breathing hitched. He clawed at the blanket. All those tiny moments he could feel through
the taut rope connecting his balls to his ankles.

Fuck, fuck, fuck. I can’t. I can’t do this, I-

‘Lumen,’ Jack whispered, hating himself. Damn it!

‘Do you need to stop?’ Pitch said, placing his hand on Jack’s calf.

‘You could definitely untie the ropes, Sir.’

‘I think that only happens if you say the word to stop,’ Pitch said. ‘Do you need to say it?’

‘I get it,’ Jack said. ‘I’ll never go and save the City of Lune again. Okay? I won’t. I promise.’

‘Actually, the issue was that you didn’t tell me about it, but thank you, Jack.’

‘I’ll never-’
‘Oh I wouldn’t go promising things out of desperation,’ Pitch said. ‘Do you need to say shadow?’

‘No. But I don’t want to be terrible at this,’ Jack said. ‘Am I really that bad at it?’

‘You could ask me to help you with it, if you like.’

‘Yeah? You wanna negotiate that number ten down to zero?’

Pitch laughed. The sound was warm, not cold.

‘Try again.’

‘Hey, it was worth a try,’ Jack said, shifting a little, looking down at the bed. ‘Ask you for help with it? Like…how?’

‘You could try: ‘Sir, could you help me obey you, so that the number doesn’t end in the low hundreds by the time we’re done?’ This scene could last years.’

‘Ha. Ha.’ Jack lifted one of his hands and rubbed at his forehead. But how would Pitch help him? And why would Jack ask? Wasn’t he supposed to be strong? And it was only four rules. Jack didn’t know why he kept forgetting. He was normally better at this. He wanted to shuffle down onto his calves so that he loosened all the tension in the rope.

Pitch ran his hand along the outside of Jack’s thigh, up his side and then down his arm, until he could rest his hand over Jack’s hand. He was closer to Jack’s face, though he couldn’t see it because Jack was still looking down.

‘It’s hard, isn’t it?’ Pitch said.

Jack nodded.

‘Ask me for help.’

‘But it’s a punishment,’ Jack said. ‘Right?’

‘You could still try it, couldn’t you? I know it’s not something you’re used to doing, but I can help you through this.’

‘Aren’t you mad at me?’

‘No,’ Pitch said. ‘I wouldn’t do a scene like this if I was angry anyway. But I’m not mad at you.’

‘The ropes though, can’t you just-?’

‘I’m only taking them off if you say shadow,’ Pitch said firmly.

Jack didn’t want to ask him for help. He turned his head away. How would Pitch help him anyway? Jack almost wanted to demand everything start up again, so he didn’t have to deal with this part. His breathing was unsteady. A few breaths later, Pitch began stroking the back of Jack’s hand with his fingers, each motion slow and firm.

‘It’s just one question,’ Pitch said. ‘And I can tell you the answer now. I will help you.’

‘I should be good at this without your help,’ Jack said.

‘Why?’
Jack didn’t know why. He just should. That’s how it was supposed to be! Jack had known that all his life, hadn’t he? Pippa was too young for him to go to her. And then she was dead. Jamie was too caring, he got angry too quickly on Jack’s behalf. By the Light, he’d gotten them both into more trouble with Crossholt when he’d tried to help.

‘Because that’s how things should be?’ Pitch prompted.

Jack nodded.

‘This is a private room, no one can see us. We’re already in the dark. If you asked me for help, I wouldn’t tell anyone. It would be a secret between us.’

‘You wouldn’t…make it too easy for me?’

Why did he ask that? But it was important, somehow. Even though he was scared and confused – maybe even because of that – he liked being able to give this part of himself to Pitch. He liked that Pitch somehow got something out of it, appreciated it. Eva had said that Anton could offer up his suffering, his grief, his trust. Jack didn’t know what he offered, but there was something amazing in being able to endure things for Pitch.

He just wanted to be better at it.

‘I don’t think there’s any chance of that,’ Pitch said.

‘So then…’ Jack’s mouth worked, and he shook his head in frustration. ‘Would you help me? Be…better at this? Sir?’

Pitch’s hand lifted from Jack’s fingers, to his chin. He gently drew Jack’s head up and then kissed him. It was a mere brush of lips across Jack’s, but a kiss all the same.

‘Yes,’ Pitch said, ‘you wonderful boy. Of course I can.’

Jack’s chest did something, a flip, some kind of missed step, and he wanted to lean forwards into Pitch, but he knew that he couldn’t stretch his legs for anything. He just knew. He had to be still.

‘All right,’ Pitch said, ‘everything resumes again. Unless you need to stop, or you need a break. The four rules are back in effect. I’d like to add another. Listen closely. For every meaningful thing you reveal to me – from the time between us arriving here at home base to now – I will remove one of the strikes against you. It only works if you volunteer it to me without my asking.’

‘What sorts of meaningful things, Sir?’ Jack was determined never to forget another Sir.

‘I think you can guess,’ Pitch said drily, shifting on the bed, ‘by how much you don’t wish to talk about it, or how much you’ll tell yourself that I don’t want to hear it, or whatever other excuses you use in your mind.’

Jack knew it was a reprieve, it was just a difficult one. Jack could spill twenty secrets he’d been keeping from Pitch and put himself in the negatives, and maybe the whole scene would change. But shit, he didn’t want to.

‘I don’t know how, Sir’ Jack said, feeling stupid.

Pitch knelt behind him and pulled the plug of ginger out, and Jack pressed his lips together to stop any sounds from emerging. The burn had woken up as a result, but it dulled down again. Something background and faintly stinging, more bearable than before.
‘Do you want me to help you with that?’ Pitch said.

Jack had to answer. He had to answer or Pitch would make it eleven and they really would be here forever. He lifted his head and stared at the murky shadows in the room and said in a thick voice:

‘Yes, Sir.’

‘Very good,’ Pitch said, kneeling beside Jack’s roped ankles and rubbing a hand meaningfully over Jack’s ass. Jack stared ahead. Dread was plummeting through him like a stone. If Pitch spanked him, Jack wouldn’t be able to move. No, he’d have to push back against it, to keep the ropes from jerking his balls. He’d have to- Jack trembled.

‘Sir,’ Jack said shakily.

‘This will be ten,’ Pitch said. ‘Which brings us down to nine. Again. But before I start, I have a suggestion that might help. How about I give you a subject to contemplate, and you can reveal something meaningful about that subject? Would that help?’

‘Yes, Sir,’ Jack said.

‘The first subject I want you to reveal something about, is something you think about the Guardians. Let’s say, Toothiana or North. Not the others.’

*Not Bunnymund.*

Jack fell completely still as Pitch’s hand began tapping over his ass. Light things that still stung over the flesh that had already been spanked hard before. Jack grit his jaw together, feeling the slow build, the way the light taps went to almost playful spanks. Pitch was giving Jack a chance to brace himself against every harder step, but Jack was still scared he’d jerk forwards without thinking. He’d tried to twist away from Pitch in the past from the pain alone.

He tried to distract himself by thinking about the subject. Toothiana or North. He’d hardly seen North since he arrived. Toothiana…

Pitch hooked his other hand around Jack’s thigh, as though holding him in place, and spanked hard enough that Jack flinched. Not as hard as before, but it still hurt. More light tapping, and then another cracking sound against him, this one much harder than before.

Jack couldn’t help it. He cried out as he lurched forwards, the rope automatically pulling taut and forcing him backwards hurriedly, even as Pitch pulled him back with the hand around his thigh. But that yank of pain sliced through him and he went down to his elbows, shuddering, feeling like the spank was echoing through his whole body, starting at his balls and lancing up like a spear towards his chest.

He couldn’t deal with another nine things like this. He *couldn’t*. Each thing was equally hard, and he had zero doubt that Pitch could come up with a hundred nastier things to do, and he’d enjoy them way more than Jack would. Jack wanted to be strong enough to bear them, but Pitch had given him a way through this, and Jack was going to take it.

‘Um, um, *fuck*, Toothiana,’ Jack said, his voice breaking. Pitch’s hand was rubbing over Jack’s ass, and Jack heaved for breath, thinking quickly. Reaching for the first thought that came to his head.

‘She has some kind of history with you, and I don’t know what it is. I think she really likes you sometimes, but every time you talk to each other, you both get- get on each other’s nerves in like five seconds. It’s almost like you’re brother and sister, but…not, I don’t, I don’t know. But I wish you’d both get along better, ’cuz you’re both just basically doing the same kinds of shitty things
for the same war, and you both wish it was- it was different, Sir.’

A long silence then, aside from the sound of Jack’s breathing, and the faint raspy sound of Pitch’s hand on Jack’s ass.

‘That’s eight,’ Pitch said.

Jack made a sound of raw relief.

‘Get back onto your hands,’ Pitch commanded. ‘We’re not done.’

Jack pushed himself back up again, his arms feeling weak.

‘Next subject,’ Pitch said, trailing a single finger in little spirals over Jack’s skin. ‘Tell me something about the Black Asylum.’

Oh, fuck no. Jack clenched his eyes shut, almost shook his head. A lot of things came to mind that he hadn’t said. After all, Pitch knew almost nothing about Jack’s thoughts regarding the experience. Jack had tried to avoid it. Pitch had brought it up in the days following his discharge several times, even attempted a debrief which Jack had flatly refused before vanishing somewhere under the excuse of: ‘I have to go talk with…some Officer about…something.’

Pitch had to know how hard this would be.

‘Brace yourself,’ Pitch said.

Jack’s elbows locked and Pitch began spanking him harder. From those spirals, to blows. The first one rocked Jack forward enough that his breath strangled in his throat, and then he pushed back into Pitch’s hand, at one point biting the tip of his tongue to stay silent, until he bit it too hard and it was just another pain he didn’t want to deal with. He opened his mouth, an occasional cry or grunt slipping free.

Minutes of those moderate blows, all of them painful. Then, five hard blows in a row. Jack managed to stay put for the first two, but then he couldn’t help but lean away from the last three. Instinctively, he raised his ankles to keep the rope loose.

Pitch’s free hand came and pushed his ankles roughly down, the rope went tight, and Jack wailed as his balls were pulled backwards. He hunched in on himself automatically, rocking backwards, his forearms dragging on the bed. All he could hear was static in his head, a white noise of pain.

Then a voice piercing through. ‘It’s okay, Jack. Breathe. Just breathe now. You can do it. Do you need to say shadow or lumen?’

Jack wiped his face against the bed. His eyes were wet.

‘It hurts,’ Jack said. Then: ‘Sir.’

‘I know, do you need to stop?’

‘I didn’t like it, Sir,’ Jack said, the words coming out, tumbling on top of each other. ‘I didn’t like how stupid I felt in the Asylum. You all keep calling me naïve and I didn’t think I was that bad and then I got there and I realised how stupid you all think I am. Just so fucking stupid. Like ‘Oh, that Jack, doesn’t know dick about anything. Doesn’t understand what we’ve all lost over the centuries. That little baby, let’s make him grow up like super fast. Just-’ And I didn’t want you to know that I’d learned that, and I didn’t want you to realise that I’d been that naïve before, and that I was
becoming more jaded or something, because I know you don’t want that *either.*’

‘Jack, do you need to stop?’

‘No,’ Jack said. ‘No, Sir. Is it- Is it damaging me? Will you need to use your Light?’

‘No,’ Pitch said.

Jack didn’t know if he was relieved, or horrified that something that could cause so much pain didn’t actually need *healing.*

‘That’s seven,’ Pitch said. ‘Is that how it’s seemed? Is that-? You thought I was trying to make you grow up quickly? While…not wanting it? Jack, I… I had no idea, of course I know why you think this, because I know the kinds of things I say that could lead to those sorts of conclusions. Jack, just because I say I don’t want you to become like me, doesn’t mean you’re not allowed to feel jaded, or that I’ll be…personally disappointed if you do. Just because you don’t know as much as some of the others, as *me,* doesn’t mean I feel any kind of personal satisfaction in knowing you’re learning some of it.’

There was something in the tone of Pitch’s voice, like he was disgusted, or… Jack took a moment to realise that Pitch didn’t mean to direct that at Jack. He meant it for himself.

Jack caught his breath, the pain was fading. He felt bruised, but not…torn, like he’d initially thought.

‘Tell me something about Bunnymund,’ Pitch said.

Jack wanted to answer immediately, but he couldn’t. In the meantime, Pitch gently encouraged him back onto his hands and knees. Then he slid off the bed.

‘I’m just going to get a couple of things,’ Pitch said. ‘I’ll be right back.’

Jack listened to him move around the room, feeling wrung out already. What number were they down to? Like, seven? Jack was going to die, even if he didn’t manage to inflate the number again by breaking the rules.

Though…he hadn’t broken a rule once since Pitch had said he’d help. It was easier to remember to say Sir, and Pitch wasn’t asking as many questions. And the questions he was asking, they were easier to answer. Now, when Jack had to say something meaningful, it reduced his ‘sentence’ as he was coming to think of it.

It was still hard though. Jack wasn’t sure he’d ask for a punishment for a long time. But then, he didn’t know how often Anton asked for them either.

When Pitch returned, he sat – to Jack’s surprise – in front of him. One item was covered in a black cloth. Then Pitch raised a blindfold to Jack’s eyes and slipped it over them, blocking out even the candle. Jack exhaled slowly through his nose.

‘It’s dark already, Sir.’

‘Yes,’ Pitch said. ‘I want it darker. I’ll be here. I’m not leaving the room.’

Then Pitch moved the thing that was covered in the cloth.

‘Open your mouth, extend your tongue,’ Pitch said.
Jack did nervously, thinking about the ginger from before. After a few seconds, he felt something cold and flat against his tongue. It felt like...a board, or polished wood maybe.

‘Now lick,’ Pitch said. ‘As much as you can.’

Jack shifted, having no idea how big the thing was, or when he’d reach the end of it with his tongue. He lapped against the object, concluding that it was some kind of wood from its curved edges. Jack’s tongue reached a space in the board, a circle with bevelled edges. Then he reached another circle, and realised what he was licking. He’d seen paddles hanging from Pitch’s wall of torment back in the Palace. And this one had holes in it?

‘Keep licking,’ Pitch said when Jack faltered.

So Jack kept licking until the tip of his nose was sticky where the paddle bumped into it. He licked until the whole thing was wet. His breaths were shaky. Pitch could hear every one of them. He hoped Pitch was appreciating Jack’s fear, because Jack just wanted to bury into blankets and pray that the next part didn’t happen.

When the paddle was wet enough, Pitch moved behind Jack, and Jack lowered his head and felt his eyelids brushing the blindfold. His shoulders hunched. His chest dropped. He was already bracing himself.

Nope. Nope, nope, nope.

Pitch rested the paddle against his ass, wet end smearing all that spit onto already sore ass cheeks. The paddle was large enough that it covered all of his ass. One blow from that would cover a whole lot of surface area. Jack laughed nervously and then shook his head, annoyed at himself.

‘This will bring us down to six,’ Pitch said.

Pitch got into position. One of his knees slipped in front of Jack’s legs, and his other arm secured itself hard around one of Jack’s thighs. He was already preparing for the moment when Jack would launch forwards. Jack could hear his own breathing. Less and less steady.

Jack was meant to go through six more things like this?

‘Did you know?’ Pitch said conversationally, like he wasn’t some cruel asshole. ‘It hurts more when it’s wet?’

Jack blinked, processing that information, and then the paddle swung away from his skin. Jack took a breath that he never completed. The wood hit him harder, faster than he could have imagined. A moment where he was hanging in some kind of space, where the sound of that hard, wet thwack was in his ears and there was a rushing noise behind that. A vacuum where he didn’t feel anything at all, except the way his body jerked – a mild tug in his bruised balls in response – and he was falling through himself.

A swoop of nausea preceded the pain that blistered through his skin and muscle, all the way into his hips. He shrieked. Instead of jerking forwards, his body somehow instinctively knew to move backwards. He wanted to hide his ass from ever experiencing that again. He wanted to not hurt his balls. But as he pushed back, scrabbling on his hands, Pitch used the paddle to keep his ass in place, and Jack shouted some protest that he couldn’t even hear.

‘Do you think,’ Pitch said, ‘that the next six should just be blows with this? It seems like it would be very expedient.’
Jack was catching his breath, every exhale a sob. He couldn’t handle another blow with that thing, let alone another six. He couldn’t.

He was down to his forearms, his forehead touching the bed. He felt like his whole lower half was on fire. Somehow – he had no idea how – he’d managed to hurt his balls again. Or maybe that was just…pains building on pain. He didn’t know. The time Pitch had gotten him hard from spanking alone seemed like it was a million years in the past. Because Jack couldn’t imagine ever being turned on by this. Not ever.

‘Should I push it back up to seven, because you didn’t answer my question? You have to keep breathing, Jack,’ Pitch said.

Pitch rubbed the paddle over Jack’s ass, and even though it was light, the simple touch hurt enough that Jack tried to get away again.

Pitch didn’t let him.

Six. He couldn’t do six, or…seven? He couldn’t- There was no way. He just-

‘Tell me something about Anton,’ Pitch said.

There was another way.

Jack didn’t even wait. He rubbed the back of his hand over his eyes and wracked his brain at the same time.

‘I like him,’ Jack said, his voice breaking. ‘I know you know that, Sir. But like, I want to do something with him, or want him to do something to me, I dunno. I’m curious because Eva said he was gentler, or you’ve- You’ve both kind of- Even Anton has said that he’s a cuddler. And I want to know what that’s like but I also kind of don’t. I’m scared that I’ll do something with Anton and realise that I just want you. And it’s stupid, because I don’t think people would mind, but I just don’t want to- I mean Anton is kind of up for it with anyone, so if you ever get rid of me, it’d be good to have something in place with Anton, y’know?’

Jack hardly let himself think these things. He had the fragments floating around in his head all the time. That Pitch would get tired of him. That Anton seemed to really like him as a friend at least. That Jack wouldn’t be lonely really if Pitch decided to move on. And Jamie was back in his life now.

‘Like a strategy,’ Pitch said. At some point through Jack’s shaky rambling, he’d heard Pitch’s breathing hitch, but he hadn’t kept track of it. Pitch’s voice was low now. His hand stroked Jack’s calf gently. ‘That brings us down to five. Or is it six?’

Jack cast his mind about, not thinking of numbers. What else had Pitch asked? Bunnymund. He didn’t get why this had ever been difficult, because it was really easy to talk about this, compared to dealing with the pain that Pitch was happy to dole out.

‘I hate him,’ Jack said, his voice wrecked as he sagged further into the bed, his ankles tipping up. To his amazement, Pitch let him. ‘Bunnymund. I hate him, but there’s something… You used to be his best friend. So there was something there, right? He wasn’t like Gavril, who was always awful. He was something. And I think he’s sorry he hurt me. I dunno. I dunno if I’ll ever like him until he’s had his back scarred fucking hundreds of times and then maybe, maybe, I’ll consider it. Maybe, when he’s bleeding and broken for years and years, but then…according to you and the others, he’s already broken? That’s why he became what he is, right?’
‘I want to see how you’re similar. In a way. Like you seeding planets with Darkness, and Bunnymund doing what he did to me. But firstly, Bunnymund’s stuff is personal. And secondly, Gavril had to possess you to make you do those things. You tried to kill yourself, you tried to stop it! Did Bunnymund ever try to stop? No! He’s a coward. I want him to be miserable forever. I want him to suffer more. I want to shove every inch of what he’s done to my back into his mind until he can’t see anything else for the rest of his life. But I can’t…stay away from him. He says he’s sorry. And I want…to see him hurt for what he’s done. It’s bad, isn’t it? I should be better than that. I’m so mad at him.’

‘Four,’ Pitch said quietly. ‘Tell me something about me.’

‘You pushed me away,’ Jack said, and then placed a hand over his face. Absently, he yanked off the blindfold, needing that candlelight by the bed. He stared at the curves in the blankets. He’d ruined how neat the bed had been, constantly clawing and grasping at it. ‘Before the Asylum mission. Maybe I needed you to tell me it was going to be okay, not as like, the Royal Admiral, but like…whatever you think you are with me outside of that. But then I realised I’m meant to be a soldier and you can’t just treat me like- Like how am I supposed to know when it’s okay to show you what I’m thinking or feeling? I hate doing it anyway, so I just…shouldn’t do it. Cuz then it’s easier.’

‘Easier,’ Pitch said.

‘Kind of.’

‘Can you tell me three more things?’

‘Uh huh,’ Jack said.

‘Good, Jack. I’m so proud of you.’

Jack felt Pitch picking at the rope between his ankles and his balls. Soon, they were loose trailing ends, and Jack slumped into the bed, even as he had to keep his ass up, his legs spread, so that Pitch could undo the rope between them. It hurt. Blood was flushing into his testicles and it hurt. He moaned weakly. He hadn’t thought it would hurt so much.

‘Can’t say lumen about this part, can I?’ Jack said. ‘Because it’s gonna hurt anyway.’

‘I can stop for a moment,’ Pitch said, his fingers stopping where they were unwinding the rope. ‘We’ll take a break, and then I’ll do it more slowly. Okay? Three more things, Jack.’

‘I don’t fit in here,’ Jack whispered. ‘You and your family. You’re all…something I’m not ever gonna be. And I feel like everyone knows I’m the odd one out. I mean everyone does. Anton tries really hard to include me. Eva tries to tell me I belong. You…try and help in your own way. Seraphina tries to teach me things to make me more like you guys. But I’m always gonna be Jackson Overland from the Overland creche, and one day you’re going to really see that for what it is. Like, what if you’re all just waiting for me to be a better version of myself that I can never be? I’m just what I am now, okay? Somewhere between being a peasant and an Overland, and some…soldier who’s barely trained, and like, whatever that thing is with the ice and the snow. When all of this is over- However it’s over, what’re you gonna see when you don’t need the soldier side of me? When you don’t need my ice anymore?’

Pitch kept methodically working at the rope around Jack’s ankles, drawing it free. It was somehow much easier to talk about this with Pitch not stopping him or interrupting him. He just moved the rope to the side and massaged his thumbs and fingers gently into Jack’s joints. Jack sighed. That
was way nicer than the pain blazing through his ass, his balls, most of the lower half of his body.

‘I mean you say you love me,’ Jack continued, wincing when Pitch returned to the rope around the top of his balls. His fingers were far gentler this time, and they hadn’t been rough before. Everything Pitch did was slow, gauging Jack’s reaction, so Jack rode out the pain and focused on talking instead. Was he down to two now? Was it nearly over? ‘And I kind of believe you feel that now, but like, what about the future? Jamie loved me and he still left because he couldn’t stay in the military. It makes sense. What about when you have more options?’

‘You don’t trust me at all,’ Pitch said wonderingly.

‘Yeah?’ Jack said, laughing weakly. ‘Then what am I doing here, Sir?’

‘What are you doing here, Jack?’

‘I’ve hardly ever trusted anyone, Sir,’ Jack said, sagging down into the bed, knees bent beneath him. ‘I don’t even know what it means, really. I’m still kinda learning. But if I didn’t trust you at all, I wouldn’t be here dealing with this and hurting for you. I wouldn’t think you were worth all my stupid fears in the first place, right? If I really didn’t trust you, I’d just accept all the scared and paranoid things I think about you and this, and walk away. I’d get myself out before you really hurt me. But there’s something about you, and I just…keep coming back. And I think some of that’s what other people call trust.’

Pitch said nothing for a long time. The rope had been drawn away from his balls, and Pitch encouraged Jack down onto his side. He stroked Jack’s flank slowly, rhythmically.

‘I think that sounds a lot like trust too,’ Pitch said. ‘What do you need from me, Jack?’

‘Who knows?’ Jack said laughing off the question.

‘I think you do. By the way, in case you hadn’t already gathered, the scene is over.’

‘Oh. Oh, I forgot to say Sir a lot,’ Jack said, closing his eyes. ‘Glad it’s over so that we don’t have to do like two hundred more shitty things.’

‘But you have to tell me something you need from me. Try, Jack.’

Jack didn’t want to try. But after everything else he’d just talked about…it didn’t seem like the hardest thing ever, either. He rolled into his back – choked a little at the pain in his ass – his knees bent, he looked at Pitch. His face was still in shadow, but Jack found it easier to make out now. His eyes that false pyrite gold, his face serious and composed.

What did Jack need from him?

‘I don’t think you should be allowed to treat me like I’m a soldier, when we’re in these rooms,’ Jack said. ‘I don’t mind saying Sir for you, and being…like, obedient or whatever, when we’re doing this. But the rest of the time, you shouldn’t get to just pull that on me whenever you don’t want to answer something. It’s hard for me to like, live here with you and figure out what we are. I feel shitty when I think I’m meant to be a soldier here too. I’m not very good at that either.’

Pitch moved closer to Jack, close enough that Jack could see the way his eyebrows lifted, then drew together. Close enough that Jack could see the understanding on his face. He understood.

‘All right,’ Pitch said. ‘That was unfair of me. I’m sorry. I do retreat to that because it’s safer for me. I’m not good at seeing you struggling with something and sometimes I try and pull the soldier
in you to the surface, but you’re right. I shouldn’t do it in our living space. There are other ways. I’ll do better in the future.’

‘You will?’ Jack said.

‘Yes,’ Pitch said.

‘But you don’t have to.’

‘I know that,’ Pitch said. ‘But I want to.’

‘What about you? Do you need stuff? From me?’

‘I need you to talk to me,’ Pitch said.

‘I’m terrible at that,’ Jack said.

‘I know,’ Pitch laughed, then pressed his forehead against Jack’s chest. ‘I know,’ he said against Jack’s chest. He lifted up again, his eyes sparkling. ‘Look at what it took to get you to talk to me.’

‘Yeah, this was not fun,’ Jack said. ‘I thought I’d like…get to come at some point. Or at least that you would.’

‘Oh no, it was never going to be like that. We can do that later. Jack. You need to think about how hard I need to work to get you to talk to me. I can’t do this every time it’s important for you to communicate something to me. We need something in the middle. Otherwise you’re going to be living in this room.’

Jack squirmed and then made a grumbling noise at the pain that flared. Lying on his back had been a terrible idea. He turned again so that he was lying on his stomach and then made a small, high sound when Pitch casually rested a possessive hand on Jack’s ass.

‘Ow!’ Jack said. ‘Are you going to use your Light now?’

‘Not yet,’ Pitch said. ‘I like the way you bear this for me.’

It wasn’t like Jack hadn’t known that Pitch could be awful, but still. He tried to focus.

‘I don’t like debriefing,’ Jack said thoughtfully. ‘It feels too…weird. I know I’m supposed to do them, but I hate them. But I suppose, I dunno… One of the reasons I didn’t come back to bed early after the Black Asylum, was because I was afraid you would get me to talk about stuff I didn’t want to talk to you about. I was afraid I would just spill everything. So maybe…some kind of rule, where I have to be home at a certain time, and I have to tell you when I’m not gonna be back?’

Pitch hummed thoughtfully, beginning to stroke Jack’s ass. Jack tried wiggling up the bed and Pitch stopped him.

‘That could work,’ Pitch said. ‘I like to sleep at reasonable times, and I suspect with no accountability, it’s very easy for you to just…literally fly away. Maybe you need someone to hold you down sometimes. Stop you from floating off.’

‘Maybe,’ Jack said.

‘Anything else?’

‘Maybe you’ll need to do something like this again,’ Jack said heavily. ‘I mean, I’ve spent my
entire life being trained to not open up to people. At all. They *hated* it in the creche. If you cry about something, you can get punished for it, y’know?’

‘No,’ Pitch said. ‘I didn’t know that. You’re only *children.*’

‘We’re *Overlands,*’ Jack said. ‘I’ve spent my life being…taught in pretty extreme ways to just not open up to people. It’s hard. I *hate* it. I mean you- You know, right? You can see… Because of today, right?’

‘Yes, Jack, I can see.’

‘So just- I didn’t like this? But I like that you can do it. But I don’t want it to happen all the time. I mean you’ve hardly fucked me, so it’d be a shame to take away from that. We should be fucking more, shouldn’t we?’

Pitch laughed. He slid his arms around Jack and lay down on his back, and then lay Jack on his front. Pitch was still fully clothed, the dick, but Jack liked it now and he rubbed his face into Pitch’s coat. He closed his eyes when one hand came and rested in his hair, on his scalp, pressing him close. The other rested on his lower back, pinning him down. Jack could feel Pitch’s breathing. That steady up and down. It was perfect.

‘You could do this more,’ Jack said.

‘You like this?’ Pitch said.

‘Yeah. Hey, why did you do the fear trick on me? What did you see that made you decide to go ahead with this?’

‘I saw that deep down, below so many other things, you were afraid of *not* talking to me. I saw the part of you that needed to talk, and didn’t know how. There’s a part of you that still needs to be pushed into a corner to do what you need to do, to break down all of the other dreck that has been piled on top of you. I’m going to remember that going into the future.’

‘Do you still love me?’ Jack said. ‘Even though I said all the things I said?’

‘I love you more,’ Pitch said. ‘I’m not waiting for the better version of you. I have the best version.’

‘So do we sleep now?’

‘It’s still daytime, *you* sleep now. I’ll pack everything away and keep you company. We can do something more enjoyable when you wake up. If you want to.’

‘I want to,’ Jack said, yawning. He buried his hands into Pitch’s hair, lazily opening and closing his fingers. ‘I want fun things with you.’

‘Do you still love me? After doing that to you?’

‘I love you more,’ Jack said, his words slipping together. All at once, the adrenaline, the constant fear and uneasiness, it had melted into something heavy, thick, drugging. He just wanted to sleep.

‘Oh, you do?’ Pitch said, and Jack could hear the smile in his voice.

‘I always do,’ Jack breathed. ‘That’s why…I wanna be so much better for you.’

Pitch kissed the side of Jack’s face. As Jack slipped off into sleep, the last thing he heard was:
‘That’s why I want to be better for you, too. Let’s learn together, all right?’

Chapter End Notes

Tags for this chapter: fear-play, mind-fucking, discipline, safeword usage, humiliation, punishment, figging, spanking, paddling, bondage, predicament bondage, blindfold.
Jack was sure he’d been having a nightmare. Halfway through, it changed, he was in a golden place full of gentle shadows and he was being kissed carefully, like he was delicate and worth something. Lips brushing against his over and over, dragging across skin and then away. The tip of a warm tongue licking at the corner of his mouth and then withdrawing as Jack’s lips parted on a sigh.

He realised it was Pitch before he even opened his eyes. His arms lifted, he wound them tiredly around Pitch’s neck, daring to touch the hair at the nape, the secret places behind his ears.

Pitch kissed him, slow and relentless, and Jack’s cock was hard and he squirmed back into the mattress. A surprising lack of pain greeted him, he moved his lips away from Pitch’s.

“You healed me?”

The end of the word was muffled as Pitch sought his mouth again. One hand bracing himself above Jack’s body, the other now stroking languidly down Jack’s chest, from his collarbone to down below his ribs. Jack moaned softly, helplessly. The punishment from before had caught Jack’s attention and wrapped it up in fear and apprehension and trust and catharsis. Whatever was happening now wrapped it up in something wholly warm and wanting.

His legs spread automatically. Hadn’t Pitch told him that he couldn’t come before? Could he come now?

“I healed you,” Pitch said. “You were very asleep.”

“Thought you would’ve wanted me to…I dunno, keep the bruises, or something.”

Pitch pressed kisses to the corners of Jack’s eyebrows, to his cheekbones, to the jut of his chin.

“Firstly,” Pitch said, sliding his knee between Jack’s legs and talking like he wasn’t beginning to drive Jack crazy, ‘you need to be functional enough for missions. Secondly, you – oh, you like that.’

Jack covered his face with one of his hands as Pitch moved his knee up firmly enough that Jack felt the fabric of Pitch’s pants roughly pressed against his balls, his cock. It wasn’t exactly comfortable, but that alone made it amazing. Jack wanted to grind down even though he knew that would hurt. He wanted to lock his legs around Pitch’s thigh. He’d spent so long spinning through the painful things his body was capable of during the scene, that he’d become attuned to every sensory thing Pitch was doing now.

“Please,” Jack said, deciding that people who didn’t beg out of stubbornness were idiots, and Jack was going to beg as much as he could. ‘Please?’
Pitch laughed, kissed him again and then lifted up and drew Jack’s hand away from his face by the wrist, pinning it down against the pillow.

‘You don’t hide from me,’ Pitch said firmly. ‘What do you want?’

‘Anything,’ Jack said. ‘I mean, if I get to come, like, whatever. Whatever is good.’

‘Whatever is good,’ Pitch repeated drily.

‘Yeah, if you wanted…someone who could speak all fancy when you fuck them, I’m gonna- It’s gonna be disappointing.’

Jack was definitely squirming down onto Pitch’s knee. And it did ache. When Jack moved down again and Pitch nudged his knee upwards, the sensation was so sharp that he gasped. Pitch kept the pressure up, and Jack pawed absently at Pitch’s shirt with his free hand, and then grabbed the fabric and yanked. Pitch growled quietly in response.

‘What are you doing, Jack?’

‘Look, I can dry hump your knee. That’s- That’ll be enough, I swear,’ Jack said, and then he laughed at himself. But he couldn’t make himself stop, and when Pitch bent down and kissed him – far rougher than before – Jack felt his cock jump from the sudden jerk of arousal, tugging him wherever Pitch wanted him to go.

When Pitch drew back this time, Jack’s lips were wet, messy. Two long fingers slipped in where Pitch’s tongue had been, pressing deeply into Jack’s mouth. Deeply enough that he gagged on the unexpectedness of it, wondering if Pitch’s cock was supposed to follow and why that just made him harder.

‘Suck,’ Pitch said, and Jack nodded as he automatically curled his tongue around those fingers. He couldn’t decide which Pitch he liked more, the tender, gentle one, or this one, taking charge so naturally that Jack didn’t have to think or worry about a damned thing.

Pitch withdrew his fingers when they were well and truly wet, shifting back onto his calves and using his other arm to bodily lift Jack’s hips. The show of strength was impressive, but Jack was more amazed at the way Pitch was lowering his head – where he was lowering it – even as he was shifting the arm not holding Jack up.

A hot mouth breathing over Jack’s cock, and then Pitch’s tongue lapping over it. Jack pushed himself up onto his forearms, wanting to see. Two fingers slipped between his ass cheeks and prodded, finding his entrance immediately. Each push was a stretch, and Jack opened his mouth as though to warn, or remind Pitch that he wasn’t exactly used to this, but he couldn’t think of anything as Pitch took Jack’s cock into his mouth.

The two fingers pushing a little into him, forcing that stretch, had Jack’s shoulders and arms trembling. Pitch twisted his fingers as though checking the slickness of the saliva, and then shoved his fingers forward all the way to the last knuckles.

Jack fell back as though his strings had been cut, the cry pushed out of him. His toes curled, his calves stretched as his feet shifted at the sudden overload. Pitch hummed happily around Jack’s cock and then sucked hard enough that Jack let loose an embarrassingly desperate, hurting noise. The spit didn’t make things as smooth as lubricant did, and Jack was convinced he could feel every minute detail of Pitch’s fingers.

Pitch rasped his tongue against the underside of Jack’s cock roughly and as Jack’s breathing
became shallow, quick, there was a shift and a thrust upwards inside of him. Those fingers not curling upwards gently, but pushing hard enough that Jack’s hips jerked as Pitch’s arm tightened to hold him still.

‘Fuck,’ Jack managed, legs flailing into air as he tried to back away from the intensity of it. Pitch had taken things from tender to overwhelming in less than a minute. Jack couldn’t even tell if he was close to coming, a sharp, knotted sensation building within. ‘Pitch, Pitch! Ah, just-’

Those two fingertips began a rapid pulsing against Jack’s prostate, and Jack was convinced that there was a line connecting those fingers to the tip of his cock in Pitch’s mouth. The nerves of his whole lower body scrambled as he keened, thumping his hands into the bed.

It was too heavy, too sharp, and Pitch worked him like he wanted Jack to come faster than he ever had in his whole life.

In the end, the thing that held Jack back on the precipice was the intensity of it. His body too confused to understand what Pitch was demanding, that pulse against his prostate feeling like it was going to virtually shove the come out of him anyway, his cock so hard that it hurt.

Jack could only stay on that precipice so long.

A sobbing wail, Pitch’s fingers working him through it, his mouth swallowing everything that Jack began to spill. Jack threw one of the pillows off the bed without realising, his hands needing to grasp and yank at something. Then he was pushing up and trying to drag himself backwards, harsh sounds on every exhale.

‘Ah, please, Pitch- I can’t-’

Jack’s breath splintered in his chest, flooded with so much sensation, too sharp to be called pleasure, too confusing to only be pain. Words turned to jumbled syllables in his mind, and he was distantly aware of howling behind gritted teeth before Pitch abruptly stopped.

Jack’s hips were dropped unceremoniously to the bed as he stared blankly upwards and he sucked down breath after breath. Pitch moved around him. A slide of something opening. A thud. Jack was a dead weight. He could feel saliva drying on his cock. His body ached in the way that told him he’d been locked up and tense, unable to feel how much his muscles were straining until only now.

Within two minutes, Pitch was back between Jack’s legs, looming over him now, his face close to Jack’s face. Jack expected kissing, or conversation, but he did not expect Pitch to press his cock up against Jack’s ass – slick with lubricant instead of spit – and push into that looser space. Jack stared at Pitch in shock, saw the look of hungry satisfaction there.

Pitch didn’t stop until he’d pushed all the way in, his hips flush with Jack’s, forcing his thighs apart. Jack’s mouth dropped open, because he’d just – for some reason – assumed they were done.

His prostate ached, his ass was used, Pitch’s cock was undeniable, too deep to be entirely welcome.

‘Be still,’ Pitch said soothingly. ‘Just be still.’

‘You-’

‘Shhh,’ Pitch said, dropping his head down and kissing Jack softly on his open mouth. ‘Be still.’

‘I can’t-’
‘You can, you can,’ Pitch said. ‘You don’t have to move. I’m not going to move. Just be still.’

Pitch framed Jack’s face with his hands and kissed him with a gentleness that belied how quickly and demandingly he’d shoved Jack into orgasm only minutes before. His fingers curled at Jack’s hairline. His lips were soft. Jack was torn between that and the overwhelming sensation of Pitch inside of him, huge and relentless and not moving.

It definitely wasn’t comfortable.

He breathed in sharply, tried to shift, and it didn’t help at all.

‘You’re too sensitive,’ Pitch said, in that way that meant he was doing it all on purpose. ‘It’s hard when you’ve just come, isn’t it? You’re tired. You’re sore. But don’t you want to make me happy? You’re being so good.’

Jack sobbed against Pitch’s mouth, reached up with his previously limp arms and clung onto him. Jack wanted to be good. He wanted Pitch to be happy. And he already knew he didn’t want to use one of the words to stop things. Neither of them. It always helped knowing that Pitch got something out of these moments that Jack couldn’t quite fathom.

But as time moved on, Jack’s body only became more sensitive as he continued to come down from orgasm. Even though Pitch didn’t move, there were still minute shifts, and despite the lubricant, he felt raw and swollen and made small, fractious noises into Pitch’s mouth. Pitch drank all of them up, keeping the kisses languid and slow.

Pitch’s cock inside of him, warming him from the inside out.

‘How are you not moving?’ Jack said weakly, amazed at that level of self-control.

‘Ah,’ Pitch said, withdrawing a lazy inch and shoving back in. No, just no. Jack whimpered, clawed at Pitch’s shoulder. ‘Well. I will. Right now I’m watching the part where you’re doing this for me, being obedient for me, despite your body telling you that it would really rather not. Mind over matter, hm, Jack?’

Pitch caressed Jack’s scalp so tenderly that Jack’s eyes began to sheen. The contrast of sensations, the closeness of it. Pitch was right there staring at him and Jack couldn’t go anywhere.

‘I like this,’ Pitch said. ‘Specifically this. Not always, but sometimes while I am looking over maps, I dream of having you beneath the desk, my cock in your mouth – which would start off cold, but warm up quickly. I’d only let you off to draw breath sometimes, and the rest of the time your job would just be to…give my cock somewhere to rest. Not to make me come. Not to work towards an inevitable conclusion. To just be good, to persevere through the discomfort while your own cock got hard – then soft – then maybe hard again.’

Jack shivered, because he suddenly, desperately wanted to try it. Pitch smirked at whatever he saw on Jack’s face, and kissed the corner of Jack’s eyebrow.

‘You are so perfect,’ Pitch said.

It was hard to concentrate on it, though Jack clung to the words because the discomfort never left.

‘Seriously?’ Jack said.

Pitch’s hips pulsed forwards. There was nowhere left to go, but the grind of his cock in Jack’s body still left Jack gasping, writhing.
‘Yes. I realise I’m known for always joking and never being serious, but right now I’m being quite serious,’ Pitch said.

‘So hate you,’ Jack mumbled. ‘Like a lot right now.’

‘I bet,’ Pitch said. ‘I like that too. I’m going to start fucking you soon.’

‘Not yet,’ Jack said.

‘We have a meeting later today,’ Pitch said, ‘I just want you to make sure you think of me fondly during it.’

‘Yeah, by like, pounding my ass to death. Pitch, you gotta- That’s not…’ Jack laughed breathlessly. It’d been at least twenty minutes and he was starting to get used to Pitch inside of him, that constant background ache. His cock no longer felt sucked raw.

‘I’m not sure what you thought the outcome of us having a relationship would be, but if you think this is not a part of it, you may wish to look elsewhere.’

Jack secretly kind of dug that this was a part of it, but like he’d admit that. Not when Pitch basically lived off feeling smug as it was. And certainly not when he was sore and Pitch was probably feeling on top of the world with all his self-orgasm denial crap.

Pitch kept kissing him, reached between their stomachs and stroked his thumb over Jack’s cock. Jack wasn’t so sensitive that he jerked away, but he still tensed as Pitch kept stroking him. Then fingers curled around him and began loosely, carefully jacking him off.

‘M dying,’ Jack said against Pitch’s mouth.

‘Good,’ Pitch said back, and Jack wanted to say something snarky or mouthy, but it was pretty hard to concentrate between the sharpness of that gentle touch, Pitch inside of him, his clever mouth. When Pitch ducked his head and licked the underside of Jack’s jaw, Jack’s eyes rolled back and he decided that nothing really mattered anyway, and he was just going to give up, because Pitch clearly had everything under control.

‘Can’t get hard again,’ Jack muttered.

‘Beg to differ,’ Pitch said. ‘You’re young. I have faith.’

Jack knew he probably would get hard again. Could feel it in the way the sensations were already shifting. But the idea of being made to come again so soon off the first orgasm – which had been shattering – was exhausting to even contemplate.

‘Gonna sleep now,’ Jack whispered.

‘Good luck.’

Jack didn’t want to laugh, but it hiccupped out of him all the same. Pitch kissed that away too. Jack’s breathing had settled, he was slowly getting hard, Pitch’s grip firming in response.

‘You’re beautiful like this,’ Pitch said.

‘What, like super uncomfortable?’

‘Yes,’ Pitch said, undulating his hips into Jack and licking at the sound that followed. ‘Wary but willing, exhausted but still generous, utterly, utterly debauched. You should see your face. But you
wouldn’t appreciate it like I do.’

‘Sap.’

‘I love you.’

Jack felt his whole body light up in response to that. He turned his head to the side. It wasn’t fair.

‘You’re already killing me,’ Jack said. ‘So you can stop with the whole-’

‘Maybe I don’t say it enough,’ Pitch said. ‘I’ve never been particularly demonstrative.’ His grip tightened more until he was no longer coaxing Jack’s cock to hardness, but forcing it. Jack gasped hoarsely, his hips jerked automatically which only forced a tiny bit more of Pitch’s cock inside of him. ‘So I’ll just keep saying it until you just accept it, instead of constantly talking back like the rebellious little shit that you are.’

Jack grinned in spite of himself.

Pitch chose that moment to start fucking him.

The sensation of it snapped Jack away from their conversation. He had a moment to be aware that he should somehow brace himself before it was too late and he was swept up in the tide of Pitch going after what he wanted.

One of Pitch’s arms crowded beside Jack’s head as he ducked down and kissed him every few thrusts. The other arm held one of Jack’s thighs up and out, so that the burn in his muscles and tendons was constant. Pitch’s eyes were closed, his eyebrows pulled together in concentration or sensation or something else equally intense. Jack watched him, couldn’t help it. For so long Pitch refused to show this side of himself to Jack or – apparently – just about anyone, and Jack loved seeing him come apart.

But Jack could only watch for so long before he began to lose the ability to concentrate. Lust was coiling up inside of him, thicker and scratchier than before, something heavier than the snapping force that had moved through him the first time.

Pitch dropped Jack’s leg, which fell heavily to the bed, and reached between them, grasping Jack’s cock and working the head of it in time to his movements. Jack was gone then. Had thought he was already in that place, but no, apparently there was some further emptiness, some black swirling hole of sensory feedback with Pitch inside of him and his hand on him.

Jack’s release when it came was less sharp, but dragged him deeper, lasted longer. Jack couldn’t think to plead that it was too much, or that he couldn’t handle it, because he was past all of those things. There was just the rhythm of Pitch’s hips, the milking motion of his hand, like he could drag Jack’s come out of him. It lasted for so long that Jack knew he’d never experienced anything like this, and that his encounters with Pitch tended to be a lot like that.

Distantly, he was amazed when that hand left his cock instead of pushing for something that hurt. He’d only vaguely noticed Pitch’s thrusts get harder until he stopped, deep inside of Jack and shaking over him, groaning. Then a mouth on his, wet and messy and not nearly as controlled as it had been. Jack responded automatically, he couldn’t not feel some pang in response to the desperation he felt in those movements.

Then Pitch was withdrawing, his hand rubbing Jack’s come into his belly briefly, possessively, as he pulled away. Jack reached out for him, and Pitch said something about getting a cloth and some water, that he’d be right back, and Jack thought water sounded good actually because Pitch was
worse than some of the military drills he used to have to do.

Which sounded good in his head, so he mumbled that out in disjointed syllables. Pitch only laughed from another room.

When Pitch returned, the cloth was different from the rougher ones Jack was used to when he showered. Pitch’s hands were gentle, laying Jack’s legs out after cleaning away lubricant and come, his palm smoothing over Jack’s thighs.

Jack thought he’d fall asleep, but he became alert beneath that care, as though he didn’t want to miss it. He watched Pitch move confidently. Pitch even had a second cloth to wipe at Jack’s forehead, to soothe his sweaty palms, to dab at his neck. All the places where Jack might feel sticky later.

‘You’re really good at this,’ Jack said, his voice rough. ‘Should I be doing it too?’

‘No,’ Pitch said. ‘You only have to do what you’re doing.’

‘Feels selfish though,’ Jack said.

‘You’re meant to be,’ Pitch said matter-of-factly, looking at him sternly before rubbing the cloth over Jack’s chest. ‘Do you feel guilty?’

Jack wanted to say nothing at all. But it wasn’t that long ago that they were doing an entire thing around how Jack was never open, and Jack was nowhere near in the mood to go through a scene like that again for a while. Besides, it didn’t seem so bad now to just…talk about things.

‘Yeah,’ Jack said. ‘You sort of did everything.’

‘That’s an odd definition of me doing everything. You were the one feeling all the discomfort. You were the one forced to overstimulation more than once. You did just compare it to doing military drills, or…something, you weren’t intelligible at that point. But part of our agreement in this, is that if I put you through all of that, then I will do this too. At the very least. But here’s my selfish secret, Jack. I love this part. I love looking after you.’

Jack swallowed. It was somehow harder to hear than Pitch telling Jack that he loved him.

Pitch put the cloth down and then picked up the glass of water, helping Jack into a sitting position. Jack drank all of it in small sips, feeling something he didn’t really have a name for under Pitch’s watchful gaze. Jack couldn’t even meet his eyes. Not when Pitch took the glass away and set it back on the counter and not when he encouraged Jack to lie down on his side, Pitch lying down beside him and facing him.

Pitch’s arm came around him, stroking up around his shoulders, even now aware of his scars.

Jack finally met his eyes, and thought that even though Pitch’s eyes weren’t as bright or as golden as Anton’s, didn’t have that green in them like Eva’s did, they were still really pretty.

‘I don’t even know what time it is,’ Jack said suddenly. ‘I keep thinking it’s morning.’

Pitch smiled softly at him, the expression so rare that Jack wanted to steal it.

‘It somewhat is,’ Pitch said. ‘You slept a long time, and I wake up very early. It’s about five in the morning. How are you feeling about everything that happened earlier? The punishment?’
‘It was intense,’ Jack said. ‘But I think I kind of needed it. You are such an asshole though.’

‘I know,’ Pitch said. ‘I know. I’m sure there’s nicer ways of getting certain outcomes, but I’ve never been a very nice man. Still, I liked it – appreciated it – you talking to me.’

‘Oh, yeah, me saying all of that? Sure.’

‘Sure,’ Pitch said, looking at Jack steadily. ‘Yes, that’s exactly what I said without the mocking inflection, wasn’t it?’

Jack stared back at him and then looked away. It was the morning after, he was supposed to pretend that everything he’d said, he’d said under some kind of duress and he’d never open up like that again. Except it’d gotten him into trouble, not just of the ‘Pitch disapproves’ kind, but...a lot of other kinds too.

‘I hate talking about my shit,’ Jack said. ‘It’s shit. Talking about it doesn’t change anything. I’m still going to believe all kinds of stupid things. You don’t have the time to like, sit me down and patiently explain things like I’m a two year old all the time. And I’m more stubborn than a two year old.’

‘Having had a two year old before, I disagree,’ Pitch said. ‘Also, you don’t...tell me things so I can convince you of something different all the time. Sometimes it is simply for the telling of the thing. Or so Eva has told me. I don’t find it very convincing myself.’

Jack sighed. No, Pitch wouldn’t find it convincing. He didn’t like to talk about personal matters either. Pitch had said he was trying though and Jack could see how he was. Jack reached out a hand and held Pitch’s, and Pitch squeezed.

‘Anything else on your mind?’ Pitch said.

‘Yeah, like, all the time. But- One thing- I wasn’t going to say anything because...you’ll think it’s a stupid plan.’

‘Oh, will this thrill me as you going to the City of Lune did?’

‘Uh huh,’ Jack said, rolling his eyes. Pitch pressed closer.

‘Tell me then.’

Okay, maybe it was a lot easier to talk about things when Pitch was leaning towards him, when it was warm between them. Or harder? Jack laughed and then groaned softly, rubbing at his hair, which was doing all sorts of ridiculous things.

‘I’m gonna be the one to kill him,’ Jack said. ‘Gavril.’

Pitch stiffened, and Jack heard the way his breathing stuttered.

‘Hear me out,’ Jack said. ‘He can’t be killed with the Light. Mihail’s already given me permission, just about. And, like, it’s not ego, or whatever. The Light won’t do it. He’s always underestimated me. Sharpwood told me you can exploit that, right? I’m going to. He expects a war, and he’s going to take the orb and leave us all and focus on his expansion. Maybe Lune can lick her wounds in the shadow of him destroying other planets, but once he’s gone, we’ll never destroy him, and he’ll come back if we recover and he’d destroy us for real.’

‘North will be delighted.’
‘North can feel whatever the fuck he wants,’ Jack said. Pitch huffed a breath of laughter, then pushed himself up and looked down at him and Jack shrugged.

‘I wanted to really like him,’ Jack said. ‘I did really like him. But I get the feeling that when there’s meetings and I come up, he’s mostly excited at the wonder of whatever he can use my ice for. He didn’t visit me in the hospital. He doesn’t…stay in touch. He’s just focused on the war. Even Toothiana came to visit me. Toothiana.’

‘Perhaps you could talk to him about it. Practice that whole…conversation concept that Eva keeps getting on at me about.’

‘Yeah, okay, about that – did you talk to her before that scene? Because it seems like you and she are kind of on a wavelength or something and…’ Jack saw the expression on his face and groaned. ‘You totally did.’

‘Yes, I did,’ Pitch said. ‘As I said, I didn’t want to rush. It isn’t- It likely isn’t what you’re imagining. I needed to know that I wouldn’t do more damage with what I was planning, she offered some pointers and helpfully told me that if I made a mess of things, she’d murder me. So the conversation went about as well as it always does.’

‘She’s like really great and terrifying.’

‘Yes,’ Pitch said, laughing. ‘That’s it.’

‘What was it like having like…a baby with her? Who topped?’

Pitch stared at him for a long time and then laughed so loudly that Jack felt Pitch’s gusts of breath all over his face. Then Pitch shook his head.

‘So, Gavril, hm?’ Pitch said.

‘No, tell me!’ Jack said.

‘You’re going to be the one to kill the Tsar? I thought you were against treason.’

Jack narrowed his eyes for a while, and then realised that Pitch definitely wasn’t going to be telling him Seraphina conception stories any time soon. He sighed and rubbed his head against the pillow.

‘It has to be me,’ Jack said. ‘I mean not exactly but… It has to be someone. He could never be left alive, right? And I think I can- I don’t want to kill someone but I’ve already- Even at the City of Lune, destroying those ships, I probably…’

‘You definitely killed people,’ Pitch said firmly. Jack flinched. He’d not really…given it much thought. He reluctantly met Pitch’s eyes, saw that steady, firm gaze. ‘You did.’

‘Rub it in,’ Jack said uneasily.

‘There are many things in the world that you can run from, Jack, but the cost of war is not one of them.’

Jack swallowed, thinking about Crossholt, of all people.

‘They didn’t let me kill anyone in the Black Asylum,’ Jack said roughly. ‘Not even to put them out of their misery. Anton wouldn’t let me.’

‘I didn’t want him to let you,’ Pitch said, his hand stilling on Jack’s shoulder as though he’d
revealed something he hadn’t intended to. Jack thought it through, didn’t know what to say. Pitch trying to protect him when it was impossible to protect him.

Jack had gone out and destroyed ships because that had been necessary in the moment, and he’d not really thought about people crashing to the ground. Maybe some of those people had doubts about Gavril. Maybe they were just doing what they were doing because they didn’t know anything else. Jack would’ve done the same before people had taken the time to teach him differently, and it had taken Jack a long time to accept the truth. Jack imagined people on the ship falling to the ground. Maybe one was already having a bad day and just needed to catch a break, and another was more annoyed at the smoke from the failing engines in their eyes, and maybe some had kids. Like Seraphina.

‘What are you thinking?’ Pitch said.

‘It all seemed a lot easier when it was just fighting like, the Darkness. Which is weird now. Because the Darkness was the scariest thing ever. It still is, in some ways. I mean it’s why Gavril has to go, right? But I don’t know if I’d have wanted to be a soldier to…learn how to kill people. I dunno if I would have done that for Pippa. Killing the Darkness was- I don’t even know if she’d recognise me now.’

Now he was someone who confidently stated they were going to kill the Tsar of a planet, like that was normal conversation after really great sex. Jack didn’t like the troubled feeling in his heart, and when Pitch drew him close, Jack wiggled even closer.

‘She would,’ Pitch said. ‘I often worry that Seraphina will see through me to the empty shell I often think I am, and instead she sees past the shell to the heart.’

‘She sees the tower your heart is in,’ Jack said. ‘She hates it.’

‘Yes,’ Pitch said, tucking his chin into Jack’s hair. ‘She does. Pippa would see that too, with you. But she’d see you as you truly can be. She’d see the you that can be joyful and playful and mischievous. That never left. She’d see the you that fights for what is right and believes in rescuing others that cannot rescue themselves. She saw you in the mountain and she managed to find enough of herself to give you an immense gift, Jack. And I think she would understand if you used that gift to try and end the terrible curse that Gavril has placed upon Lune.’

Jack closed his eyes and nodded. It was touching, but there was something that stuck in his mind. That Pitch said that Jack wouldn’t end the terrible curse, but that he’d only try.

‘Do you think we can win the war?’ Jack said.

Pitch was silent and pressed his lips to the top of Jack’s head and held him close. Jack wanted Pitch to tell him they’d win, that it would be okay, but in the end he just held onto Pitch and decided Pitch would be someone he’d rescue too.

*  

The meeting was held in a surprisingly small room with a single table in the middle that had a model of the major locations of Lune upon it; Asylums, the City of Lune, major towns and villages, the mountain where Jack had been initiated. Little models rested atop it. Small red squares representing units of Resistance, and golden squares representing the Tsar’s people.

They stood around the table – the Guardians, Jack, and Pitch. Jack watched as North moved units around the table, consulting a sheet of paper with tiny curling shorthand written on it. Jack refused
to make eye contact with Bunnymund, though Jack could tell that Bunnymund was casting furtive
looks in Jack’s direction every now and then. Checking on him? Wondering why he was even at
the meeting?

Even Priest Sanderson – Sandy – was there. Jack had hardly seen him, but apparently he’d flown
into home base on his own clipper to the great happiness of all. Now he spent most of his time
signing rapidly to North, who signed back and sometimes made grumbling noises. When Sandy
saw Jack, he beamed so brightly that Jack felt something lift in his heart. Sandy’s presence
somehow made the whole thing feel more official, even holy. Jack didn’t know if Sandy had been a
Priest before Lune invented the story about the Light and the Darkness, or if he became one, but
there was still something special about him.

‘Here it is, the current state of things,’ North said finally. ‘He is mobilising. Here-’ He pointed to a
large golden block by the City of Lune, ‘-Is the Nightmare Galleon. Pitch, you are being right
about this.’

‘He’s mobilising,’ Pitch said grimly. ‘He’s getting ready to leave Lune.’

Jack honestly didn’t know how Pitch could talk with such a steely focus, given what they’d done
earlier, and the fact that Jack was still aware of everything in a very physical way.

‘The question is, does he want to crush the Resistance first, and should we be preparing for a full-
scale attack, or should we be rushing to stop him from leaving?’ Toothiana said.

‘I believe it’s time to mount a decisive attack,’ Pitch said, a finger and thumb cupping his chin, as
he stared down at the board. Then he looked to Jack before looking back to Toothiana. ‘I know
we’ve been talking about this for some time. But I feel we’re all ready.’

‘You are cooking something up,’ North said. ‘I can tell.’

‘I want to split the focus,’ Pitch said, pointing to the mountain. ‘Sharpwood has said that he can
take the orb back to Grisaille. Jack and I can go with him into the mountain to ensure that nothing
goes awry. In exchange for the immeasurable intel he’s given us, it was his only request – that he
get to take the orb back to Grisaille.’

‘To conquer us?’ Bunnymund said.

‘I don’t think we should let Sharpwood anywhere near that orb,’ Toothiana said. ‘Didn’t you say
that he had a lovely idea to just kill all the Golden Warriors that already existed?’

‘Consider that this was a being who forgot that he needed to pilot a ship in order to get back home
in the first place when he double-crossed his planet,’ Pitch said. ‘I don’t think he can do what he
thinks he can do with that orb. Finally, Gavril needs that orb to expand properly. If it is repatriated
to Grisaille, they may even help us heal other planets.’

‘May,’ Bunnymund said. ‘Well. Actually, that’s not such a daft bloody idea after all. Grisailleans
just aren’t vengeful in the same way that we can be. Have to break a few eggs to make an omelette.
Gav will be expecting something like it though. He’ll be expecting a few things now. He knows we
have Sharpwood, and he’ll have an inkling that Sharpwood wants the orb. Miracle Gav hasn’t gone
for it yet.’

‘I’m not sure Gavril can handle it himself,’ Pitch said speculatively. ‘He never touched it when we
travelled from Grisaille to Lune, and aside from his own ‘initiation’ he hasn’t touched it again
since. I’m not even sure he touched it then. He’ll need all his mages and magicians on hand, I think
we can expect they’ll be close by anyway.’

‘He’ll take them and a small army on that Galleon and leave with the orb,’ Bunnymund said.

‘So we get it first,’ Jack said, looking up and squinting. ‘I can make the Light-snow, and since I made enough for y’know, the Black Asylum and the whole City of Lune without any assistance, I’m pretty sure I can make enough to stop whatever’s in the mountain. If Gavril’s expecting us to make this move, why not just dress up a bunch of other people like me – my costume’s pretty distinctive and Flitmouse is here, and he knows how to make it – and send them out in other directions while we work on this?’

Toothiana blinked at Jack. Then she smiled.

‘Yes,’ she said. ‘I like it.

‘It’s a good idea,’ Pitch said thoughtfully. ‘It is distinctive and we’ve not done it before. We’ve never had cause to do something similar with anyone else, because aside from the Guardians here, everyone wears the uniform. If we send a few Jack Frosts out into the world…Epiphanes, can you make some eggs to give them temporary snow powers?’

‘Sweeten the pot a bit?’ Bunnymund said, ears pricking forward in interest. ‘Yeah, mate. I’d love to. Actually, about that- Jack…’

It seemed everyone in the room tensed, but Jack had expected it. That they’d have to talk. Or at least look at each other.

Jack reluctantly met his eyes.

‘If you’re gonna take on the mountain, there’s a chance that Gavril will intercept, right? I want to- I want to help, if I can.’

‘Yeah?’ Jack said. ‘How?’

So Bunnymund explained his ideas, and Jack unwittingly became the third lead strategist in the meeting along with Pitch and Bunnymund. Toothiana and North offered suggestions, and sometimes Sandy asked astute questions which headed off truly dangerous ideas. It wasn’t until an hour had passed that Jack realised how much he’d been talking, how much they’d been listening to him.

At first that made him feel good, but then it made him feel scared. After all, he wasn’t a strategist, not even a fully trained soldier. Someone like him should just be pointed in a direction and told to make snow and Light. But instead…

Why were they listening to him?

The meeting stretched long. North left to get refreshments and Jack looked at the tiny red and gold blocks on the map and the niggle feeling that had been bothering him resolved into a sinking sensation. All of those blocks were people. They lined them up neatly to be knocked down to win a strategy and they were all people. Jack touched one of them and frowned. A larger block meant more people. The tiny blocks were fire-teams. Then little push pins for individuals. Jack’s push pin was white. Pitch’s black. North’s was pine green, Toothiana’s violet, Bunnymund’s a pale orange, Sandy’s was also gold.

No one else was represented with an individual pin. They were just in a block waiting to be knocked out of the game, or a block that would knock someone else out of the game.
Except it wasn’t a game. It was people’s lives.

‘People are going to die,’ Jack said, feeling like he was stating the obvious.

‘Yes,’ Pitch said. ‘They are. We’re going to minimise that where we can.’

‘What happens to the ones left behind? If we defeat Gavril? What about the people loyal to him? Do we do public executions too?’

‘No,’ Pitch said.

‘Jack,’ Toothiana said, ‘we’ll be repurposing some of the Asylums until we decide exactly how we’re going to deal with those who will never be loyal to anyone other than Gavril and his reign.’

‘We’re putting them in Asylums?’ Jack said.

‘It’s not what you think,’ Toothiana said, wincing. ‘It’s probably not what you can even imagine. There will be no Darkness in there. It will be…a holding space for people. Possibly a place of rehabilitation. Yes, there will also be interrogation, that’s reality. Before Asylums, there were prisons. Most worlds have them. But they’re not like the Asylums that Gavril ran, and they won’t be called Asylums.’

‘Everyone will call them that,’ Jack said, refusing to look up from the small red block he had his finger on. ‘It’s what everyone knows.’

‘But in a hundred years, two hundred years as generations die out and new ones replace them… Language evolves, Jack. Even we didn’t always call them Asylums.’

Jack couldn’t think of what to say. North swung in with a giant platter of drinks resting upon his broad hand, enough for all of them. He set it down on an empty space of map and passed them out one by one. Jack ended up holding a glass of something fizzy and cold. When Jack sipped it, he could taste fruit, and a background hint of something strongly alcoholic. It warmed the back of his throat even though the drink was cold.

It turned out that Sandy also had some kind of fizzy, fruity cocktail, and North had brought hard liquor to everyone else except Bunnymund, who wrinkled his nose at what he was given, and glared at North.

‘Cordial?’

‘It is being good for you.’

‘Except the sugar,’ Toothiana said mildly. ‘That’s going to do shocking things to your teeth.’

‘So…we have a plan,’ Jack said, taking his finger off the little red block when he realised he’d covered it in frost.

‘It is seeming like we do,’ North said.

‘So that’s it? We can leave you Guardians to it? Pitch and I can go?’

Toothiana looked up at that, frowning. Sandy’s face fell. North looked at Jack for a long time and then sighed.

‘You are both being here, aren’t you? This is a Guardians meeting.’
‘Except how I’m not one and Pitch isn’t either.’

‘This is being Guardians meeting,’ North said stubbornly.

‘Except…’ Jack was ready to fight on behalf of Pitch, a weird irritation building inside of him until he saw the earnest, hard look that North was giving him. Jack looked at Pitch in confusion, but Pitch was staring at North, his drink forgotten in his hand.

‘I beg your pardon?’ Pitch said with a careful lightness.

‘It is stupid, hanging onto these grievances from such a long time ago,’ North said, sounding disgusted with himself. ‘We were all hurt, but some of us did things we regret.’ He looked sidelong at Bunnymund as he said this. ‘And some of us were not thinking about looking deeper into matters. We turned a blinding eye.’

‘A blind eye,’ Bunnymund said absently.

‘I know what I am saying,’ North said, and then sighed. ‘So you are both Guardians. And that is that.’

‘Maybe I don’t want to be one,’ Pitch said silkily. ‘Maybe that’s not the privilege you think it is, bestowing a title upon me. Oh, so I get to be a member of your little club now? Lovely. Ow!’

Pitch and Jack looked down at the same time, to see Toothiana withdrawing her foot where she’d obviously kicked Pitch in the shin.

‘Don’t be graceless,’ Toothiana said. ‘You’ve been a member of our little club since you’ve arrived. Pretend you haven’t been. Pretend you haven’t been at all the important meetings, guiding us with intel that we have always needed from you and have been handicapped without. Pretend you haven’t been a part of this little club, as though you’re the only underdog to have ever existed. Please. You still have your family, Pitch. But Epiphanes and I lost ours, in part due to what Gavril made you do to our planets. You’re not the only one who goes away to dark corners to both hate Lune and everything she is, and fight for her so fiercely your heart breaks.’

Pitch stared at her, and Jack opened his mouth, automatically wanting to defend Pitch. But nothing came to mind. Instead, of all people, North spoke.

‘Toothiana, that is being harsh, and you-’

‘Is it?’ Toothiana said, holding up a hand and cutting him off. ‘I want to hear what Kozmotis has to say.’

‘I think it’s convenient,’ Pitch said slowly, less silkily than before, ‘to want an attack dog when you need to attack, and discard it when you’re done. It’s only bred for one thing, isn’t it?’

Toothiana folded her arms and instead of quickly rebutting as Jack thought she might – she looked down and shook her head.

‘Yeah,’ Bunnymund said, though he didn’t sound like he was agreeing at all. ‘I’ve said some right stupid things.’

‘You can say what you’ve done,’ Pitch said crisply, ‘but you’ve never actually apologised for it. Stating aloud that you can be a complete buffoon is not an apology.’

Jack wanted to be elsewhere. This was super private, and they were all standing here watching it
Toothiana looked deeply uncomfortable. North had a fervid, bright gaze that he kept directing between Pitch and Bunnymund. Sandy was scratching slowly at his chin. Pitch stood straight and proud, but Jack knew that these sorts of conversations could really get to him.

Bunnymund placed his paw-hands on the table, fingers curling. His ears were halfway back. Jack wanted to do something silly, like hold Pitch’s hand, or yank them both out of the room. He didn’t trust Bunnymund at all.

‘I should never have believed Gav when he shit-talked you behind your back,’ Bunnymund said to the table. ‘I should never have ignored you when you tried to reach out to me, or insulted you so that you wouldn’t reach out to me again, even though we had a pact between us. I should never have broken it. I should never have spoken out against you to these fellows, or been a part of convincing them we didn’t need you, or been part of convincing them that they shouldn’t help you. And then I shouldn’t have been so bloody stubborn about it, deliberately misinterpreting everything you did as though you were somehow worse than Gav, because I couldn’t handle seeing anything for what it was. I’m sorry for all of it. Maybe he’d be gone, if I hadn’t done so much wrong by you, and everyone. But even if he wouldn’t be, I still shouldn’t have done it.’

Pitch’s arms were stiff by his sides. After a long moment where Jack almost hoped Pitch would throw all of it back in Bunnymund’s face, Pitch said:

‘You had your reasons.’

Bunnymund looked up in shock, but Pitch only looked down at the map. He picked up his drink and finished it all at once, setting down the tumbler with a thump.

‘Are we done?’ Pitch said.

‘Are you being Guardian?’ North said sharply.

‘I’ll think about it.’

Pitch nodded to them once, gracefully, and then took Jack by the wrist – Jack hastily putting down his glass of fizzy sweetness – and walked them both out of the room without another word. When he closed the door behind him, he kept his other hand on the doorknob. Jack suspected the grip was as tight as the one Pitch had on his wrist.

Jack wanted to ask him if he was okay, but he didn’t want anyone to hear. There was no one in the corridor, but…just in case. There was a brittleness in Pitch’s tension, a fragility to it.

Instead, he reached out with his fingers and touched the back of Pitch’s hand where it curled around Jack’s wrist.

Pitch let go immediately, but it wasn’t what Jack wanted. He caught Pitch’s hand and drew it back, watched as the fingers curled back into place, and then rested his fingers on the back of Pitch’s hand once more and looked up at him. Pitch stared back. Jack thought that maybe he was so closed off, so aloof, so mean sometimes to hide the openness that Jack saw now.

‘I need a drink,’ Pitch said.

Halfway down the corridor, Pitch abruptly spun and pulled Jack close, his grip so tight that Jack made an airless sound. In other circumstances it would have made him laugh. Instead he ignored the way one of Pitch’s hand dug into his back, his scars, and wrapped his arms around Pitch’s waist.
‘I didn’t think that would ever happen,’ Pitch said, his voice shaking.

‘Me either.’

After a long moment, Pitch took a deep breath and straightened. He looked around the corridor, though no one was there, and slowly released Jack until his hands were resting on his upper arms.

‘Do you know what it’s time for now?’ Pitch said. ‘Now that we have a plan?’

‘Uh, a lot of working and training and preparing?’ Jack said. Pitch’s eyes crinkled in amusement and then he took Jack’s hand in his own.

‘We go and remember what we’re fighting for in the first place.’
Pitch’s idea of remembering what was important was to organise a great feast for his family. He spent hours in the kitchen with Eva and one of the cooks, and the smells that came from within were so warm and rich that Jack’s mouth watered. He dressed in his ‘Jack Frost’ uniform, staring at the frost patterns in the mirror, touching them, noticing how the frost would follow his fingers until he had a pattern he was happy with. He made the spirals vanish, and let his fingers guide the frost into starbursts and two birds with wings outstretched on his half-cape.

He never thought he’d still like the uniform after all this time, after what Gavril had wanted it to mean, but he knew that Flitmouse’s hand created the garments. Flitmouse had always been a rebel and Toothiana’s agent, and so it was easy to embrace the uniform.

Mihail threw open the bedroom door and ran in, staring ahead in Jack’s direction without meeting his eyes. Then he ran out just as Jack began to say hello, and the door closed with a slam. A few seconds later, Seraphina poked her head in and grinned at him.

‘Just checking you’re here!’ she said.

‘I’m here,’ Jack said, smiling at her. ‘Good afternoon, mistress Seraphina.’

‘You can call me just Seraphina, or even Sera, but I don’t like Sera, and I don’t think you’d do things I wouldn’t like, would you?’

‘Not at all, Seraphina,’ Jack said, stepping away from the mirror above Pitch’s giant chest of drawers. She walked into the room and approached with a bouquet of vibrant coloured flowers in her hand. How she managed to make them grow despite the snow and cold, made him wonder if she had a kind of magic with natural things. Maybe she was just that gifted when it came to understanding what plants needed. Or maybe other planets had these vibrant flowers even when it snowed and Pitch brought them back to her, and she tended them lovingly.

‘Bend down,’ she said. ‘Like a Knight.’

So Jack obediently knelt down to one knee, his shoulders straight, and stared at her. Like this, he could look upwards and she stared down at him, her black hair braided with green flowers, her green dress embroidered with silvery green flowers. She looked like a princess. Jack remembered then that she was meant to become a Queen one day, if everything went the way Agness, Eva and Toothiana wanted it to.

‘So are you a princess?’ Jack said.

‘Always,’ she said. ‘And you are Knight Frost-Overland, from faraway lands that people don’t understand very well. But you are special, and a Guardian of all of us. So you need flowers in your hair.’

She looked over the bouquet critically, and then plucked out two bright blue flowers, like the sky
in their very brief spring. Both only had five petals, fluted like a trumpet and stained a midnight blue within. She pinched off some of the stem and placed one behind Jack’s ear. She reached into her pocket for a small bobby pin, and then deftly placed the other flower directly into his hair above it.

‘One more,’ she said, looking him over, tilting her head. A deep red-velvet flower, a kind of rose. It had rims of gold, and Seraphina had one of the buds in her hair, the petals not yet spilling open. She twisted off most of the stem and let that fall to the ground.

‘Oh, that’s beautiful,’ Jack said, looking at the flower. ‘Will it suit?’

‘This one doesn’t have to suit,’ she said. Another bobby pin, and to Jack’s surprise, she was threading it through the knot of his cape so that it rested between his collarbones within the pale ribbon. ‘This one is because of how much you love Papa.’

Jack blinked at her, stared down at the rose. He touched his fingertips to it and stopped straight away, in case he frosted it.

‘You love him, don’t you?’ she asked. ‘A lot?’

Jack nodded, unable to think of what to say. He’d not thought…Seraphina had noticed. That was ridiculous, she noticed everything. Not only that, Pitch had intimated that she wanted this outcome in the past.

‘And you love me too?’ she asked, her voice smaller than before.

‘A lot,’ Jack said roughly, looking at her. ‘Very much.’

She placed a regal palm flat on his shoulder, just when he thought she was going to embrace him.

‘Then you, Jack Frost-Overland, are part of this family, whether you like it or not. Because we love you, and I am really bad at letting people go. Papa will tell you. Mama too. And Mihail. Oh and I suppose Anton. But I’ve liked getting to know you. Could we do lessons again? I…’ her fingers curled into his shoulder. ‘I miss them.’

‘I miss them too,’ Jack said. ‘It might have to wait until all of this is over, but then think of how much time we’ll have.’

Her smile was weak. It was the smile of someone who knew it might not ever be over. The smile of someone who knew that Jack or Pitch or all of the others might not survive it. A moment later she looked away and fussed with the bouquet, a tiny sniff betraying the expression that had crossed her face.

‘I want that,’ she said. ‘For us to have a lot of time.’

He reached out and dared to touch her cheek, and then her hair, and she turned her cheek into his palm and smiled at him.

‘Your hand’s so cold,’ she said. ‘It’s not bad though. Just cold.’

‘That’s good,’ he said, laughing.

She reached up and grasped his wrist with the hand not holding the bouquet. ‘I sleep better when you’re around. I have less nightmares. Sometimes I even dream of snow with Light in it falling around me, and nothing can touch me except for family.’
'That’s really cool. Even I don’t have those dreams.’

’Soo don’t…’ Seraphina’s eyes closed, she took a breath through her nose. ‘Don’t die like Fyodor died.’

‘I won’t,’ Jack said.

‘Don’t promise me, but please don’t do it. Our lessons aren’t over and…and I want to keep having good dreams.’

She moved Jack’s hand from her face and kissed his knuckles, and then stepped back from him and smiled, her eyes glittering.

‘I’m going now,’ she said. ‘I have more flowers to bequeath.’

‘Then you’d better go do that, huh?’ he said.

She curtseyed to him, then ran from the room, leaving the door open behind her. More of those cooking smells wafted in – stew with onions and barley, something that smelled of pastry and fruit, the buttery goodness of fresh bread. Had Pitch always done this before a major battle or event? He did seem to be weirdly food focused.

Jack looked at himself in the mirror again once she’d gone. The flowers in his hair were pretty, the one at the base of his neck shockingly red against the ensemble of blue, brown, white and grey.

The flower suited Pitch. Red and gold. Like a small, beautiful stain emerging from Jack’s chest. Being with Pitch felt like that sometimes. Like a wound he couldn’t help but notice, a willingness to bleed for someone else. He touched the rose with his fingers and met his own silvery eyes in the mirror, that ring of gold around them.

His whole life had been a journey to catch up to one of his heroes and now he was here, still catching up. It happened so fast, yet every year since knowing the Royal Admiral existed, he’d been painstakingly dedicated to a path that would bring him here. Pippa had made him want to be a soldier, but the Royal Admiral had made him want to be great, be brave, be the kind of child who would look after his younger sister forever and now, be the kind of adult who could protect the people he cared about.

The door opened again and Pitch looked inside. He had a blue flower pinned to his coat. His eyes went straight to the rose and he smiled.

‘It doesn’t suit you at all.’

‘I know, right?’ Jack said, laughing, charmed in spite of himself.

‘Are you hungry?’

‘Seriously, after how good everything smells? I’m going to eat all the food.’

‘That’s an excellent attitude to have,’ Pitch said. ‘All right, stop taking up all that mirror for yourself, the rest of us are vain too.’

‘I’m not vain,’ Jack said, staring at him. Pitch only rolled his eyes and stood alongside Jack, looking at himself in the mirror, smoothing his coat, and then placing his hands on Jack’s shoulders.
‘Are you nervous?’ Pitch said, and Jack swallowed automatically, because he hadn’t expected anyone to say anything about that. He nodded, met Pitch’s eyes. Of course he was. Nervous about what the dinner meant in terms of it being a send-off. Nervous about a family dinner when he wasn’t used to family.

‘It’s silly, isn’t it?’

‘It’s not that silly,’ Pitch said. ‘I worry people won’t like the food. Eva will…be relaxed, actually, she loves events. Anton is nervous because Flitmouse is coming. Sharpwood has no normal range of emotion so you don’t need to bother with him. Seraphina is worried you won’t have a good time. We’re all – except for Eva and Sharpwood – a bit nervous.’

‘How does Eva do that? Like what is her power?’

‘Wine,’ Pitch said, kissing the side of Jack’s head. ‘Come on. Dinner.’

* *

The dining table was completely laden with food. Some of it Jack recognised, and some of it was new. There was a baked dish of some kind, with pastry shaped into a fish, and another with the pastry shaped into a rabbit, and Jack wanted to grab the pastry and run, it looked so golden and flaky and good. There were vegetables he’d never seen before, that he only knew were vegetables because they were with the broccoli and beans. Little dishes of dips and sauces accompanying the kinds of roast meats that Jack could only dream about in the creches.

‘No military rations today, Jack,’ Eva said, drinking a dark red wine and smiling at him fondly.

‘This looks amazing.’

‘Save the vegetables for last!’ Seraphina said enthusiastically, standing and holding serving forks like a tiny huntress. ‘That way you’ll have no room for them!’

‘I thought you liked plants,’ Jack said teasingly.

‘Growing them,’ Seraphina said. ‘Not eating them. That’s just- eating something you love is bad. Isn’t it, Mama?’

‘Eat your vegetables, Seraphina,’ Eva said, rolling her eyes.

‘But last, yes?’

Eva opened her mouth and then closed it, tilting her head towards Pitch. ‘Darling, can you get this one?’

‘Eat your vegetables, Seraphina,’ Pitch said soberly. Seraphina made a small, desolate sound. ‘At the end. When you don’t have room for them.’

‘Thank you, Papa!’

‘I hope you live to regret this,’ Eva said, glaring at him, but she smiled indulgently at Seraphina as she piled her plate with stew and savoury pastry and potatoes and meat before anyone else could start.

Then everyone served themselves. Anton who gestured for Jack to go before him, and Sharpwood hovered around the table at the end and went away with several roast potatoes and an endive with
stuffing inside of it. He sat on his customary chair and ate in silence, and Jack wondered if he was hoping no one would interrupt him or involve him. He’d become like a strange part of the extended family. He never tried to hurt anyone, he hadn’t tried to betray them, and he was bizarrely tolerant of Seraphina and Mihail.

Jack wondered if Pitch had talked him into staying for dinner, or if Sharpwood had wanted to stay and observe as some kind of social experiment.

Jack used his powers to cool down his food, as much as he wanted to eat it while it was hot and steaming, he couldn’t anymore. But everything was still delicious even when it was lukewarm, and he focused on eating while everyone else bantered around the table. Mihail ate with his fingers and separated his food so it didn’t touch his other foods, and every now and then he’d take a piece of roast potato from Seraphina’s plate and swap it with one of his own.

She thanked him every single time. When she noticed Jack watching, she just shrugged and said: ‘His are better than mine. He’s nice that way.’

‘That’s really cool,’ Jack said.

In response, Mihail reached across the table and took one of Jack’s roast potatoes, and replaced it with one of his own.

‘That’s really cool,’ Jack said, staring at it, grinning. ‘Thanks, man.’

Mihail nodded without looking at him and kept eating.

As the dinner progressed, Jack began to relax. Anton kept looking to the door, and Pitch or Eva would sigh and tell him that they were sure Flitmouse would actually come by at some point, but not during the actual dinner. Pitch would point out the things he’d gotten wrong with some of the dishes, as though trying to pre-emptively beat other people to highlighting the non-existent flaws in his food. Even Eva looked over to Jack several times, checking on him.

They were all worried about things in their own way. Jack wasn’t sure he should take comfort in that, but he did.

*

After dinner, Eva and Pitch cleared the dishes, asking for Seraphina’s and Mihail’s help. When Jack offered to help, they waved him off, and Jack was left sitting at the table, hands on his full belly, while Anton groaned across the table.

‘I ate…so much,’ Anton said, sliding down in his chair until only his head was visible. Jack startled when the tip of a boot touched his own boots, and then laughed.

‘What are you even doing?’

‘Flirting. Only my feet can do it. If I open my mouth I think three servings of dessert are going to fall out.’

‘That’s really attractive,’ Jack said.

‘Help me,’ Anton whined, and then wriggled back up the chair until he could rest his elbow on the tablecloth and rest his chin in his palm. His eyes twinkled as he looked at Jack. ‘Goodness, but you’re very pretty.’
Jack rolled his eyes and Anton winked.

‘Honestly,’ Anton said, ‘it’s a crime we haven’t been able to do more together, to *explore*, but I think it might be best if you waited. Yes? Everything *is* happening all at once, and I think you have more than enough to be dealing with. But…I suppose I’ve never properly asked you if you do actually want to *explore*? With me?’

Sharpwood got up abruptly – Jack had forgotten he was there – and walked out of the dining room.

‘Maybe he’s jealous?’ Anton said, then shrugged. ‘Anyway, what say you, Jack?’

‘I mean…yeah,’ Jack said. ‘Yes. I feel like I’ve basically agreed before this, haven’t I?’

‘Not really,’ Anton said. ‘And I wasn’t certain…what would happen between yourself and Pitch. Whether I was about to lose you as a potential lover, and Pitch as a long-time one as well.’

‘I think Pitch is kind of into it,’ Jack said hesitantly. ‘Honestly.’

‘Mm, that doesn’t surprise me at all,’ Anton said, and then he sighed and smiled to himself. ‘That sounds like it has a lot of potential. I want- It helps to have things to look forward to. That’s how I survive. That and dumb luck and Pitch looking out for me.’

‘Not skill or anything,’ Jack said drily.

‘Never that,’ Anton said, finishing off the rest of his wine.

‘You run fire teams, Pitch thinks the world of you.’

‘What are you looking forward to?’ Anton said, changing the subject.

‘Not dying,’ Jack said. Anton laughed, running a hand through his golden hair. ‘None of you guys dying. Basically no one dying. Except for Gavril.’

‘I’ll drink to that,’ Anton said, pouring himself a new glass and emptying the bottle in the process. Jack raised his own glass of fruit juice and they clinked their glasses together across the table. They sipped at the same time, and Jack felt how the air was gently charged between them. It was warm and sweet, different from the electric chemistry he had with Pitch. Anton had described himself as someone who liked to cuddle in the past and Jack could see it.

‘So you and Flitmouse…’ Jack said. ‘What is that?’

Anton cleared his throat, drank a large mouthful of wine, then leaned back in his chair once more, sighing. He looked up at the ceiling.

‘A lot of hope. A lot of love.’

‘Seems like he’s mean to you sometimes though.’

‘I don’t let him off the hook for that,’ Anton said seriously, still looking up at the ceiling. ‘And it’s all quite complicated.’

Jack nodded. He understood complicated. Jack and Pitch had been hovering squarely in *complicated* for a long time.

‘I ate *so* much,’ Anton whispered, sliding back down in his chair again. ‘Eulogise me, Jack. Make it good. Tell them I died doing what I loved.’
‘What, eating until you explode?’

‘Yes,’ Anton said melodramatically.

Jack laughed as Anton slid off the chair and onto the floor with a thump and a groan.

* 

Later still, they were all in the lounge. Seraphina and Mihail were leaning against each other in an armchair. Pitch and Anton sat on a couch, and Eva occupied another armchair. Sharpwood sat at the back of the room, staring off at nothing in particular. Jack had a couch to himself, half-dozing.

Occasionally lazy conversations went on around him. Jack pointed his staff at the ceiling and drew frost patterns up there until Pitch said:

‘That will melt. Onto your face. Then we shall all laugh and make you clean it up.’

Jack pointed his staff at Pitch instead and made frost bloom into patterns from the hem of his coat and pants, upwards. Pitch tilted his head and watched him as if to say, *Really?*, and Jack smiled innocently.

A knock at the main door, and Jack startled, turning as it opened.

Jack was surprised to see North in the doorway, and from the expression on Pitch’s face, he was surprised too. But then he smiled and stood – groaning about how old he was and how much he’d eaten – and they embraced each other. North thumped Pitch on the back with way too much force, and Pitch only laughed and said something under his breath, North’s laughter booming through the whole room.

‘I am bringing gifts,’ North announced. He walked back to the doorway and brought in a red sack, opening it and pulling out boxes of brightly coloured paper and ribbons. Jack craned his neck, curious. He’d never seen anything like it before.


‘It is being tradition. A very old tradition. The date is normally a bit different, but this is special occasion.’

‘Are there gifts for me? Are they rabbits?’ Seraphina said.

‘No rabbits!’ Pitch and Eva said at the same time, before looking at each other and shaking their heads.

‘Not this time,’ North said, touching his index finger to his nose. Then he sat down in the middle of the room, adjusting the sabres by his sides, and began pulling the red, green and golden wrapped boxes out one by one. He handed multiple to each person there. Anton got three, Eva two, Pitch got four, and Seraphina and Mihail each got three. Even Sharpwood got a present, and he walked forwards and held it in his hands, staring at it in confusion.

‘Here is being two for Flitmouse,’ North said, putting them aside. ‘I hear he is coming by?’

‘If he’s not too gun-shy, sure,’ Anton said, smiling broadly. ‘They discharged him a few days ago, but he’s still an outpatient.’

‘And for Jack, I have these.’ He reached into the sack and drew out two boxes that were wrapped in
green and gold. Jack was kind of relieved that they weren’t somehow snow themed, because he sometimes felt like that’s all anyone ever saw in him.

He watched the others, unwrapping the paper. Tearing it in the case of Eva and Anton, while Pitch, Seraphina and Sharpwood all fastidiously unwrapped theirs, unfolding the paper without ripping it.

Jack saw the spark of excitement and happiness in North’s eyes and decided to watch too, he wanted to see what everyone got.

Anton got what looked like a black scarf of a material finer than any he’d seen. It had golden sigils at the end of it, embroidered carefully. He held it in his hands, smelled it, and then put it on immediately, forgetting about his other presents.

‘You commissioned this from Flitmouse, didn’t you?’ Anton said.

‘It is being silk,’ North said.

Anton rested both of his hands on the ends of it, his eyes had gone very bright, but he said nothing else as he opened the other presents.

Seraphina pulled some books out of one of her boxes, and Jack could see that Pitch was turning a cube that looked like it was made of glass speculatively. But North looked at Jack and then nodded his head towards the back corridor.

‘I am needing to speak with you, for just a minute. Is this okay?’

Jack hesitated, then nodded.

‘Excellent! Bring those with you,’ North said about the presents.

Jack followed, hovering above the floor and turning to look over his shoulder when Eva exclaimed in delight. Instead, he got distracted by Sharpwood holding a thick book of children’s stories in both hands and staring down at it like he didn’t know what to think. Jack thought privately it was a pretty good book for Sharpwood, who seemed far more drawn to the children’s stories than anything else. Jack didn’t think it was because he was simple, but because he maybe found something meaningful there about what Lune used to be.

The folklore hadn’t been tampered with as much as everything else. That was something Seraphina had taught him.

He ended up in one of the guest rooms, North sitting on the bed which creaked beneath his tall, broad might. Jack began to unwrap one of the presents, tracing his fingers along the painted paper. He could see the brushstrokes up close.

‘Did you paint these?’

‘The yeti too,’ North said.

‘They’re not here, are they? Where did they go?’

‘They are going into the cold,’ North said, shrugging. ‘I am hoping they will come back after. There is much to be done, but it is not their battle or their war.’

Jack revealed a box made of thick cardstock, and opened it, drawing out what looked like a carved, wooden pine tree covered in baubles. He turned it curiously, hearing the faint sound of bells from
within. He thought back to the cottage that he, Pitch and Sharpwood had stayed at. He’d seen things like this before.

‘What is it?’ Jack said.

‘It is being Yule tree,’ North said, smiling. ‘From a long time ago. It reminds me of old joys. I am making many, and I want to give them all away, but the Tsar knows what they mean. So I am giving it to you now, instead of when I wanted to, months ago.’

Jack looked up at him, uncertain. He still didn’t know what to make of North. He admired him, but North was frightening in his driven need to see this war through. Everything he did, he did for the Resistance movement. Jack didn’t know if he slept, he hardly saw him eat, and North was there at most of the big meetings and many of the smaller ones. Jack was actually pretty fine with being thought of as a weapon, but he didn’t know if he could trust North’s general mien of good-will and friendship. The mind behind those laughing eyes was as sharp as the sabres he wore.

‘I wish…’ North began, and then closed his eyes and laughed sadly. Even his sad laughs were loud. ‘I am wishing that I could have gotten to know you sooner, Jack. That I can still get to know you. I am seeing glimmers here and there, but in the meantime, I have been so focused on how you could help us that I am not seeing how you might be needing help, or…how I could be your friend. I am not making many new ones you see. I am rusted.’

‘Rusty,’ Jack said automatically. Then he sighed and sat down on the bed beside him, carefully placing the wooden, painted tree down and holding the other wrapped present. ‘You’re all kind of broken by this, huh?’

‘As much as I would like to say ‘no, of course not! Of course this is not being true!’ That is a lie. We all are. I would love to say that it is only being small thing, that we will all make full recovery, but I don’t know if that is being true. I only hope for future generations it is. And I wonder at how much beauty and magic still exists around me and inside me, despite how much is broken.’

Jack sighed. He was coming to learn that they really were all broken. But he got along with some of the rifts and breaks in some better than others.

‘I admire you,’ North said, reaching into his pocket and drawing out a smaller gift that was the size of a small coin. ‘Here, open that one, and then you can open this one.’

‘Okay. So gift giving is like a thing huh? You like doing it?’

‘I love doing it,’ North said, laughing. Jack was tearing the paper on the present, revealing another box that he opened faster than the first, eager to know what was inside it. He drew out the two carved figures and dropped the box absently, turning them in his fingers. It was a boy and a younger girl. Their clothing was creche clothing, and the boy was holding the girl’s hand.

Jack realised what it was with a start, and his fingers clenched around it and he closed his eyes.

‘How, though?’ he whispered. ‘You’ve never met her.’

‘Physical details are always being logged,’ North said. ‘But I went with vague likeness instead of anything too detailed, just to be safe.’

Jack opened his eyes and pressed his index finger to Pippa’s face, then to his own. Their forms were indistinct, and yet there was enough detail that Jack knew who North had carved without being told. He drew the sculpture close to his body and spread his whole palm around the cool wood, turning to smile at North, not knowing what to say.
North shrugged, and handed Jack the disk.

Jack didn’t want to let go of the wooden figures. He placed those down even more carefully than the tree, staring at them for a long time. He’d never had anything like that before. Never. Gifts were a thing for rich people. Or at least, richer people. They weren’t allowed sentimental items in the creche and they weren’t allowed to give gifts. Then, in the Barracks, it was much of the same. Jack had always hoped for a day when he could give Jamie a nameday present, when they were both Golden Warriors.

Jack unwrapped the disk, which was covered in golden paper. The paper must have been very expensive to make. When he revealed it, he was surprised to see a simple locket attached to a thin chain. On one side, the words Jack Frost had been stamped into the metal, and on the other, the words Jackson Overland.

‘We are never forgetting where we’re from,’ North said. ‘Those of us who come from the backwater creches. We never forget. Not when our names change. Not when others think of us as heroes. We never forget that in the beginning, they thought of us as only filth, when we are trying to do nothing more than live our lives like they are.’

Jack opened the locket and stared at the tiny photo of Pitch, the tiny photo of Seraphina.

‘It is being made of the special meteor that repels Darkness,’ North continued. ‘You are not having to wear it, but if you do, it will help keep you safe. It is talisman.’

‘Shit, North,’ Jack said, his voice getting scratchy.

‘I want us to… Ah, no, that is not- I am first wanting to apologise to you,’ North said, placing a thick hand on Jack’s shoulder. ‘But then I am wanting to be your friend and maybe also your family. But that takes time, yes? Please forgive me, but I believe that you are one of those people who can give us that time. Who can give it to all of us! I became so distracted by that potential, that I am being…remiss in seeing you.’

‘Uh huh,’ Jack said, laughing a little. ‘No, it’s fine. Actually it’s totally cool, I get it.’

Because all at once, he did understand it. What would someone like North do, when he could finally see a way out of the mess he’d been stuck in for centuries? Of course he’d get distracted by that, the potential for all those lives saved, all that future left to live.

‘I didn’t get you anything,’ Jack said.

‘You should be riding coattails of saving the whole City of Lune,’ North said, laughing. ‘That will be worth many years of gifts to me. I love that City with my whole heart, the people in it and you did something none of us could do. But also, I am liking gingerbread. Can I hug you? I am giving you a hug.’

Jack laughed as North threw his arms around Jack and drew him close, pressing a kiss into the top of his head. And then North pushed him back and gripped him by the shoulders, shaking him a little.

‘Are you liking your gifts?’

‘I mean they’re all making me cry, so I guess,’ Jack said, rolling his eyes.

‘Wonderful,’ North said. ‘I am liking them too. One day, I am hoping things will be different, and maybe you can teach me how to be less like I am now, and more like I was then.’
‘I dunno,’ Jack said, placing one of his hands on North’s. ‘Who you are now isn’t so bad. Just a bit…sort of super focused on one particular thing.’

‘Ah, I have always been that way. But it would be nice to focus on something else for a change. Maybe even something like this. But can one spend their life making gifts for others? Yes! I am thinking so! All right, I am getting back to the others now. Thank you for listening to me.’

North stood, ruffled Jack’s hair in a way that made his whole body move with the massive gesture, then left the room.

Jack sat there for a moment looking at everything. After a moment, he put the locket on and tucked it behind his clothing, feeling it cold against his cool skin. He took the two wooden sculptures and crossed the corridor into the room he shared with Pitch, and placed them on the drawer on his side of the bed. He looked at the image of himself holding Pippa’s hand, and felt something sharp and tight in his chest. He pressed his fingers there, and bumped against the rose Seraphina had given him, the shape of the locket.

He’d had family back then.

But he had family now, too.

‘Knock, knock,’ a voice from behind him. Jack whirled and saw Flitmouse there, leaning on a walking stick and looking tired, but still much better than he’d looked in the hospital. ‘I’m interrupting aren’t I? Well. I’ll be quick.’

He stepped inside and closed the door. Then he hesitated and looked around. He seemed to realise he was in Pitch’s room and the hand not holding the walking stick came around to grasp the wrist of his other hand.

‘You reconciled then,’ Flitmouse said.

‘I mean, yeah,’ Jack said. ‘We fight a lot, but it works out.’

‘Does he ever hit you?’ Flitmouse said sharply. ‘Does he?’

Jack forgot about the locket, the rose, and stared at Flitmouse in confusion. ‘You mean like spanking and stuff?’

‘Goodness, no,’ Flitmouse said in revulsion. ‘You said you fight a lot. Does he ever hit you? Do you ever hit him?’

‘No,’ Jack said, feeling taken aback. ‘We wouldn’t- I mean there was that one time we basically tried to kill each other, but that was pretty early on and I had no control over my inner darkness at that point. I dunno. What-? Is that…? Why would you ask that?’

‘It’s something a friend would ask,’ Flitmouse said defensively, taking a step back. ‘Isn’t it?’

‘Is it?’

‘Yes!’ Flitmouse said, but he looked to the door. ‘Obviously this was a mistake.’

‘No, honestly, it’s good to see you. Really good to see you out of the hospital. Anton’s been like buzzed all day that you would come by.’

‘Oh, Anton…’ Flitmouse said, and then he exhaled slowly. ‘Yes. He’s very sweet. Too sweet for
me, really. I’m all- I’m a very sharp person, I suppose. He’s very patient with me.’

‘You made him that scarf,’ Jack said. Flitmouse was sharp on the surface, but Jack still vaguely remembered the conversation Anton had with Flitmouse while Jack was recovering from shadow sickness. He remembered Flitmouse constantly leaving his hospital bed – against doctor’s orders – to sit by Jack’s side. He remembered the way Flitmouse stared at him, fever bright, warning him not to put his life in danger again.

Flitmouse was a lot of sharp covering an awful lot of soft. No wonder Anton liked him so much.

‘Well, he looks good in scarves,’ Flitmouse said, looking at Jack suspiciously.

It only took another few seconds for everything to slot together, and Jack felt suddenly queasy.

‘Who hit you?’ Jack said, staring at him.

‘I beg your pardon?’ Flitmouse said, eyes going wide.

But Jack was putting it together on his own. Anton muttering that he’d like to stab Flitmouse’s ex with a pencil – Anton, who had never expressed that kind of viciousness on any other subject in Jack’s memory. That horrid sofa that Flitmouse couldn’t even look at, in his own attic home.

‘Your ex?’ Jack said.

Flitmouse opened his mouth like he was going to argue, he even lifted his walking stick before lowering it quickly back to the floor. Then his head dropped, his shoulders slumped and Jack waited as the silence stretched. Jack hated that he could see it all too clearly. Hated that it all made sense. It hadn’t even occurred to him that those things happened. He and Pitch had been violent once, yes, but their relationship hadn’t started as a relationship. There was a time when they had just been enemies with a very tenuous truce between them.

‘I don’t talk about it,’ Flitmouse said finally. ‘I won’t. With anyone. Certainly not you.’

‘Fine,’ Jack said, raising his hands, hating that he had confirmation. ‘That’s fine. I’m just…I’m sorry.’

‘Don’t,’ Flitmouse snapped. ‘You sound like Anton. I don’t need pity.’

‘It’s not-’ Jack forced his mouth shut. It was very easy to be drawn into arguments with Flitmouse, and he wondered if Flitmouse needed that somehow. Needed to constantly prove how sharp he could be with words. Maybe that was why Anton found it so easy to handle them. ‘You and Anton have a pretty weird relationship, huh?’

‘It’s not a…’ Flitmouse rolled his eyes and then smiled a little. ‘It’s something though. It’s hard for me. I’m not like you all. I don’t want multiple partners. I only want one. And I don’t know if I want that one to be…someone who has almost certainly had better experiences with hundreds more people. Who is still having those experiences. Why would he even come back to-? It makes no sense and I cannot see the trick of it. As I say, he is very patient with me.’ Flitmouse met Jack’s eyes, his gaze turning hard. ‘But I will never let myself be hurt again.’

‘He would never hurt you. Not like that.’

‘I don’t care,’ Flitmouse said. ‘He won’t even have the chance. And now you know. Don’t tell anyone else. It’s incredibly stupid to want to spend any sort of time with Golden Warriors. You all live forever. I won’t. I hope you enjoy me dying in forty years. It will be awful, I assure you.’
Jack blinked at him, and Flitmouse leaned a little harder on the cane and pressed his fist to his chest.

‘This isn’t what I came to say at all,’ Flitmouse said, his face pinching together. ‘Damn it. I am sorry. I actually came to wish you luck and fortune on your mission.’

Jack stared at him for a long moment and then burst out laughing. Flitmouse looked at him, offended, and Jack just shook his head and kept laughing, because Flitmouse really was pretty terrible at being friends. Even worse than Jack.

‘Well, I take it back now!’ Flitmouse said, incensed.

‘No, no, I mean thanks, but geez you could’ve led with that.’

After a moment, Flitmouse actually chuckled, though he looked annoyed at his own response. He walked up to Jack and looked down at him, before reaching out and neatening his cloak, the flower there. He smoothed his hands down Jack’s shirtsleeves.

‘If you don’t die, we’ll make you some new items,’ Flitmouse said speculatively. ‘But you know that you’re probably going die doing this, don’t you?’

‘Yeah,’ Jack said, not even bothering to feel bad about it. He knew. Sometimes it scared him half to death at night when he woke up, jack-knifing upright and hyperventilating with Pitch already there, comforting him. But the rest of the time, it was just the way it was. He’d take a risk, he’d probably die.

Maybe it’d be worth it.

‘Well, don’t,’ Flitmouse said forbiddingly. ‘Just don’t do that. All right? You’re not allowed. I forbid it.’

‘Okay,’ Jack said easily.

‘I mean it,’ Flitmouse said, his gaze softening. ‘Don’t go out there and die. I shall be overwrought. I have not made many friends. And I’ve lost most of them.’

‘Flitmouse, I- Hey, can I call you Alois?’

‘What? No!’ Flitmouse said, eyebrows lifting in apparent horror at someone else calling him by his first name. Then he smiled a little and poked his finger into Jack’s shoulder. ‘If you come back, and don’t die, then maybe. Sometimes. In private.’

‘It’s a nice name,’ Jack said.

‘Perhaps. But I remember it in the mouths of monsters, so I prefer Flitmouse.’ He shrugged. ‘One can have a nice name, but if it’s always being used to hurt you, there’s nothing very nice about it anymore. Anton makes it…nicer.’

Monsters, plural. More than one person. Jack wanted to hug him, but he held back. He had a feeling that Flitmouse wouldn’t like it very much. As Jack tried to think of what to say, exactly, Flitmouse made a tiny, irritated noise in the back of his throat.

Then he stepped forwards and embraced Jack quickly, before stepping back. It was so fast that Jack had only halfway raised his arms when Flitmouse was standing in the same place as before.
‘I never much liked my family,’ Flitmouse said, adjusting his spectacles. ‘They never much liked me. So I didn’t understand the point of it for a very long time.’

‘And now?’ Jack said, when Flitmouse didn’t continue.

‘Now…I think I’m getting closer,’ Flitmouse said. ‘It doesn’t seem terrible.’

‘I can relate,’ Jack said. ‘It’s weird though, right?’

‘So strange!’ Flitmouse said fervently. ‘Also caring about others. Exhausting.’

‘Right?’ Jack said, laughing.

Flitmouse nodded, then pushed his spectacles up his nose again even though they hadn’t moved at all. He looked back towards the doorway and sighed.

‘I escaped them,’ he said. ‘Everyone is being very nice. I hate it.’

‘You want me to come back out there with you and be really mean?’

‘Yes,’ Flitmouse said. ‘Except for the last part.’

‘Done.’

Jack followed Flitmouse out of the room he shared with Pitch, and didn’t quite know how to describe how he felt. He decided he liked Pitch’s ritual of reminding himself what was important in life. He liked this odd family that had grown into existence around him, giving him more reasons to fight, more reasons to live.
Jack and the Mora were in the cabin together, hiding. Well, the Mora wasn’t hiding so much as clattering away – Jack wondered why they’d even brought her, she might have been a famous hydrofoil once, but Pitch hardly seemed to use her now – and Jack wasn’t really doing anything except sitting there in an oversized black coat because apparently that would make him as incognito as the cabin would.

They flew high, Jack looking through the tiny porthole at the sky around them and making snow cover. Jack couldn’t see the mountain that was their goal.

Outside, Pitch was at the wheel and Sharpwood stood behind him. The three of them travelling together and Jack’s heart pounding as he wondered if this would be the moment when Sharpwood would betray them. When they would be set upon by Gavril’s soldiers. When they would be shot from the sky.

That morning, two days after the dinner with Pitch and everyone else, Jack had walked with Pitch to the shipyards. He’d left his locket and the sculpture North had given him back on the chest of drawers because he couldn’t bear to have the locket taken from him when he’d only just been given it.

He’d waited out of the way as Pitch had checked every inch of the small gable that he’d wanted to use. He, North and even Bunnymund together, looking at its rotors, its engine, North checking its magic and making sure it would hold. Bunnymund there with pots of coloured paint that looked innocuous enough, until one realised it was pure magic and shone in a way no paint should shine.

He’d stayed just beyond the huge building where they were looking over the gable, and there he’d seen Jamie and Cupcake make their way towards him, looking worse for the wear.

‘Are you two okay?’ Jack said.

‘So. Fucking. Hungover,’ Cupcake said, shielding her eyes from the rare, mild sunlight.

‘I’m dying,’ Jamie said weakly. ‘She drank me under the table.’

‘Fuck you I didn’t,’ Cupcake said belligerently, scratching at her chest and rubbing her face. ‘I drank everyone under the table.’

‘As long as you don’t puke on me, I’ll be okay,’ Jack said.

‘About that, you have your big mission today, don’t you?’ Jamie said. He smiled, then stepped forwards, looking at the coat Jack was wearing. It was too warm. It was black. It wasn’t even one of Pitch’s so it didn’t smell like him. Jack hoped it wasn’t from someone who had died, but it probably was. ‘Doesn’t suit you.’

‘Finally you tell me black isn’t my colour,’ Jack said.

Cupcake snorted, leaning against the metal of the ship building. A slight, deep echo of the iron shifting. She closed her eyes and tilted her face up to the sun, and Jack thought she looked cool in that moment. She was someone who’d saved his life and she probably didn’t care and didn’t think
it was a big deal. He admired that.

‘You nervous?’ Jamie said.

‘I dunno,’ Jack said. ‘I mean it’s just…a big mission with huge consequences for like, all of us, if it fails? I don’t see why I should be nervous.’

‘Nerves are stupid,’ Cupcake said.

‘You want to do it?’ Jack said. ‘Go on. I’ll give you my coat and my staff and everything.’

‘I’d just spew all over Gavril,’ Cupcake said, eyes flickering open. ‘Though that’d be like, highlight. Something to tell the grandkids. Remember that time, cowardly Jack Frost bailed out of doing what he was supposed to do, and I got to vomit on the Tsar? Good times. Except I’m dead now. Because I vomited on the Tsar.’

‘Ouch,’ Jamie said, laughing. ‘You’re meaner when you’re hungover. I didn’t think that was possible.’

‘Anything’s possible if you just believe,’ Cupcake groaned and then dug her thumbs into her temples and bent over. She breathed like it was the only thing stopping her from vomiting then and there, and Jack stepped back to get his shoes out of range. Jamie did the same thing a moment later.

‘I dunno,’ Jack said, in answer to Jamie’s question. ‘It’s not real. None of it seems real. What, we’ll…do this and…? I’ve only ever been on one mission before now, to the Black Asylum, and that felt super surreal. So what’s this? Honestly, I just…’

Jack felt the fear sneak into him then. Felt it as Jamie watched him with a softer, compassionate gaze, even as he seemed so much more a real soldier than Jack had ever been, which was ridiculous, because Jack was the one who had always applied himself so hard back in the Barracks.

‘You can do this,’ Jamie said. He stepped forwards and grasped his shoulders, then drew him forwards into a hug. ‘You can do this, Jack. Take it from me, okay? You know me, I’m the biggest coward here. An actual deserter. I’m the first one to shoot an idea down if I don’t think it will work. But this? You’ve got this, Jack. Right now there are three soldiers out there pretending to be you, with Bunnymund’s magic to make snow, and fake staffs from North, and they all think it’s possible. We got drunk last night, because we think it’s possible.’

‘You got drunk because you were all saying your goodbyes,’ Jack said, rubbing at the back of his head as he stepped back.

Cupcake finally straightened and leaned against the side of the building again, sighing.

‘You gotta come back,’ she said.

‘That’s the plan,’ Jack said.

‘I mean, you gotta come back so I can actually get to know you as something more than a dork. Jamie says all these nice things about you, and the only stories I have are how you made snow that one time and needed to be dragged out of a mountain.’

‘Good times,’ Jack said. He smiled though, because he liked the idea of coming back to them as well. To spending more time with Jamie and learning about what it was really like to come to these headquarters. To learn when Cupcake had decided to join them, and whether that was always going to be her path. To drink with them, though maybe not too much, since it sounded like Cupcake was
formidable at putting alcohol away. Jack had a sudden vision of Eva and Cupcake across each other drinking glasses of wine and decided it’d be fun to come back to that too.

‘I just want to wish you luck,’ Jamie said. ‘You’re going to crush it. I know you are.’

‘What he said,’ Cupcake said.

‘Aw, you two are the best,’ Jack said, rolling his eyes at her.

Jamie’s eyes were bright, vivid, and he stared at Jack with a mix of pride and care. Jack wanted to quail beneath it, wanted to ease out from the weight of it, but in the end he shared a private smile with Jamie while Cupcake had her eyes closed.

* 

Now, Jack’s hands were oddly still. He didn’t fidget. Frost had crept out from his boots across the floor, but it was the only sign that he was nervous. He couldn’t clearly think about the people who were pretending to be him, putting their lives on the line. He couldn’t think about what would happen if he couldn’t touch the orb, or if Gavril had already taken it, if Gavril intercepted them now, when they didn’t have a huge Nightmare Galleon like he did, a whole city of a ship.

A gentle bump onto a snowy floor, and Jack looked out of the small porthole to see so much snow falling that all he could see of the mountain was some black rock through the snow. They were too close to see its peak, and the snow had been too heavy to reveal it earlier. The ship only flew so well because North and Bunnymund had both further protected the engine against snow. Bunnymund mentioned that if they were thinking this strategically, it was likely Gavril had now protected all of his ship’s engines from potential snow and freezing.

It took less than five minutes to properly dismount and gear up. Jack shrugged off his huge black coat and touched the colourful painted eggs belted to his waist, like grenades. The shells didn’t break while they were on him, but they were fragile otherwise. As soon as he threw one, it would shatter against whatever it touched. Sharpwood wore no weapons, but Jack knew he could make them, Sharpwood had shot him once before.

Pitch was silent, Jack was grim. They’d not said any final goodbyes. They’d not done anything more than embrace each other in the morning. It hadn’t even been Jack’s idea. He’d been brushing his teeth when Pitch burst into the bathroom and made the toothbrush drop onto the counter with how forcefully he’d jerked Jack into his chest.

Jack thought he might have trembled, but then he often did that when Pitch touched him anyway, so it was hard to tell what was a normal amount of nerves to be around Pitch, and what was terror at what was ahead.

There was only one main entrance into the mountain, and it was the entrance with all the dead, frozen and mummified bodies from other children who had tried to learn how to make the Light. Sharpwood seemed to look at every one, Jack tried not to look at any of them. Only a few months ago, they hadn’t looked like children, he hadn’t thought of himself as a child. But now, knowing the lies that they’d been fed, the fact that all of this was unnecessary in the first place, the whole mountain took on a grotesque aspect; living sacrifices for a hungry, demented god.

Jack didn’t know if Gavril could die. Maybe it would be better if he ran away and took the orb with him. There was a part of him that still expected to die of old age in about fifty years and clung to a dream of never having to deal with Gavril’s return.
The rest of him knew that the Light and Darkness had permanently changed him. He would be alive to see Gavril return. He would be alive to see the destruction. And even if he died unnaturally, Pitch and others he cared about...they would be stuck seeing it too.

'No traps,' Pitch said quietly as the light from the cave began to vanish and Pitch called his Light to a bulb of metal hanging at his side. He hung the bauble of filaments from his forearm – sword in his other hand – and the Light clung to it and expanded, and cast an odd golden glow over everything.

There were far more bodies than Jack had realised.

'There are other entrances,' Sharpwood said.

Pitch looked at him sharply. 'You didn’t tell us that.'

'I didn’t,' Sharpwood said.

His voice was oddly muffled despite the stone around them. Jack wondered if the sheer number of bodies in varying stages of frozen decomposition around them dampened their voices.

Jack saw the way Pitch looked at Sharpwood, and knew he was concerned about what else Sharpwood hadn’t told him. But Jack knew that Pitch had never completely trusted Sharpwood, he was prepared to take him down.

Hours behind them was a small flotilla of ships led by Anton, ready to intervene and defend in case Gavril brought his forces to bear. Another flotilla led by North and Bunnymund had moved towards the City of Lune, and another led by Eva and Toothiana towards the Asylums. Only a skeleton crew was left manning the Resistance headquarters.

But right now, it was just the three of them, and the dead.

'Begin making the snow,' Pitch commanded softly, and Jack raised his staff and made it come from nowhere. Pitch infused it with Light, not even needing his sword. He simply held the thurible North had made for him, and the Light reached up to the snow. Jack saw at the edges of the Light, the Living Darkness hurriedly oozing backwards, an unnatural, strange movement.

It was strange being here free of the influence of those initiatory drugs. He’d asked Pitch about it while they’d been planning: Why the drugs? Because they allowed the Darkness into a person without the person fighting it. Why weren’t more people possessed? Because the Darkness in the mountain was altered by its proximity to the orb, it wasn’t as evil. It wasn’t as strong. Jack had been baffled to learn that even now, the orb – corrupted by the Tsar already – still had a mitigating effect on the Darkness itself. Even though it was an orb of Darkness. Even though it had been used to steal entire planets of the lives that lived upon them.

When they came to the huge, spiralling stone stairs leading down into pure darkness, Jack stared.

'I don’t remember any of this,' he whispered.

'You were absolutely out of your mind on a cocktail of drugs designed to have you hallucinate too broadly to remember the specifics of the mountain,' Pitch said, placing his hand over his mouth and whispering to help prevent echoing.

Jack wanted to ask: Did they do that to you? Did you go in knowing exactly where you were going?

'The orb is some time away,' Sharpwood said, his voice somehow not echoing at all. 'But it is not
hard to get to. Many soldiers miss the stairs and fall.’

Jack remembered falling. As they walked down the stairs, the sounds too loud to be muffled, bright golden snow falling around them, Jack wondered how he’d ever survived it. Hadn’t he landed in snow? Had he only imagined it? Maybe it had been dust.

But no, at the bottom of the winding stairs, in the humid dank deep of the mountain, bodies were piled in broken mounds. Jack stared at them, transfixed. Pitch walked on, but even Sharpwood stopped and looked around. His eyebrows pulled together, his black gaze had narrowed.

Eventually Pitch halted and glared at them, and Jack hurried along, Sharpwood following behind them. Jack didn’t like having Sharpwood at his back. He thought if Sharpwood was going to try anything, it would be now, it would be this day. But Pitch had repeatedly said that Sharpwood knew he needed a pilot now, he knew he needed help getting back to Grisaille. Jack could only remember that Sharpwood thought it was reasonable to kill all of the Golden Warriors before leaving, and heard those slow, measured footsteps behind him and shivered.

The mountain wasn’t silent. It talked and groaned in the creaking and shifting of rocks in the bowels of the earth. In the exhalations of gas in chambers far down that sounded like moaning or desolation. But Jack didn’t hear the Darkness speak once. He only ever saw it escaping from the Light. He could feel it around them, clinging and crowding, but it felt weaker than what he’d felt in the Black Asylum. It wasn’t as malicious.

He realised he was waiting to hear Pippa’s voice.

The only thing that spoke was the mountain.

*

Deeper into the mountain the heat got surprisingly cloying. Jack had to cover himself in a rime of ice and it became harder to make the snow, even with Pitch sending his own Light into it so Jack could conserve his energy. The Black Asylum hadn’t been this deep, this dark, this sweated through with heat. It wasn’t like being by a fireplace, but it was still oppressive.

Jack absently counted the eggs with his free hand. He eased one free of the belt and stared at it. This one painted beautifully in blue and yellow and pink. The egg itself looked frivolous and silly, until Jack realised just how much magic was in the paint itself, and not just in the alchemical smoke living within the egg. Bunnymund’s magic, so colourful and sweet compared to the pooka himself.

That morning, as the sun rose in a pink-yellow sky, Bunnymund had taken him aside. Jack had stood there, staring unimpressed, as Bunnymund had explained what the belt was for, what the eggs were for. Jack had asked him for magical assistance in the meeting, and Bunnymund had delivered.

The first thing Bunnymund had done was crack a brightly coloured gold, silver and blue egg. As Jack breathed in the wreath of brightly coloured blue smoke, Bunnymund had explained:

‘To protect you from any of the serums they try and use, especially the truth ones. It only lasts two days.’

The smoke tasted and smelled like berries.

As Bunnymund kept talking, Jack felt weirder and weirder about it.
‘Do you miss whipping people to death?’ Jack said abruptly.

Bunnymund dropped the egg, his ears twiching as he lunged to catch it before it hit the floor. There, halfway to the ground, egg rolling in his palm, Bunnymund turned and looked at Jack in horror.

‘Like, just whipping the absolute crap out of them?’ Jack said. ‘Knowing they’re going to be scarred for the rest of their life? Nerve damage if they survive? Is that fun for you? Pitch enjoys whipping people. Be a waste if you didn’t get something out of it.’

‘Bloody hell,’ Bunnymund said, almost to himself. He carefully eased the red and black and gold egg back into the belt. ‘Springing something like that on a fellow when he’s holding a grenade will backfire on you as well.’

‘You always change the subject,’ Jack said.

‘I’m trying to think of how to compose a bloody reply,’ Bunnymund muttered, edging sideways until Jack realised he’d somehow managed to put the long metal table between himself and Jack. Good. Jack wanted him to feel uneasy. Wanted him to feel on edge. Just a tiny shred of what Jack had been put through.

Pitch and Bunnymund might be talking amicably again, but Jack wasn’t ready. Pitch and Bunnymund weren’t exactly friends, they just…worked together. But Jack wasn’t ready to let any of it go. He was still in the novelty of being able to express anger at all. Once, he’d been convinced it was all his fault. All of it. He knew differently now. Even knowing the reasons for it – that Bunnymund was forced into it, that he hated it, that it was designed to break him – didn’t stop Jack’s soreness from spiking up. Jack wanted to give all of it back to Bunnymund, the person who had given him his messed up back and all that pain in the first place.

‘I never enjoyed it,’ Bunnymund said breathlessly. ‘I don’t miss it. I’ll never feel good about being a Lune sanctioned murderer. I think you know all of that. There’s nothing I can do to make up for what I did to you. But I can try, can’t I? I’m allowed to try?’

‘Stand up against a cross for me,’ Jack said, ‘and bare your back to it, and maybe I’ll think we’re even when you can’t lie on your back for the rest of your life without a part of you being aware that it’s not right and never will be.’

Bunnymund placed his paws on the table. He looked at Jack, looked away, and the fur on his arms stood on end. Finally he just lifted a paw a little and said:

‘If you want me to do that, I’ll do it.’

Jack stood there for a long time, silent. He wanted to call Bunnymund on his bluff, but he felt nauseous too. He wanted to slice every inch of skin from Bunnymund’s back. He wanted to run from the idea and never acknowledge that he’d had it. He needed that every time he saw Bunnymund, he felt ugly, awful things. He felt guilty for being this vengeful. He felt angry that he hadn’t gotten a proper revenge.

‘Well,’ Jack said, ‘it’s a good thing I’m not scum like you are then, isn’t it? Because I wouldn’t do that to you. Even if I think you deserve it.’

Bunnymund’s jaw worked. He looked tired. Jack wanted to know if he was still drinking. If he was still escaping his precious feelings – even though he’d gotten his rebellion and his second Resistance movement and the City of Lune was safer than before – in the bottom of a bottle. Jack
had zero sympathy for him.

But he had a grudging respect for the fact that Bunnymund had stopped making excuses for himself. And in that silence, Jack found himself reluctantly remembering all the reasons why Bunnymund had done what he’d done.

‘Gavril said you understood it better than most,’ Jack said. ‘How to play this game.’

‘He’s right,’ Bunnymund said. ‘In the sense that he thinks I’m like him, how far I’ll stoop to lay a trap or toe the line to get the outcomes I want. There’s a lot of ways to play a game, but he thinks I play it like he does.’

‘Do you?’

‘I haven’t won yet, so I don’t know,’ Bunnymund said softly. ‘Probably not. I used to think there was only one way to do this. Some of the biggest blow ups between me and the others was that we all thought we were doing the right thing, and sometimes those things clashed badly. I’d be ropeable. The others would be too. All about as useful as tits on a bull, I reckon.’

Jack nodded to himself, and he watched as Bunnymund pushed the belt towards him. Jack picked it up. The eggs looked so fragile. It was hard to believe they’d stay intact until necessary. Jack felt like they’d break if he just touched his fingers to them.

‘I want you to win,’ Bunnymund said. ‘I want it so that in the years to come, rebuilding, you can hate me as much as you bloody well want without some monster in power looking down over you and waiting to kill you for daring to think different. I’m not trying to pull the wool over your eyes, I’m not interested in tricking you into liking me, or even thinking I’m a decent person, because while I’ve done good things, I’ve done evil things, and you can’t ask the person who knows the evil things to accept the good too. You just can’t. It’s a crime, and I was wrong to do it.’

‘Like you’ve had such a revelation about your bad behaviour,’ Jack said, milder than he’d intended it.

‘Maybe I have,’ Bunnymund said. ‘But I wouldn’t ask you to trust that, or me, either.’

Jack nodded slowly.

It was somehow easier at least, to not have to deal with the constant bursts of anger he felt around Bunnymund. Since the induction with Sharpwood, weeks ago in the snow, his own inner darkness – whatever it was – had quietened. Jack wondered if it was because he used his snow and his Light so much, if it was because he let himself be angry at Bunnymund without trying to repress it. He wondered if that was just…Sharpwood’s magic. He felt like a sharper version of himself, but increasingly, he felt like he was meant to be sharper. Lune hadn’t carved him into a soft shape.

But now that Bunnymund wasn’t trying to convince him that his anger and outrage was wrong or unfair or unjustified, Jack found it didn’t last as long, it wasn’t as intense.

‘Is it hard to make this kind of magic?’ Jack said abruptly.

‘What? Oh. It…depends on the magic,’ Bunnymund said. ‘I’m a tad rusty, but I’m still an alchemist at heart and it felt a little like being back home. With my family. Making the eggs.’

Jack swallowed. ‘Your family?’

‘Wife. Kids.’ Bunnymund didn’t look at Jack at all then. ‘Gone now. Long gone. Seems stupid to
‘Doesn’t seem that stupid,’ Jack said, wondering how long it had been. It was so much easier to listen to Toothiana about it, than it was Bunnymund. It wasn’t like she hadn’t done anything awful either. She was the one that had manoeuvred secretly, so that the Tsar would decide to put Jack on the cross to die at Bunnymund’s hands. Yet it was so much easier with Toothiana.

Maybe because he didn’t wear any of her actions as scars on his body.

‘They used to paint the eggs with me,’ Bunnymund said fondly. ‘Once the paint’s done, made, it’s magical no matter who paints with it. They’d do all kinds. So creative. Like…little galaxies of alchemy. They would’ve all been better than me, if they’d decided to walk that path. Clever little ratbags.’

Abruptly, Jack tried to imagine what it would’ve been like if Pippa had lived. He’d never… properly thought about it before. It was something he didn’t allow himself to consider. But now as he stood here with Bunnymund, he realised that it probably wouldn’t have been the idyll he’d just assumed it would be. Maybe she would have wanted to become a soldier, and Jack wouldn’t have wanted that for her. Or maybe they would have been separated, and they would have both been fed a serum so that they didn’t miss each other, quietly and emptily running their farms and living for the Tsar’s love.

It made him feel sick.

‘You have to make an alchemy to fix them,’ Jack said abruptly. ‘Or magic. Or whatever it’s called.’

‘Fix who? My kids? I can’t bring anyone back from the-’

‘The ones who take the serums,’ Jack said. ‘The ones who just…live out in the middle of nowhere raising deer and shit, and who can’t bond anymore because they’ve been broken. Can’t you make an alchemy thing to fix them?’

‘Oh that,’ Bunnymund said quietly. ‘That I’ve been working on for decades.’

‘What?’

‘Longer than decades,’ Bunnymund said, his nose twitching. ‘Toothiana and me, we’ve been on that one for a long time. All the serums. Counters for truth serums. Counters for all the serums. It’s hard, because Gavril has his own magicians and chemists too. But hoo right, we’ve been working on that. We won’t forget about them out there, raising their livestock and needing our help. They’re the ones I do this for. And those little tykes, my kids.’

Jack nodded and didn’t know what to say. He realised one of the reasons he was so angry at Bunnymund was that out of all the Guardians, he felt like Bunnymund was someone he could’ve really been friends with once upon a time. Everything about who he used to be, Jack found it easy to admire. The magic, the colours, the alchemy, the fact that he was Pitch’s best friend once, and North’s ally, and that the three of them were this unstoppable, joyful, triumphant force.

Jack wanted to say: ‘I’ll kill him for you, too.’

But he didn’t want to jinx himself, he didn’t want to promise something like that, and he didn’t want to do anything for Bunnymund.

Now, hours and hours later, Pitch, Sharpwood and Jack walked through the mountain and Jack cracked the blue egg painted with yellow flowers and pink stars. A rush of cold surrounded him,
wisping quickly in white smoke. Jack breathed it in and smelled pine and blizzards. The locus of cold inside of him expanded, refreshed, and he realised that Bunnymund’s magic was familiar.

He’d felt it in the orb. Once, a long time ago. There had been swirling colours and magic, and Jack wondered now if it came from Bunnymund’s home planet, when the Darkness had eaten all of those people.

‘Are you all right?’ Pitch said.

‘Just y’know, making sure,’ Jack said, breathing cold mist out of his mouth, frost crystals following. ‘It’s warm down here.’

‘We’re nearly there,’ Pitch said.

‘We are,’ Sharpwood agreed.

The tunnel was narrowing around them. Soon they had to walk sideways, the space too narrow for their hips, their shoulders. Jack made the snow, Pitch made the Light, and around them the Darkness hung and waited for an opening, but didn’t press its advantage the way it had in the Black Asylum.

Jack wondered if Gavril was watching them even now. His skin crawled. It seemed easy so far. Too easy.

Maybe the plan they’d come up with was just that good. The other fake Jack Frost out in the world. Then Jack suddenly realised that maybe it was going so well because they were the ones getting attacked.

He forced his breathing to calm, and – even though he’d not thought it for a long time – a phrase repeated in his mind to help ground him:

*We are the Light, and we do not fail.*

After the cave became so narrow that Jack thought they’d have to turn back, it opened onto a large, central platform. In the middle, on a raised platform, an orb the size of the globe that Pitch had in his strategy room, brightly coloured and glimmering and gleaming like a slick of oil. Jack couldn’t hear any voices coming from it, and it didn’t seem as overwhelming as he remembered, but he wasn’t drugged up anymore, and he supposed it would look different.

They walked closer, across a bridge made of old wood that stretched too long and narrow over an abyss of darkness. Above them, Jack was surprised to see what looked like a speck of light, as though there was a hole in the top of the mountain. He’d not noticed that before. The mountain was louder here too, voids and spaces in which sounds could echo and amplify. Moans rising up from the depths, the cracks and tinkles and booms of rocks falling. The bridge creaked, the wood crumbled in parts but held, and Pitch looked like he did this all the time.

Then, they were twenty metres away, and Jack looked around. Pitch scanned the area, sword out, thurible of Light hanging from his forearm.

‘Do you want to try touching it?’ Pitch said to Jack.

‘Sure,’ Jack said.

An odd crunch on the ground behind them, and by the time Jack started to turn, Sharpwood bolted past them towards the orb.
‘Damn it,’ Pitch hissed. ‘Sharpwood!’

Pitch ran forwards – faster than Jack knew he could – and Jack stared in horror as Sharpwood turned and unleashed a whip of pure blue energy from his hand. It cracked out towards Pitch and lashed around his sword, spinning it away. Another whip from Sharpwood’s other wrist – too long to be anything other than magic – looped around Pitch’s arm and threw him towards the ground.

The impact of running across stone jarred through his legs, but Sharpwood was too fast, like he’d been conserving all his energy for this one moment. Jack didn’t know what Sharpwood would do if he got his hands on that orb while they were still on Lune, but he had a sudden vision of all the Golden Warriors dropping dead all around Lune and his legs burned as he ran.

‘FLY!’ Pitch roared at him.

Shit, shit, I forgot!

Up into the air, no time to even get angry at himself. He sped forwards, gained ground, but it wasn’t enough.

In the corner of his eye, he saw movement that wasn’t Pitch, the orb or Sharpwood. The shape of people. People.

His mind working too fast, his mouth open before the concept was clear:

‘Sharpwood, no! It’s a tr-!’

The tip of a blue-nailed finger touching the orb, an explosion of light and noise. Sharpwood was flung past Jack, past Pitch, into a stone jutting out of the platform. Jack spun in the air to see him crumpling. Pitch was already running towards his still body – having already grabbed his sword – and Jack turned back to see no orb at all.

A decoy.

Did Gavril already have the orb?

Jack saw the people in the distance approaching. Couldn’t pick who they were from only the glow of his snow against the Darkness and the enormity of the cave. But he knew they were Gavril’s soldiers and magicians. Dread at the thought that Gavril might be there too.

He shouted with effort as he threw up a huge ice barrier between them, and then flew to Sharpwood.

Black eyes staring up at nothing, blood trickling from his mouth, a chest heaving unevenly and Pitch kneeling beside Sharpwood staring down in horror. Light was streaming from his hands, but it wasn’t doing anything. Jack knew the Light could solve just about everything, but…sometimes, it was possible to be too late.

‘You idiot,’ Pitch said as the Light faded from his hands. ‘You idiot.’

Jack wondered why Pitch wasn’t angrier, but maybe Pitch had expected something like this all along. Maybe he’d even thought it was worth it.

‘Pitch,’ Jack said. ‘They’re coming. They’re here.’

Sharpwood groaned as he placed his hand on Pitch’s forearm. He didn’t turn to look at him, but
blinks slowly upwards.

‘Take me back…to Grisaille,’ he said, his voice shattered. ‘Promise me. Swear. Let me touch…the soil.’

‘I swear it,’ Pitch said. ‘If we live.’

‘You…’ A pause, a rattling cough, Sharpwood turning his head towards Pitch. ‘You…were the one thing that made this planet truly tolerable. I believe, back…home, if we’d…’ Jack heard the ice cracking in the distance and didn’t know what they were going to do. Should he be flying over there to attack? Jack wanted to drag Pitch away, but Pitch was staring at Sharpwood, one hand gripping his coat the way Sharpwood gripped Pitch’s forearm. ‘If we’d…ever had a word for love, I think you…’

A final shuddering breath, and then Sharpwood went still, his hand limp.

Pitch touched Sharpwood’s neck and then shook his head towards Jack. He looked shocked. Jack could only think that he was the one who was going to try and touch the orb first, and he’d be dead if he had. Jack didn’t think Pitch had ever truly considered Sharpwood could die. He’d been knocked out and unconscious for three days and he’d still lived. He’d still had a pulse.

They had to do something.

‘They’re here,’ Jack said. ‘They have the orb. Do we get back to the ship and chase them? What do we do?’

He knew the flotilla led by Anton was behind them – maybe already waiting outside – but what did they do now?

‘There’s too many for just the two of us,’ Jack said, as the ice in the distance blew apart.

‘Blizzard,’ Pitch said, standing. He threw the thurible down and his sword suddenly blazed with Light from hilt to tip. ‘Now. Can you fly over and see if they have the orb?’

‘Maybe,’ Jack said. ‘I can try. I can use the grenades to muddle things.’

Pitch turned to face Sharpwood, and then turned to Jack and nodded curtly.

‘Don’t do anything stupid,’ Pitch said.

‘You either,’ Jack said.

He spread his arms, gathered as much snow and ice as he could in the heat of the cave and set it forth with hungry, driven winds. The blizzard caused a commotion immediately, shouts and yells in the distance. Jack flew up high, taking some of the red, orange and gold eggs out of his belt. He threw those down where he saw Gavril’s soldiers, and then in the subsequent rumblings of the mountain, flew out of the way of a cascade of rocks that smashed down onto floor and people below.

Jack couldn’t see the orb, couldn’t see Gavril, but he could hardly see anything. Even with the wind obeying him, opening tiny pockets in the snow, it wasn’t enough to pick people out. He was trying to be safe, trying to be good. In the distance he could see Pitch who even now looked tiny and small behind a veneer of snow. He was fighting soldiers with his sword.

Another fall of rocks above and Jack flew sharply sideways. The mountain itself was complaining
loudly now. Louder and louder, like an engine.

An engine.

Magic burst like coloured fireworks out from the snow beneath him, green and dangerous, even as Jack jerked out of the way and looked up to see Gavril on a skiff in the air, two people beside him. The skiff’s engine wasn’t enough to justify that droning noise.

Jack stretched his staff towards Gavril, sending spikes of ice, following them as he flew higher into the air. Gavril was right there, protected by only two people, and Jack was going to kill him. That was his task. Everyone knew it. He knew it.

Gavril smiled as Jack got closer, and Jack heard Pitch scream his name from below.

You’ve gone and done something stupid, Jack.

One of the people by Gavril reached out delicately, like they were extending a gentle hand to a friend. Their palm was up. Their index and middle finger curled. A net of green spikes exploded from their hand and netted him. Jack’s voice strangled in his throat, pain writhed through him wherever the net touched him, and another net – this more like a tentacle – came and wrapped around the staff and ripped it out of his hand.

The fight continued below. Jack heard Pitch shouting something. He tried to ice the net, but the ice only fell through it to the ground.

‘Time to go,’ Gavril said, beautiful as ever, as Jack was unceremoniously reeled into the skiff with a hard thump. The pain made him keen behind his teeth, the magic made it silent. ‘New horizons to conquer, I rather think. Don’t worry, Jack. You won’t be here to see him die. I’m merciful that way.’

Jack tried to raise his hands in the net to shoot ice at him, through him, before a shadow descended towards his head and he knew nothing more.

Chapter End Notes

*ducks projectiles*
It was dizziness first. What woke him was the thundering nausea in his gut, sizzling all the way up the back of his spine and his oesophagus. He turned and vomited violently as the throbbing in his head worsened. Jack opened his eyes to blurrily see what looked like a city of black in front of him. He squinted up at it in confusion, then realised where he was with dread.

The Nightmare Galleon. It was an immense ship. It reverberated with the huge droning that Jack had heard all the way in the mountain. It was larger than the largest of warships. People could live on it. A whole metropolis could survive on it.

Jack weakly raised his wrist to wipe vomit off his chin and realised the magical green net was gone. He was lying on the black wooden planks of the decking. His staff was gone. The belt of magical eggs that Bunnymund had made was gone. He went to push himself upright and was shoved back down to the ground with a boot, realised he was surrounded by mages.

‘Hi guys,’ Jack said, voice rough.

The left side of his face was wet. He was pretty sure whatever they’d done to knock him out had been brutal. Blood still oozed from a temple.

As the nausea receded, fear crawled into him, thick and stifling. Why wasn’t he dead yet?

Why hadn’t Gavril killed him?

And Pitch, left in the mountain, fighting off too many people at once with no back up. Had he contacted Anton? Could Anton even get to him?

Sharpwood had died trying to get back home.

Would Jack die the same way?

He sagged back to the ground, closed his eyes, pretended that he was too woozy to try and escape. He half-expected to feel the Darkness pressing into him, possessing him. Why was Gavril keeping him if not for that? He wished for his staff. Wished Pitch would just appear and deadpan something about having to save Jack’s life yet again.

The heated, droning rumble of the ship buzzed through him and made him feel worse. How could any of them stand it? This black hive? The air up here was cold at least. The breezes and winds meant they were still within the atmosphere of Lune, they hadn’t left. Jack realised he could hear distant explosions and hoped that was…something that didn’t involve shooting down Anton’s ships. He couldn’t feel any reciprocal explosions through the Nightmare Galleon. No one was hitting the ship with weapons, or it was too large to feel them.
Footsteps, and Jack didn’t look up. He didn’t open his eyes. Some deeper instinct told him that if he tried to run now, tried to flee without his staff, they’d kill him without a second thought. He knew it in his bones. Whatever they wanted him for…

Maybe death might be better, but he had to wait and see first.

‘He’s awake,’ said a mage, his voice hollow.

‘Lovely,’ Gavril said, and Jack opened his eyes and stared up from the ground. Was it magic that kept all his curls in place? That let his eyes sparkle so warmly? Jack couldn’t see a hint of the cruel monster he actually was on that face. Even the smile he gave wasn’t cruel, but gentle. ‘Hello, Jack. There was much crudity in our capturing of you, such a shame, but you see, you have given us a very difficult time of things.’

I’m surprised I’m not dead because of it, Jack thought. He said nothing.

The last time he’d been so close to Gavril, he’d accepted the piece of paper that was his death warrant. Sharpwood had taken him to Bunnymund, and…

…Jack hadn’t seen Gavril since.

Gavril kneeled beside Jack and placed a tender hand on his thigh.

‘That is a very nasty wound,’ Gavril said. ‘We’d heal it, but we don’t have many Light-healers on this ship, you understand, of course! But it’s not so bad, you’re still alive, after all. And you’re awake! We didn’t truly want to hurt you. We believe you can be very useful to us. But first, a few things.’

Gavril nodded to someone behind Jack, and then Jack turned to see one of the magicians holding his silvery staff. Jack had thought it’d been tossed overboard or something, and fought the temptation to lash out and grab it.

An arc of something green and toxic as the magician grasped the staff between both hands, and then Jack felt it split in two before he even saw it separated into halves. He choked on the pieces of thread inside of him that snapped in response; some anchor, some connection that allowed him to use his ice properly. He’d had it with him almost constantly ever since the mountain, and he stared as the magician turned and tossed both halves over the side of the Galleon.

A wet crawling over his wrist, Jack looked down to see a tendril of Darkness. He responded automatically, unable to pretend at passivity any longer. Light suffused his skin, his arm, and Jack was grateful it responded to him. He’d used hardly any of it in the mountain, focusing on snow. Now, breathing heavily and feeling the Light surround him, it came easily. It was second nature.

‘You finally learned how!’ Gavril said, clapping once. He beamed, then turned to another one of the people by his side. ‘We’ll need the funnel then. Ah, Jack, you do like things to be difficult, don’t you?’

It happened quickly. Gavril stood up and took several steps backwards, someone knelt behind Jack, sliding their knees beneath his shoulders. Then he was pinned, a metal funnel shoved unceremoniously into his mouth, cutting his lips, his tongue, scraping the back of his throat. His eyes widened, he struggled, but there were too many people surrounding him, Gavril staring down at him.

The first vial was held up and shaken in the corner of his vision, glass filled with golden oil. Truth serum.
Jack’s entire world narrowed to a pinpoint. Time slowed down. His whole body went limp as he stared at the vial.

He knew Bunnymund had given him possible protection from serums. But how many serums? What kinds? It would last two days. Jack was still in that window.

But if he wanted to survive, he’d have to go along and pretend they’d worked.

_They’ve always told you that you’re the worst liar. You’ve gotta prove them wrong. You’ve just gotta fucking do it. Pull it together, Jack._

What were they going to give him? More than one serum. Truth serum, maybe something to make him weak? Passive? What if…? How many serums would there be?

What if they worked?

The first vial of oil tipped down the funnel, Jack felt it trickling down the back of his throat. He coughed automatically, but the funnel was shoved down and Jack cried out as the metal cut into his throat. He swallowed, helpless, felt the oil vanish. He couldn’t even taste it. His throat felt warm though, but that could be his own blood from the sharp edges of the funnel.

The next serum was milky, there was a great deal more of it. Jack decided to struggle, it wasn’t instinctive, but a choice. If they were giving him something to make him obedient, he couldn’t be obedient now. He had to pretend at it later.

If he had a choice then. If he had the choice.

He stared at Gavril’s smiling face as he swallowed the serum, tried coughing it back up, but they poured water down the funnel, making sure he drank all of it.

Gavril’s smile widened. Jack couldn’t look away, seeing half his face, the rest of his vision taken up with the funnel, the vials, fingers too close to his eyes making sure he didn’t move.

Another vial, this one tipped in too fast for Jack to see the colour.

The funnel was withdrawn after more water was poured down his throat to flush it all into his stomach. He lay there, panting hard, trying to decide what he would have been given. Truth serum. Something to make him suggestible. What else?

_The numbing serum._

They had no evidence that Gavril gave the numbing serum to anyone other than adults being separated from their children, or children being separated from their siblings, but… Maybe Jack could pretend he didn’t care about the others, and he could pass that off as a suggestibility serum? Would Gavril want him to care and be trying to escape all the time? Or would he want him passive, receptive?

He’d tried to get Jack to have serums in the past. He’d given one to Pitch and told him to use it, during Pitch’s first induction of Jack. He’d given one to Jack directly by the fireplace, and told him to make a choice.

The others stepped back from him and Jack lay there breathing for a while, hearing the people who mattered to him tell him he was a bad liar, voices circling around his head.

He felt strange.
‘There we are,’ Gavril said, crouching by Jack’s side and placing a hand on his thigh in the exact same place as before. ‘How are you feeling?’

*The truth. Tell the truth.*

‘Bad,’ Jack said, which was easy to admit. ‘Dizzy.’

‘But you know we did that for your own good, don’t you?’

A leading question. Did he lie? Did he pretend that it was a suggestibility serum? Surely—Truth and suggestibility at the very least?

‘I think so,’ Jack said, wondering if that was a normal way to respond. Would he pretend, at first, that the serums were taking a little bit to metabolise? He had to calm down. He had to make this work. If Gavril thought Jack was under his control, then Jack could buy himself some time. He could find the orb. He could kill Gavril.

‘You only think?’ Gavril said sweetly. ‘You don’t know?’

‘I don’t know,’ Jack mumbled. ‘I’m sorry. I’m so confused.’

‘Tch, apologies,’ Gavril said, sighing. But then a broader smile. ‘Of course you are. You’ve been going through such a nightmarish time, haven’t you, my boy? Those evil Guardians, and Bunnymund trying to *kill* you, and that was awful, wasn’t it?’

‘Yes,’ Jack said. Easy to let the anguish of the remembered experience pass over his face.

He was definitely being asked the kind of questions someone would ask if they were checking a suggestibility serum was effective. So he had confirmation of that at least.

‘Get him up,’ Gavril said, stepping back.

People touching him, grasping his forearms, his upper arms, his shoulders. Jack stood shakily, queasily, one arm wrapping around his stomach. He made an effort not to try and look at the mountain, not to look at the ships he could now see in the corner of his eye in the distance. If he was given a numbing serum, he wouldn’t care. What had he learned about the serum? They gave it to people to dissolve their old bonds, so they’d look for something new to bond to. Lune and Gavril.

So Jack looked at Gavril, eyebrows pulled together like he was confused, and didn’t look away.

‘Can you stand?’ Gavril said, his voice almost kind now. ‘Do you want a walking stick to help you keep your balance?’

Jack nodded. This part was horribly easy. He knew he wore his emotions on his face. He was too scared to feel his rage, and he didn’t know if he could keep his balance. Pitch had told him in the past that he could look vulnerable, *weak*. If he wasn’t drugged, presumably he’d be compliant but still rebellious. Now he just had to strip down to that part of him that he didn’t like to let out at all. The part that slipped free during induction. The part of him that was too raw, too honest.

*It’ll keep you alive.*

‘Yes, please,’ Jack said. ‘Can I?’

‘Of course you can,’ Gavril said, gesturing to someone. The walking stick appeared and was
handed to Jack by a stranger that Jack didn’t bother looking at. He took it and leaned on it and slowly the support around him drew away. He stood there for a few seconds, truly not certain if he could hold himself up on his own. But after a minute he realised he was okay and offered a small smile to Gavril.

‘Follow me, Jack,’ Gavril said, turning and walking down the decking.

Jack followed automatically, leaning on the stick and acutely missing his staff. He didn’t look at anything except Gavril’s shoulders, his blond-brown curled hair, though his skin crawled to turn his back to the mages. He half-expected an attack. He feared they all saw straight through him and they would parade him through this before his execution. Surely he would be killed.

Eventually, minutes later – it took so long to cross the Galleon itself – they were at the bow of the ship. In front of them, Jack tried not to see North’s ships manned by Anton and his crew, tried not to see how few of those ships were left in the air, fighting Gavril’s other ships that he’d brought with him.

Jack looked at Gavril instead and pretended he didn’t care.

If he was wrong. If his guess was wrong…

‘Look out there, Jack,’ Gavril said, pointing to the ships. ‘Your friends aren’t going to live.’

It was the toss of a coin. Gavril was calling his bluff, or Gavril was testing whether the numbing serum had worked. If it was the former, Jack could maybe try and push Gavril off the bow, he could try and run. If it was the latter, there was only one correct response.

Jack looked in the direction Gavril pointed and with an empty voice he said: ‘Okay.’

A pause, he sensed Gavril looking at him closely. Jack just stared numbly ahead. Perhaps it should have been harder. Deep down he was horrified they were going to die, but he really did feel kind of detached from everything. It was like the dark hole he’d found during shadow sickness had returned, but instead of being desperate for Pitch to come and hold him, he felt…almost nothing.

He looked at Gavril, scared that maybe the serum was working.

‘Are you feeling all right, Jack?’ Gavril enquired, solicitous, like he wasn’t ending the world, the Resistance, everything that mattered.

The truth serum would make him honest. Jack shook his head.

‘I don’t know what’s…happening.’

‘You’re where you’re supposed to be,’ Gavril said soothingly, warmly. ‘By my side. After all this time, Jack, you’ve fought so hard like an unruly dog, or a chafing teenager, but the truth is you’ve always wanted to be by my side, haven’t you?’

‘Yes,’ Jack said.

Once, that had been true. It was easy to remember how that felt. Jack edged a tiny bit closer to Gavril, even as his skin crawled. Gavril tensed sharply in response, but when Jack did nothing else but look up at him, Jack could feel the way the tension eased.

It was confirmation enough, wasn’t it? A truth serum. A suggestibility serum. And…something to cut off his care for the others.
Jack blinked wide-eyed as Gavril reached out with both of his hands and cupped Jack’s face. His fingers were warm. His face was warm.

*I loved you once.*

“You are one of the strongest things to have *ever* come out of that mountain,” Gavril said. ‘Did you know that? That ice of yours, Jack, have you ever thought of what great things you and I could do together? We’re going to leave Lune and find a wider universe, greater worlds, and that Light-snow of yours, why…it’s going to give other people hope too.’

‘Is it?’ Jack said, staring at him.

His mind raced. Was that the plan? To control Jack with serums? In one more day, all of the serums would be effective and Jack could be reliably brainwashed to Gavril’s side. It wouldn’t even be that hard. Jack had always loved Gavril. He’d cowered like a dog for him, braved torture for him, and there was a part of him that still naively believed he could win Gavril’s favour if he just did the right thing.

And with the serums Jack would do anything for him. He would go with Gavril to secretly seed new planets with Darkness, and he imagined Gavril would sell Jack’s Light-snow as a saviour’s grace. A god and his slave, to bring the whole universe under their sway.

‘Don’t you care that Pitch is down there, dead in the mountain?’

**Dead.**

Jack would have panicked, but he knew his entire life, his existence, rested on his ability to lie in this moment. Jack kept staring at Gavril and after a while he let his forehead furrow slightly.

‘Not really,’ he said. ‘Should it?’

‘I don’t think so,’ Gavril said, thumbsing Jack’s cheek. When he drew his hands away, one of his hands was covered in blood. ‘Do you know, we used that serum on him a long time ago? It wore off, after a while. Centuries went by. It’s amazing, isn’t it, how long something can last? You could almost imagine he never wanted to care about anyone at all, with how long it took for the effects to fade.’

It was the final piece of the puzzle sliding into place. Pitch being given the numbing serum and having his friendships and relationships cut off and destroyed. Living centuries alone, fucking others as his only source of real connection. From what Jack understood, his relationship with Eva, Anton, his having Seraphina as a daughter, they were all relatively recent developments. Before then it was a huge chunk of nothingness, where Pitch went from having strong friendships with all of the Guardians, to being a non-entity.

Gavril’s dog.

Jack wondered if Pitch knew. He’d never mentioned it. Jack wondered if Pitch was alive. He wondered if he’d ever get a chance to tell him.

‘But then he started to care,’ Gavril said, sighing. ‘I could have given him the serum again, but I was bored of him.’

Gavril gestured for Jack to follow him, and Jack turned obediently and followed, still using the walking stick. The dizziness was clearing, but the throbbing continued. His chest felt like it was burning from the serums, or maybe bile, it was hard to tell. His ice was quiescent, Jack was too
scared to try and reach for it. What if he reached for it and it didn’t come? What if Sharpwood’s induction had done nothing for this moment?

As they walked up stairs towards the raised cabin, Jack felt an odd humming under his skin that was different from the drone of the ship. It was like wisps and breezes of energy, or colours underneath his eyelids. It felt like magic, though not the kind that Gavril’s magicians used. It felt fresh and cold, familiar.

‘Jack!’ he heard, a young girl’s voice. A voice he’d never forget. Jack didn’t miss a step. He didn’t change his expression as Gavril opened the door into the cabin space and Jack stepped into it. Gavril didn’t appear to have heard anything at all.

The orb was somewhere nearby.

If Jack could find it, maybe he could toss it from the ship. Maybe the others could find it and hide it away.

At the control deck, Gavril pressed some buttons and the drone became louder, swelled as the engine worked hard. The ship shifted, slowly began to rise above the mountain.

‘I gave you so many opportunities,’ Gavril said, staring out of the wide glass windows.

Jack thought about how Sharpwood said Gavril had always underestimated Jack. Gavril had his back to Jack right now. No one else was in the room. Jack leaned on his stick and tentatively reached for the ice. He didn’t call it to his body, he just wanted to know if he could touch it.

Just as tentatively, his ice reached back.

Jack let go immediately. He only needed to know it was there.

‘You gave me many,’ Jack said, and pretending to be influenced by the truth serum, he followed it up with: ‘You pushed me away too. You didn’t want me.’

Gavril nodded, turned back to Jack after pressing several more buttons at the command deck. Jack wondered if he’d look this perfect in a thousand years’ time, two thousand. If he would always be this perfect man who only looked about twenty five years old. His skin without a single wrinkle, no shadows under his eyes, his irises bright and all-seeing. People could readily believe he was a god, and Gavril would happily accept it as his due.

Jack thought he was so beautiful. He’d always thought that. He half-wanted to throw himself at Gavril’s knees and apologise for everything he’d ever done wrong. Clearly Gavril intended on keeping some people alive as he moved into his new future, and Jack felt a part of him want that more than anything.

‘I failed you,’ Jack said, his voice small. He looked down. ‘I failed you and you pushed me away. I don’t want to apologise, but—’

‘No apologies,’ Gavril said, turning to look at him. ‘It’s all right, Jack. I’m a very forgiving man. I am the most merciful being you will ever meet, to give you another chance. You. I almost didn’t notice in the beginning, how much you need to be led, Jack. Of course, it all became obvious when I realised what exactly you were getting from your perverse arrangement with Kozmotis. I can’t give you such perversion, but a purer form of it? Obey me perfectly and you will be rewarded, Jack. I will let you live.’

Jack nodded, feeling tears come to his eyes. He hoped the numbing serum wouldn’t prevent that.
Wasn’t he meant to bond with Gavril now?

‘So tell me,’ Gavril said, ‘why were you in the mountain?’

The truth now, this part would be easy enough.

‘To get the orb,’ Jack said, ‘so you couldn’t get it.’

‘Oh dear,’ Gavril said, then he laughed. ‘I must admit, you’ve all been a tad smarter this time around. The City of Lune strategy was a nice touch. Even I didn’t see that coming. How did it feel to make that much snow, that much Light?’

‘It was hard,’ Jack said. ‘I burned through all my powers, and I was possessed by the Darkness when I got back to the Resistance Headquarters.’

‘Mm yes, I heard something about that,’ Gavril said. ‘You got shadow sickness, didn’t you? I hear that’s simply awful.’

‘It was,’ Jack said.

‘I can make sure you never have to feel that way again,’ Gavril said, smiling a little. ‘It would be far nicer, wouldn’t it? Instead of living with the uncertainty out there? Never knowing when the Darkness is going to attack? I don’t have control over it to that degree, after all. But if you stay with me, you’ll be so safe. Isn’t that all you’ve ever wanted?’

He wondered if the way he leaned into those words, the way he yearned for them, was just him pretending, or if the serums still influenced him. Even his head had moved forwards.

‘It really is,’ Jack said.

‘And you can make other people safe on many other planets, hundreds of planets. You can give them safe zones that will make them feel protected, looked after. You’ll be my sweet little ambassador – Jack Frost – and I must say, to look at, you’re far more appealing than our dour Kozmo was. Though he was very amenable. For hundreds of years in fact, after the serum, he didn’t care about anyone or anything very much. Except me. Pleasing me. And that’s all anyone really should care about, isn’t it?’

‘Yeah,’ Jack said, pushing neediness into his voice. He was almost embarrassed at how easy that was. Strip down all his bravado, and he’d only ever been this. But this was maybe going to keep him alive long enough to get out of here, to get free.

Having confirmation that Pitch had been given the serum made him think back to Gavril calling him the bird with a broken wing. Gavril had made him that way, then mocked him for it.

Jack leaned against his staff, stared adoringly at Gavril, felt his heart beating harder. Originally he was going to look for the orb and then kill Gavril, but wouldn’t it make more sense to kill Gavril now?

Gavril turned away to look at the control deck, at whatever the lights were doing, and he pressed several buttons in response. Jack touched his ice again, knowing that he’d not have the fine control over it that he normally did without his staff. It didn’t matter. He’d killed Crossholt when he was completely out of his mind. His ice would respond.

Do it now.
Jack wanted to say some last words. He wanted to say something pithy and powerful, instead of remembering that the last thing Gavril ever heard was the word: ‘Yeah.’ But he could sense the orb somewhere close, knew he had to stay focused. He’d made it this far. If he kept up this charade he’d eventually mess up, Gavril would realise the serums hadn’t worked.

_Doit now._

Jack’s chest felt colder.

_Now, Jack._

Jack stepped back into a fighting stance and threw his arms up, letting go of the walking stick. The glass of the cabin around them shattered as ice and wind flew into the room, Jack’s vision turned ice cold and blurry as he threw his arms forward and directed all that chaotic ice at Gavril.

The Tsar of Lune moved far faster than anything had ever indicated he could. He’d only ever been seen in passive roles in the past. Being protected by the Golden Warriors, by Sharpwood, by Pitch, by his own soldiers and mages.

But Gavril powered through the ice – avoiding the worst of it with quick reflexes – he grabbed Jack’s collar with one hand, one foot slipping on the ice on the floor, even as Jack tried to overcome his terror to strike again.

‘Clever,’ Gavril said in Jack’s ear, regaining his footing. ‘Almost clever.’

Gavril dragged him from the cabin and slammed him into the wall. Jack shouted as the throbbing in his head became a boom of pain, then choked when Gavril slapped him with an open palm. The way one might punish a dog or child, but far harsher, far more cruel. Jack cried out as the stinging slaps didn’t stop, one after the other across his cheek, blazing up into his eye, his nose, cutting his lip.

The magicians were there too, waiting, having seen what Jack had done with his ice. He tried to call it back again, but the blows to his face left him insensate, desperation making ice spiral out and skitter across the corridor and walls, crazing up Gavril’s shoes and legs.

‘Nice try,’ Gavril said, as a green net of magic was thrown over Jack in the process. The pain increased and Jack almost collapsed, except Gavril was holding him up by the collar, unaffected by the magic. ‘But you need to bring a better A-game, Jack. What did you think would happen? I’m not a lowly Lieutenant. Still. One could almost be proud of you.’

He was being dragged forcibly down a corridor, down stairs, struggling to keep his feet beneath him. Down and down, into the heavy drone that got louder, into the heat of the bowels of the ship. There, a room filled with heat haze, the boiler room, and Jack gasped, felt airless, he suddenly couldn’t connect with his ice at all. They were going to burn it out of him. This was far hotter than that fireplace had ever been.

_No!_

Jack struggled as hard as he could, against Gavril, against the net, against the magicians that followed loyally, waiting for any orders.

_NO!_ Jack shrieked.

He was flung down, a wrist handcuffed to a searing metal pipe. Jack’s skin touched it and it burned away instantly. He pushed himself as far away from it as possible, even as the green net vanished.
He yanked his arm to escape, but he couldn’t concentrate, his head burning, his vision no longer focusing.

‘You have chosen the wrong side, Jack,’ Gavril said coldly, looking unaffected by the heat, though it seemed like one of his curls was out of place and Jack stared at it, clanging the metal pipes as he pulled his wrist futilely away from it. ‘I wish you had been smarter. I wish you had joined me of your own volition. Instead, you’re going to make us work for it, aren’t you? But don’t worry, I learned a long time ago that I don’t need to work to break you.’

Jack could hardly hear his own breathing, he could hardly hear Gavril. The boiler room was its own furnace of constant noise, the engine nearby incessant and angry, like a hive of mechanical bees. Gavril crouched by Jack’s side, and Jack pushed backwards, then cried out again as his clothing hit the metal of the boiler and began to burn and smoke. He jerked away, but it meant that Gavril was right there, staring at him, his gaze – even now – still warm.

‘We’ll talk again when your ice is gone,’ Gavril said mildly. ‘If it helps, a lot of your friends will be dead by then. And just think, Jack, the magic protecting you right now, it never lasts. We’ll try the serums again soon, hm?’

A little wink, like they were co-conspirators, and Gavril stood, dusting off his hands.

‘Thirty minutes,’ Gavril said to his magicians. ‘It will be long enough. Bring him to me then.’

They all exited the awful, burning place, and Jack screamed, turned so that he could brace his shoes against the boiler and pulled at his wrist, grazing the skin, realising it would break before the handcuff let him go.

He pulled and pulled, feeling the heat leeching his ice from him, far faster than it ever had before.

He yanked at his bruised, chafed wrist, metal clanging against metal, staring numbly ahead, trying to think of what to do.

There had to be a way free.

There had to be a way.
Two chapters to go!

I will not be sticking to a schedule for the next two chapters as I'm currently undergoing radiotherapy. They'll either come soon, or they'll come on a huge delay! There's no telling. You can go to my Tumblr to get updates on that front! :) BUT, I will be writing both chapters at the same time, to put them up relatively close together, as the final chapter is an epilogue. :) So whenever chapter 55 lands, you can expect chapter 56 a few days later. <3

The tears were evaporating from his face before they reached his cheeks. His eyes were burning. He knew this place would’ve been bad for him even when he’d been fully himself, before the ice had warped him into a boy of cold and snow. The smell of metal and smoke and soot in his nose, and blood now, as he bit his tongue and pulled on his wrist as hard as he could.

He had to break it.

It was harder than he thought it would be. He could feel the skin and his bones crunching together in the narrow metal hole of the cuff and always at the last minute his brain shied away from doing that much damage to himself. He breathed hard, each exhale a long sob, each inhale high and strained. Gavril had told them to come back in thirty minutes. Jack didn’t know if he’d even be awake then. This place was bad for him. Every cell in his body trying to get him free, but trying to make sure he was whole when he did it.

‘Come on,’ he rasped at himself. ‘Just fucking come on.’

Come on, come on, come on, come on, just-

He screamed through clenched teeth as a bone in his thumb buckled. He gripped his wrist so hard with his other hand that he was drawing blood. He couldn’t look, he couldn’t look, and it wasn’t enough. He thought he was free, but his hand then caught at the four knuckles of his fingers.

‘Please,’ he cried to the roar of the machine.

Yanking and yanking, and then finally shoving his shoes against the boiler itself and listening to them burn, the scent of scorched rubber filling the room. Several quick, hyperventilated breaths, and he bent his knees and launched himself backwards.

A tearing, a wretched crunching, and Jack keened as pain lanced all the way up his arm, coalescing in his wrist, his elbow. It felt like he’d ripped his whole hand off. But as he opened blurry, tear filled eyes while sitting on a floor covered in dust, metal shavings and soot, he saw his mangled, broken hand useless at the end of his wrist. With his good hand he reached for his cape and wiped his face, the snot from his nose, then looked around, dazed. His head pulsed a beat that only got worse as the pain from his hand moved up through his shoulder, wriggling up his neck and chewing its way through his skull into his brain.
He pushed himself up, staggered over to a pile of metal pipes and picked one up, looking at its glittery, brittle edge. Then he looked to the door with its metal wheel.

Fury felt far away, but something steely clenched inside of him as he tightened his fingers on the metal bar. Sometimes there were things you just had to do. He had to drag his body back through the snow after Pippa had been taken and tell the people who didn’t care about her that she was dead. He had to make his way to the Barracks and become a soldier, even though peasants weren’t meant to do that and Overlands weren’t meant to be anything at all. He had to make it alive through the mountain. He had to see Jamie again.

He had to do this.

Jack leaned the metal bar against the wall and tried the wheel, surprised when it turned.

The door swung outwards and Jack was already armed and launching forwards, shoving the metal bar through the neck of the magician whose eyes were still widening. He ripped the metal bar free, cried out at the blood that followed and gouted over him. The magician went down. Jack looked ahead to see a narrow metal corridor and then stairs and stairs going upwards.


Jack kept his bad arm, his broken hand, up by his chest as he thundered up the stairs, looking up for risks and threats. A wave of dizziness blew him down to his knees, the throbbing in his hand and head working in sync, vision going grey. He closed his eyes and held on, breathing.

‘Jack!’

‘Pippa!’ Jack whispered.

‘Jack-Jack! It’s you! Oh, this is bad, this is bad. Oh, but then maybe…’

‘You’re telling me,’ he said to the grilled metal slats he was resting on. The drone of the ship’s engine felt like it had taken the place of his heart, a constant too-fast beat of something too large to contain. Did he feel happiness to hear from her again? He was trying so hard not to pass out.

‘Jack, if you can hear me, it means your mind is broken wide open like last time. We can’t get through otherwise!’

She didn’t sound like a child anymore, and Jack sobbed out laughter when he realised he’d finally cracked. It had to happen at some point.

‘We?’

‘Jack-Jack, listen to me, you have to find us. You have to get us out of here. Please! Please do it!’

‘I’m…that’s…nice and all, but I’m just gonna pass out and-’

‘NO!’ her voice sounded like her own, but with the weight of hundreds of other voices behind it. Jack retched, he felt the presence in his mind reel back. ‘Get to us. Use your powers!’

‘Ice is gone,’ Jack breathed. He heard footsteps pounding towards him and looked up. Flights of metal stairs above him, there, at least ten people were descending. ‘Shit. Shit.’

‘Your Light! I believe in you, Jack-Jack. Don’t you know I’d do anything to see you again? Come to us. Come to us.’
A vision in his head of countless people somehow waiting in a tiny metal room surrounded by small glass portholes.

Jack had never used his Light to make a portal. A part of his mind immediately started telling him how impossible it was, and he shoved that aside as ruthlessly as possible, as he tried not to feel the worst of the headache. Crossholt had put him through some of the most brutal training a trainee had ever experienced, and it was going to get him through this moment. Being asked to run around the Barrack grounds after being whipped, being made to stand in the cold in a vest for far longer than was legal, for saying something wrong, being cuffed and asked to do so much more than any of the other soldiers because Jack was inherently unworthy.

He stood and called his Light to himself and held onto the vision in his head. How did Pitch do it? He’d never thought to ask. But then, he’d never thought to ask what Gavril’s capacity was as a fighter, and he’d fucked that up too. Gavril wasn’t as helpless a warrior as Jack had assumed him to be.

Neither was Jack.

Shouting above him, but all Jack could see was the gold-white in front of his eyes.

He tried to imagine himself in the place Pippa was showing him. Felt the Light draining from him faster than it ever had before. Was he just sending it out of him? Was it just flowing away uselessly?

He opened his eyes and saw the portal in front of him. He forced himself upright and stumbled through it, dry-mouthed.

The portal closed behind him. He blinked rapidly, adjusting to the dimness and there in front of him, the orb. This one impossible to mistake for anything other than it was. He could feel it, even from here. Countless voices, countless generations of magic and culture and language, and Jack took a step towards it, knowing he needed to act quickly.

‘Careful, Jack!’ she said to him.

A small metal room, thick glass portholes all around. Jack went to the door and turned the lock from the inside, then walked over to the orb. He wasn’t even sure if he could touch it, he didn’t know what to do with it.

‘I’ll help you. Touch the orb, Jack. You can do this, I promise.’

‘You’re not…you,’ Jack said, his voice thick. ‘Are you?’

‘I said you had to let me go, Jack. You have to let me go. There’s only memories, and so many other memories, and I’m not…what you remember of me. I’m so sorry, Jack-Jack. This is all… that’s…’

Light and colours arced off the dark, shadowy orb, and Jack walked ever closer to it, seeing the way the light of it stained his clothing in reds and greens, oranges and blues.

‘Touch it, Jack-Jack. We’ll help you. If you do this for us, we’ll help you.’

Jack lowered the metal rod to the ground and then stepped close enough to the orb that he could taste something completely alien in his mouth. It crackled around him, made his vision turn to sparks of colour, and he raised his shaking hand, staring at the slick of colours moving across it, turning his hand into a spectrum. He couldn’t stop seeing Sharpwood being flung backwards in his
mind’s eye, the bomb exploding, the trap that Gavril had left for them.

‘Please, Jack!’

A sizzling flash when he touched the orb. He gasped. The world went white.

*

He was ten.

She was eight.

They sat on charcoal grey granite rocks ascending from the ground, looking towards the forested horizon, snow falling softly around them. He’d given her his scarf and felt the cold wiggling into him, finding all the places that weren’t thickly covered in the poor quality fabric they gave them in the Overland creche.

‘I have this memory,’ Pippa said, her voice older than he’d ever heard it. ‘I think of it often. It was just...another day we escaped. Nothing momentous happened. Do you remember?’

‘I do,’ Jack said. ‘Where...are we?’

His body was small, his mind too large for it. He looked down at himself, at his gloves. He turned and saw the snowflakes landing on the wisps of her hair that were escaping beneath her woollen beanie. He reached out and stroked some of them away, knowing they’d otherwise melt and her hair would get wet and she might get a cold. He remembered his ten year old self doing exactly the same.

‘I mean I know where we are, but...I- The orb-’

His hand wasn’t broken. His head wasn’t bleeding. He touched his temple carefully and swallowed, feeling strange.

‘What’s happening?’

‘I’m going to help you,’ Pippa said. ‘But I’m stealing a moment. I’m not myself. I don’t think this is my soul. I’ve been around so many other memories, so many other magics, and I don’t know if we’re souls anymore. If we’re people. You know I’m not really here, don’t you? The way I’m talking? Even calling you Jack-Jack doesn’t feel right anymore. And you, you’re so different! Your hair’s all snow-white.’

‘Yeah,’ Jack said, staring at her, his sister that wasn’t quite his sister. A flash of grief stronger than any he’d felt for years. It was like losing her all over again, even while looking at her. She was using Pippa’s voice and she had Pippa’s memories but...it wasn’t the same. He’d never have his kid sister back. This was as good as it would ever get, some hazy orb-dream as the world ended. ‘I miss you.’

‘Me too,’ she said, looking up at the snow, letting it fall on her face, closing her eyes and letting it fall on her eyelashes. ‘Snow’s getting heavier now. It’s nice and cold here, isn’t it? Don’t you feel stronger here?’

Jack stared at the snow falling, tilted his face up to it, opened his mouth. They’d said he was stupid to let it fall in his mouth when it was already so cold, and he’d always said:

‘It’s already so cold though! It doesn’t matter!’
Then he’d laughed.

A small burn of amusement, behind it a glimmer of ice swirling inside of him. Around him, the wind picked up. Jack lifted his small hand, his oversized glove, saw the way the snow circled around his hand in flurries. He was making it happen. The wind listened to him like it wanted to do nothing more than obey him.

‘Don’t remember this broken me,’ she said, leaning her shoulder into him exactly as she had when she was eight. He unconsciously put his arm around her, curling fingers that worked into her arm. He was ten and not ten. He was reliving in the memory and creating something new. He pressed his lips to the top of her head, even though he’d never done that in this memory.

‘Are you sad?’ he said. ‘Are you unhappy?’

‘I’m sad,’ she said. ‘I feel so much, all the time! But I’m not always sad. Sometimes I’m happy. Sometimes angry. Sometimes quiet. Sometimes scared. Sometimes loud. But I’m never alone here, Jack. I’ll never be alone again. The shadows make us sleep sometimes, but we’re still here… I think the shadows want us to be. I don’t understand it. The Darkness in here isn’t like the Darkness out there. It’s nice.’

‘You’re…so different.’

‘It’s not really me, Jack. I’m not even a ghost. Just…memories. Just…loving you and missing you.’

‘Yeah? And all the other people in there with you? Just memories?’

‘Just a lot of people loving a lot of people and missing a lot of people,’ she said. ‘It’s blurry in here. But we’re running out of time.’

‘I can’t stay,’ Jack said.

‘You can’t. But do you have enough now? Do you have enough to do what you came here to do?’

What did he come here to do? Get away from the creche? Sit in the snow? Have a moment that was entirely his and Pippa’s? He pulled her closer and felt her small body and squeezed his eyes shut.

He couldn’t protect her.

He turned and wrapped both arms around her, pushing his face against her small ear, her small cheek, feeling her eyelashes tickle his skin.

He couldn’t protect her, and she was gone.

‘Are you ready?’ she said. ‘You’re ready now, aren’t you? Jack, there’s not much time. He knows you’re here.’

‘Gavril,’ Jack said.

‘The Tsar,’ she said.

‘I’m not ready.’

‘That sucks,’ she said, and she laughed in her eight-year-old voice and it was so much her that he began to wonder if was really was in there somewhere. ‘Do you have enough to do what you came
here to do?'

*He knows you’re here.*

Jack had to get the orb off the ship. He had to kill Gavril. Did Pippa know? Or was the orb just trying to preserve itself somehow? Was it trying to get back to Grisaille, even now? Jack wondered if it was the voice of Pippa in his mind, or if it was the Darkness, talking to him the way Sharpwood tried to, begging him to return the orb to its rightful owners.

Ice in his heart, wind causing a rime of frost to grow over his skin.

‘I’m ready as I’ll ever be,’ he said. ‘Hey, Pip?’

‘Yes?’

‘I love you. You know that, right? I’m doing this for you.’

‘I knew you would,’ she said. ‘I love you too, Jack-Jack.’

She drew back a little, lifted her head and kissed him on the underside of his jaw. The sound of the wind roaring. A flash of white.

*

The wind was thundering around him even as he went to his knees, returning to the pain in his hand, his head. He had his ice, but not enough of it, he could tell. Instead, it was the wind responding to him, turning his body cold. He felt himself spinning. Stood up and blinked at the orb itself. He picked it up and held it close to himself with his good arm, his good hand. He felt like he was carrying the essence of Pippa, but knew it was so much more. So much cradled in his arm that had destroyed what Lune once was, ruined other planets, a power that Gavril shouldn’t ever get his hands on again.

The spinning didn’t stop, the wind trying to pull him round and round, whirling hungrily.

There was too much of it, he needed to set it free.

He staggered to the porthole and looked outside, seeing papers and tools and ropes and other items flying all around the sky, the ship, people running after them. His wind seeking an outlet. People were panicking. He saw magicians and Gavril running towards him.

He narrowed his eyes, made a wish on the wind, watched it blow the magicians back. Not Gavril though, he ran at more of an angle, his hair no longer perfectly in place, his eyes black with rage.

‘Not much time,’ Jack whispered. ‘Here we go.’

He sent the wind that had built inside of him outwards. It galloped across the ship until it found the stairs, plummeting downwards and blasting people out of its way. Joyfully, gleefully, it burst into the boiler room, stoking the heat past anything safe, overloading the engines which began to stutter and shudder and scream. The ship began to vibrate.

Jack unlocked the door with the elbow of his bad arm, shouting at the pain it sent through him.

He ran straight to the edge of the ship and threw the orb overboard, Gavril twenty steps away from him. Jack’s hair was whipped all over, his cloak was blown away, his shirt tore, he stalked towards Gavril with a chill certainty in his heart. The ice waiting there, wanting the same thing that Jack
Gavril’s other ships zooming towards them and Jack stretched out his good hand and used the wind – now draining from him like water down a sink, the boost of power falling away with the orb – to spin them off their courses. An explosion beneath their feet from the engines as Jack used the wind to smash approaching ships into each other.

Two of Gavril’s hands gripping Jack’s arms, instant bruises, fury in those eyes. Jack calmly touched Gavril’s chest with his good hand.

The ice in his heart turned to ice in Gavril’s heart.

Gavril’s black eyes cleared, turned honey-warm brown and then widened. He opened his mouth and said nothing.

Should’ve always been this easy.

Jack smiled grimly, wished he had enough Light left to make a portal. He didn’t. Wished he had enough energy left to make sure he survived, because Pitch deserved someone who would survive. But he only came here to do two things, and survive wasn’t one of them.

‘So,’ Jack said. ‘This’ll be new.’

The wind picked them both up and flung them overboard.

Jack used what small amount of ice he’d recovered spending time with Pippa in that memory, to ice Gavril’s hands to his arms. The fingers dug in hard enough that they’d broken through fabric. But Gavril was dying. And Jack was going to make sure it worked.

‘I love you,’ Jack said to those stunned eyes.

They fell like stones towards the white ground and smashed up ships far below. Above them, the underside of the Nightmare Galleon exploded, sending shrapnel everywhere. It flung past them, Jack blinked when some of it sheared through his leg. Another pain he was too cold to feel properly.

‘This should’ve been for Lune,’ Jack said, the wind around them making sure Gavril heard every word he said, ‘but it’s not. It was always for her. Pippa Overland. A name you don’t deserve to remember.’

The single hand at Gavril’s chest was enough. Jack called the ice, and it came. Spears of ice radiating outwards, crunching terribly through Gavril’s spine, his neck, down towards his hips. Jack didn’t stop. Not until the light left those eyes, turning them as empty and hollow as Gavril had been all along.

‘Yeah,’ Jack said, closing his eyes, which had filled with tears. ‘Okay. Are we done? Cuz I feel… pretty done.’

He tried to get the wind to slow them down but couldn’t tell if it was working.

He thought of Pippa – as she was and not as what he’d seen in the orb. He thought of Pitch, touching his hair, holding him close, smirking at him. He thought of Anton, Flitmouse. He thought of Eva raising a wine glass and winking at him, before staring in bemused horror at something Seraphina was doing. Seraphina… He saw no memory there, but only her crumpled face when she’d learn that he wasn’t coming back. Maybe it was selfish to imagine it, but the tears flowed
faster then, the wind snatching them all away.

He saw North handing him presents with that excited, hopeful gleam in his eye. The shifty, furtive and desperate expression of Bunnymund handing him the eggs of magic like he hadn’t wanted Jack to know how hard he was trying when it was so obvious he was trying to make amends. He thought of Toothiana by his hospital bed, smiling at him like they’d been close friends for years, and thought she would have been a close friend, even if he’d never have trusted her fully. He thought of Mihail slowly opening up to him, signing to him more and standing nearby, and Agnessa giving him free reign to spend time with his friends and Pitch’s family. He saw Sharpwood sitting across from him in the snow, giving up his time to help a citizen of the planet that had ruined so many planets that they’d be mopping up the mess for centuries. Then he saw Sharpwood, so desperate to get home, he’d sprinted for that orb like a lifeline, only to be betrayed by the person he’d served loyally for centuries.

*Never thought I’d shed a tear for Sharpwood.*

All the thoughts and images piled on top of each other, he opened his eyes to see the ground rushing up towards them. Too fast. He was falling too fast. *Oh shit, oh shit, oh-* The winds were helping but it was too fast and he was going to-

‘…Saving your life again,’ Pitch said.

Jack felt himself breathing slowly, steadily. He was lying in the snow. He felt the warmth of Pitch’s healing Light and reached out clumsily, slapping his hand against whatever he could reach. A leg, it felt like.

‘Thank the Light,’ Pitch said, sobbing.

‘Hey,’ Jack said. ‘I wasn’t dead. The wind saved me.’

‘It did not,’ Pitch said.

‘I was only a little dead then.’
Jack’s eyes flew open when he realised who else was meant to be completely dead. He pushed himself up, ignoring Pitch trying to get him to lie back down again. He stared in shock at Gavril’s eyes staring at him. A head separated from a body, and Pitch’s sword in between, bloody and covered in gore.

‘I was just making sure,’ Pitch said.

‘You beheaded him?’

‘Making sure,’ Pitch murmured. ‘I had to be sure.’

Arms around him, as hungry as those he’d placed around Pippa in the orb-memory. Jack closed his eyes and buried his face into Pitch’s chest, then cried out when he realised his hand was still broken.

‘Shhh,’ Pitch said. ‘I’ll get to it. I will.’

‘You got out of the mountain,’ Jack said.

‘I did.’

‘He gave me serums. A numbing serum. I haven’t felt…right since. Bunnymund gave me something to protect me, but… And Gavril gave it to you.’

‘Gave what to me?’

Jack heard an explosion in the distance and startled hard, jerking his head to look in the distance. There, like a mountain on the horizon, the broken, crumpled Nightmare Galleon sending up billowing plumes of black smoke. Jack couldn’t smell it, the wind was pushing it in the other direction. Just before the ship, the tiny dots of figures fighting.

‘The numbing serum,’ Jack said, unable to tear his eyes away.

‘No, he didn’t.”

‘He did, he told me,’ Jack said. ‘He gave it to you…a long…time ago. Said it lasted centuries.’

Pitch was silent for a long time. Jack’s head wasn’t hurting as much, his hand sent a scratchy, fractious pain through his arm and made it hard to draw full breaths. Everything felt cold. The wind around them was still wild, though every now and then it settled and lingered close, like a loving animal rubbing against his cheek.

Jack leaned on his good hand when Pitch drew away from him. Jack watched, feeling numb, as Pitch walked over to Gavril’s body and picked up his sword. Then, with a grim expression on his face, he drove the sword directly through the ice jutting from Gavril’s chest, straight into his heart, through to the other side, into the ground.

‘He’s super dead,’ Jack said.

‘He gave me numbing serum?’ Pitch said again, voice small. He looked over at Jack, and Jack felt the hollowness in him vanish like smoke as his heart panged to see that expression on his face.

‘That’s what he said. I’m sorry. He said it wore off. Come back? Come on, Pitch, come back. I killed him and everything, just—’

Pitch walked over to him, sank down in slow motion and crushed Jack to him so tightly that Jack
let loose vague sounds of protest. Pitch didn’t stop, and Jack sniffed and closed his eyes, wondering if he’d be expected to battle again now. If they’d want him to pick up a sword and fight. He didn’t think he could.

‘It doesn’t feel real,’ Jack said.

‘I know,’ Pitch said. ‘It will.’

‘I can’t fight anymore.’

‘Do you think you could hold the orb?’

‘Do you know where it is?’ Jack said.

‘I have people standing guard around it, but I don’t think anyone else should touch it but you.’

‘Okay, yeah. Then…I can do that.’

Somehow, he knew he wouldn’t hear Pippa’s voice again. Maybe it was some weird connection to the orb, even now. He just knew. He shifted back away from Pitch’s grip and rubbed at his face with his good hand. He was tired. He wanted to sleep.

Snow began to drift around them, light and fluffy. Jack watched in amazement as Pitch turned his face up to the sky, closed his eyes, and let the snow fall on his face.

‘Hey, you remind me of someone,’ Jack said.

Pitch only smiled.
His leg still felt strange, and his hand felt new. Pitch had run out of healing Light, and then admitted he’d needed to fight hard for his life in the mountain. Eventually, he’d carried Jack to the orb, and they’d waited for someone else to come. A person whose face blurred in Jack’s mind, even though they’d healed him and there was no reason for it to blur out. The sounds of the battle faded in and out, the world seemed bright and forbidding with its glaring white snow and the black from the mountain, but then it would turn dull. He leaned back against Pitch’s arms and body, smelling smoke, blood, sweat, and he looked at the orb and waited to hear his sister.

But no, she’d told him to let her go.

The Golden Warriors went back for Gavril’s body and his head, and they brought it with them, because proof would be needed. Jack stared at Gavril’s open eyes and thought about the numbing serum, and thought about how nothing felt real. He couldn’t tell the difference anymore, between what he would be feeling normally, and what might be the serums he was given.

No one seemed to be bothered that Jack wasn’t interacting or talking much, and Pitch directed people easily and smoothly through what remained. Making sure those loyal to Gavril were captured and subdued. Looking for survivors on both sides. Clearing out the mountain with Light as much as possible. Fetching Sharpwood’s body and wrapping it in a sheet, because Pitch was firm about bringing it back to the City of Lune.

People came to see Gavril’s body. Some cheered. Some cried. But most people stared in silence for a long time, before walking away, keeping their thoughts to themselves. An air of excited disbelief was spreading.

_The Tsar is dead._

Jack’s hand felt new, and he kept curling his fingers in and then out. Cold fingertips touching his own palm, then out again, then back into his own palm.

He could feel his ice slowly returning now that time was passing. So he’d be some weird immortal snow boy forever. It wasn’t until after that he realised he’d secretly held a wish to return to normal. To enjoy scalding hot showers once more, to slide warm arms around someone or touch gentle warm fingers to someone’s face.

‘Did you ever want to return to normal?’ Jack said.

‘Hm?’ Pitch said quietly, as yet another group of soldiers walked away from Gavril’s body.

‘Did you ever just want to have a normal…life? Die at like…seventy or something?’
‘Yes,’ Pitch said.

‘My ice is never going to go away, is it?’

‘Probably not,’ Pitch said, his arms tightening around Jack. ‘But you told me once that your sister gave it to you, so maybe you’ll learn to make peace with it.’

‘Maybe,’ Jack said, thinking that maybe it wasn’t even something that Pippa gave to him, but something the orb gave to him in an act of sheer desperation. He wanted so badly to believe it was his sister, but he was too empty to manage it. ‘Things feel weird.’

Pitch sighed, and Jack closed his eyes when he felt the hand in his hair. He had so much blood on him still, from the nameless person he’d shoved a metal pole into. He still felt the texture of it through his arm, ripping it out, the splatter of blood pulsing out and all over him.

‘I want a shower,’ Jack said. ‘Should I be fighting? Or doing something?’

‘Shh,’ Pitch said.

‘I feel like I should be fighting.’

‘Not now,’ Pitch said.

‘I feel like-’

‘Jack,’ Pitch said, like an adult talking to a child, ‘you have to get some rest now. You’ve had a long day.’

For some reason that made Jack’s eyes prickle, and he turned his face into Pitch’s warm chest, and felt smaller than he had in some time.

*

He floated along like a balloon at the end of a very long string. They went back not to Resistance headquarters, but to the City of Lune. There, Jack was left in one of the ships above the City, while Pitch and many others went through the Palace and swept it clear of all staff except for those known to be loyal to Toothiana or the cause. Jack didn’t know how he felt about staff who hadn’t strictly been loyal to the Tsar – who hadn’t really known there was a side to choose – being caught up in that, but Pitch said they would use truth serum to make the process swift.

Jack didn’t know how he felt about that either. But he supposed it was better than just imprisoning everyone and hoping that eventually the really treacherous ones would somehow reveal themselves.

He learned that Anton lived, Eva lived, everyone else he cared about…alive.

He sat in the ship and felt Gavril’s fingers digging into his arms and wondered what it meant that he could murder someone he loved.

*

Bunnymund walked into the side room Jack had been led into. He was in a Palace room now, somewhere, surrounded by colourful murals of an older time, with Tsars and Tsarinas that made mistakes, but weren’t evil.

‘Gavril gave him the numbing serum,’ Pitch said. ‘I can’t tell if it’s affecting him or not.’
'Strewth,' Bunnymund said, swearing quietly. 'I gave him as much protection as I could from all of that, but the numbing serum is… Look, mate, it's possible some of it got through. My magic is a sure thing for truth serum and all the rest of it, but whatever they've got in the numbing serum… y'know, it's a work in progress, we're still trying to figure out how to deal with that in the best way.'

Bunnymund came closer to Jack, and Jack just watched him quietly.

'So,' Bunnymund said, sitting next to Jack. 'I hear you killed Gavril.'

'Uh huh,' Jack said, picking at the embroidered upholstery of the chair he was in. 'I guess.'

'That makes you a hero.'

Jack swallowed, picked a little more aggressively at the embroidery. He wasn't really mad at Bunnymund. He just didn't like it. Would people say that? He was a hero? For murdering someone he loved? It hadn't felt heroic. It was something he just had to do. Mihail gave him permission. He basically had to.

'What do you think?' Bunnymund said gently. Jack wasn't sure he'd heard Bunnymund speak to him like that before, maybe not since that time they'd been at the Palace and Jack had lost control of his powers anyway.

'I dunno,' Jack said, refusing to look up, feeling tense and uncomfortable. His breathing was shallower than before. He basically had to do it, because he couldn't think of how Pitch was going to. Pitch had tried before and it hadn't worked, and if Pitch couldn't do it…

So he had to.

Gavril was going to kill him. Gavril had tried to kill him in the past. It wasn't like…

'I dunno,' Jack said again, digging his nail into the embroidery and bending his finger until his nail flushed white down into the bed.

'Hey, mate, that looks like it hurts. You want to stop doing that for a second?' Bunnymund said. Jack wondered if that's how he used to talk to his own children. 'It's okay.'

'Uh huh,' Jack said.

It didn't seem very okay.

People were going to call him a hero and Jack didn't know what kind of person he was anymore. He didn't know what kind of person he'd been for a long time. It felt like he was only just beginning to understand that he'd be made of ice and snow and wind forever. Like he was going to live and watch Seraphina die, and Mihail, and anyone else who wasn't a Golden Warrior. Maybe they'd keep him around to parade him out every year, and he probably couldn't make snow animals anymore, because he'd stabbed Gavril to death with like forty spikes of ice.

'Koz…' Bunnymund said, sounding far away, 'I don't think this is the numbing serum. Or if it is then…not much.'

'That's…' Pitch sighed. 'I wondered.'

'I'm not a hero,' Jack whispered.
‘What was that?’ Pitch said.

‘I’m not a hero,’ he said. He swallowed the lump in his throat and finally managed to pinch up one of the loose threads and start tugging at it. The chair was embroidered in motifs of Light and Dark. Had Gavril picked out the design? Had he approved it? Had he ever sat in this chair? Jack shook his head and yanked at the thread, pulling it loose and picking up more. ‘I’m not.’

Bunnymund stood, now standing in the corner of the room, giving Jack space.

‘I’m not,’ Jack said, thinking that he didn’t quite sound like himself. ‘I’m not a hero. You can’t be a hero for that. For that.’

‘For what?’

Pitch, kneeling in front of him. Looking up at him. Jack thought that Pitch had just been through a lot too, and his friend Sharpwood had been killed, and Jack hadn’t even asked Pitch how he was doing. Jack rocked forwards and shook his head, thinking that in another lifetime, he’d already done that. Shown his love better, or more obviously, not...like this.

He couldn’t stop picking at the armrest.

‘For what, Jack?’

‘You can’t be a hero for killing someone you love,’ Jack said, his voice breaking. ‘You can’t.’

A door opening and closing, and then it was just the two of them in the room. Jack felt like the room was moving, but it was him, rocking back and forth.

‘I had to, though,’ Jack said, refusing to meet Pitch’s eyes. ‘I had to. I had to. You didn’t see. What he was going to do. The things... And I couldn’t- So I had to. Mihail told me I could, and someone had to.’

‘Someone did.’

‘So I had to,’ Jack said, coughing on the thickness in his throat. ‘But you can’t be a hero for that. You can’t. You just... I didn’t mean to do it. I didn’t- I did, but, I didn’t want to do it. I didn’t want to. I’m sorry. I’m sorry for not asking you how you’re doing. I’m sorry, I can’t seem to- I just...’

‘Oh, Jack.’

‘No,’ Jack said, sobbing, ‘that’s not fair. You can’t just- You can’t just forgive me for it. You can’t pretend it’s okay, you can’t-’

‘I love you,’ Pitch said, reaching up and sliding his arms beneath Jack’s and then dragging him down onto the floor. Jack recalled this happening at the cottage, but he could barely remember that, compared to being in the Palace now, in this room. This room that Gavril walked in. This place he lived in. He was never going to come back to it. So many members of the Resistance had hated him, but Jack...

‘I loved him,’ Jack cried, covering his face with his hands. ‘I loved him. If I could’ve, I would’ve gone with him. I would’ve. I’m sorry. I’m sorry, Pitch.’

Pitch held him, murmuring sweet things, soothing things, as Jack cried himself out. Pitch was so warm. He had to live forever, because Jack needed someone that warm to lean against, to press his face against, to hold.
‘I’m so proud of you,’ Pitch said later, as Jack’s breathing started to ease.

‘What? What? Why?’

‘Debriefing yourself without even being prompted, look at that.’ His voice was dry.

Jack pulled back and stared at him, stared at the stupid smug look on Pitch’s face, and shook his head in disbelief.

‘You’re the worst,’ Jack said, his voice thick, his nose blocked.

Pitch grinned.

‘You’re just the worst,’ Jack said, rubbing at his face. ‘I love you. I don’t get why I’m such a mess. Shouldn’t I be happy? I can tell others are happy. You’re happy.’

‘I’m…satisfied,’ Pitch said carefully. He closed his eyes. ‘I suppose I’m in the part of this where I get to imagine spending the rest of my life with you.’

Jack blinked at him, and Pitch opened his eyes straight away, looking a little abashed.

‘Of course,’ Pitch said, ‘I’d understand if you wouldn’t want to. It’s a lot of life I have to spend, and I would understand if you didn’t feel the same way. You’re young, you have not only your whole life ahead of you, but many other lives too.’

Jack shifted until he was straddling Pitch’s waist, and stared at him. He felt like he was a complete mess, he knew his face was still wet and drying. It seemed like all he’d done since he was captured was cry, or be close to crying. He’d be glad when that part was over.

‘That’s a lot of life,’ Jack said slowly.

‘It is a lot,’ Pitch said. ‘And the world opens up to us now in ways it never has before. In ways we both can’t imagine. So I’d understand if- mmph.’

Jack placed his fingers over Pitch’s mouth.

‘I think…if you’re cool with it, I’d like to spend as many of my lives as I have with you,’ Jack said, staring at him. ‘I mean, I’m never going to have a regular body temperature, and I have a habit of icing shit, but like, if you can put up with those things, I’d really like to spend that time with you. I know you have all this time to assume that like, people change, but…I really hope I never see the day I don’t feel this way for you. You were one of the best things that ever happened to me, before I even met you. I mean then you were the worst for a while, now you’re kind of…both?’

Pitch pressed his forehead to Jack’s.

‘You are also the worst,’ Pitch said, ‘to borrow a phrase.’

‘I’m so not.’

‘First of all, you keep haring off and getting very injured, and heroism is all well and good when you’re in the middle of it but it’s extremely tiresome from the sidelines and I have new appreciation for Seraphina’s endless near-patience with me.’

‘You just backhand complimented yourself,’ Jack said.

‘And,’ Pitch continued, ignoring him, ‘you rarely listen to me, and when you do, it’s usually to pull
out some singular thing, like to tell me that I’ve just backhand complimented myself.’

Jack sighed, smiling a little, wiping his nose on Pitch’s shirt. He was pretty sure Pitch wouldn’t care.

‘It’s all right that you mourn him,’ Pitch said softly. ‘It’s all right to feel sad about it, and it’s even all right to be angry at the others for celebrating his death. But you have to give them room to celebrate it, and we have to give you room to mourn, Jack. It’s not an easy thing. I only wish he’d been worthy of your love.’

Pitch’s shoulder was bony and not all that comfortable, but Jack kept his forehead there and thought about it. He didn’t want the rest of Lune to be as sad as he was, because that…made no sense. But he also couldn’t be happy about it. He felt relief, but that wasn’t happiness. He kept wishing there had been another way.

‘It will take time,’ Pitch said. ‘But I’ll be here by your side.’

‘And what about you?’ Jack said. ‘How’s…how are you with all of this? Everything? The war being over? Or kind of over? Not quite over. Mostly over?’

‘Mostly,’ Pitch said. ‘I hope. I’m… Ah, well. Soon the announcement will be made that Gavril is dead. Then there will be speeches. A crowning of the Tsarina. Jack, I…have to go to Grisaille, and that is not simply a few days’ flying. You don’t have to come with me, but I could be gone for two months. They might not let me come back. We’ve committed war crimes, and I was not possessed with the Darkness when I helped Gavril steal that orb.’

Jack looked up and frowned. He hadn’t really thought about that.

‘Well, you’re not going alone,’ Jack said.

‘I don’t think you should-’

‘It’s not a vote,’ Jack said, ‘you don’t get to vote. I’m coming.’

Pitch blinked at him, and Jack shrugged.

‘It will be a skeleton crew,’ Pitch said.

‘Nah,’ Jack said. ‘If we’re taking the orb, we’ll have billions with us, right?’

Pitch’s mouth slanted into a sad smile, and he pressed his forehead to Jack’s once more.

‘Are you sure?’ he said.

‘Hey, I’d like to go with you on a possibly one-way trip to Grisaille. I don’t know if you’ve heard, but I’m like, pretty good at acting pretty heroically at the last minute.’

When they pulled back from each other, Pitch was smiling in a way that had Jack placing his hands on Pitch’s cheeks, he couldn’t help himself. His throat was still sore from crying so hard, the skin around his eyes felt sticky, but Pitch’s face beneath his fingers felt good, and Jack couldn’t help but smile back.

* 

Jack stood in Fyodor’s room. It had never really been his room. He walked over to the cupboards that still had Fyodor’s clothing inside, and placed his hand on one of the soldier’s coats. He made a
promise to himself, to Fyodor, to make sure that he wouldn’t stop talking about him. That Seraphina still got her chance to talk about how much she loved him and missed him. That Pitch knew that Jack wasn’t going to stop him from having his grief.

Then he walked out of the room without looking back.

He still got confused on his way to Pitch’s rooms, but made his way eventually, looking around. Nothing had changed. He’d been informed that though Gavril had tried to get into Pitch’s rooms, no one could break Bunnymund’s magic. It really was like a fortress within a fortress, and Jack was amazed by Pitch’s foresight.

Pitch’s rooms were empty of people, though he knew Pitch would come by soon. Jack had a spare day to wander around while everyone was in meetings. He had the option to be included, but as soon as he’d gotten the chance to get Toothiana alone, he’d talked to her.

‘I want to retire,’ Jack had said. ‘I mean, I want to still do things, but I don’t want to be a soldier like that anymore.’

Toothiana pulled on her cigarette in its holder, and blew the smoke out thoughtfully, looking at him with a gaze that was calculating. He thought he could see the warmth behind it now. She would still make the cruel decisions she’d learned how to make, but he could sense that she didn’t want to have to do that, if she didn’t have to.

‘Tell me what you want to do,’ Toothiana said eventually.

‘Well I can still use my Light to get rid of the Darkness, that’s fine,’ Jack said. ‘I guess. And- But I don’t want to be… I don’t want to be armed with a sword, I don’t want to- I can’t be part of a military that’s about killing people. I’m like, I know that’s not what you want to hear, but I just can’t, and after everything- I’m just-’

‘Jack,’ Toothiana said. ‘Jackson. Everything in between. I’m not going to make you hold a sword and kill people. Would it be lovely to have your ice on hand for assassinations? Of course. Do I have plenty of other ways to eliminate my enemies? Of course. That being said, the people may want a mascot. So public appearances may be in your future. I’m still deciding what will happen there. The hatred towards Pitch I expected is not…happening. The City of Lune, aside from its strays, loves you.’

Jack rubbed at the back of his neck and shook his head, looking away. He didn’t love that. It felt weird. Like they were loving things about him that didn’t feel like they were him. Was that what it was like for the others?

‘So like there’s Anton the Brave,’ Jack half-joked. ‘Am I gonna be Jack-the-something?’

‘They already call you their saviour,’ Toothiana said.

‘Come on.’

‘They do.’

‘I’m sure you’re doing a great job of stopping them,’ Jack said.

Toothiana only laughed lightly and leaned back in her chair, eyes amused. ‘Jack, you’ll always be a Golden Warrior, but if you don’t want to be in the reformed military, you don’t have to be. But let the people have their fun. Let them remember that you make animals out of ice and snow that lights up their world and saves them. Let them remember what it is to laugh again, to walk the
streets without fearing the Darkness on the cobblestones. You wouldn’t begrudge them that, would you?’

Jack bit into his bottom lip.

‘It’s going to be hard, going into the future,’ Toothiana said. ‘For all of us. For different reasons. People are going to have to learn a new way to live, and they will struggle with it. All of us...are trying to create something new. You as well. I understand that it’s not easy, Jack. I really do. But don’t you want it to be a little less hard? For the others?’

‘You’re so manipulative,’ Jack said, rolling his eyes.

‘Actually, I’m showing my cards here. If I was manipulating you, you probably wouldn’t be as aware of it. Yes, of course, I’m manipulative. But right now, I’m making it clear – it’s hard, and you can help people, and I’m saying you don’t have to do it by killing anyone. You just have to be yourself. And sometimes wear your Frost uniform, which I think will get a slight upgrade. We know you’re leaving, anyway, since Pitch has put in to leave for Grisaille. So it’s easy enough to establish you as a mythical figure, someone who comes and goes, but always brings hope and joy with him. How would that be?’

‘You’re gonna end up disappointed.’

‘Oh, I don’t think so,’ Toothiana said, smiling. ‘Anyway, Jack, come and talk to me if you don’t like the direction something is going, all right? I may seem like some shadowy figure, and, well, yes okay. But darling, I want you to have a chance at being happy. Please...let me learn what that is for you.’

‘So you’re basically giving me permission to come bug you whenever?’

Toothiana’s cigarette holder tipped in her fingers, as though she’d forgotten about it. She blinked at him, and then smiled in a way that had her eyes crinkling.

‘I’m going to take that as a yes,’ Jack said. ‘I mean, I’m retired now, so I need like, people to bother, and annoy, and...yeah. I’m pretty good at it, you’ll see.’

Toothiana remembered her cigarette holder and placed that and the burning down cigarette in the jade ashtray she must have taken from the Tower of Memories.

‘I hope I do,’ Toothiana said, almost to herself, before declaring that it was time for a drink.

*  

Jack stood in the room where Pitch had first spanked him. It felt like it had happened years ago, even though it had only been months. Jack felt so much older, even though he really wasn’t. He walked around the room slowly, looking at the leather benches, the bed, peering into the bathroom where he’d once had to get a glass of water and make sure it was the right temperature.

He still couldn’t look at simple glasses of water the same way, especially when Pitch handed one to him.

He was surprised at how...unaffected he was. He expected to feel aroused, expected his cock to get a little hard, but instead he just felt distant from all of it.

Eventually, he sat on one of the benches, folding his hands in his lap, pursing his lips at nothing in particular.
Pitch found him like that, walking into the room and sitting next to him, stretching his long legs out. He was quiet, and Jack eventually leaned his head into Pitch’s arm and felt nervous and like he was about to be the world’s greatest disappointment.

‘I thought coming in here would be like…before. But I don’t feel much. Is there something…wrong with me?’

‘No,’ Pitch said. ‘After everything you’ve been through? You likely would have swung one of two ways. The first, that you would have wanted to bury yourself in physical sensation to escape reality, as you have a habit of doing. The second, that your body and mind would need a break from all of this, as you actually…try and deal with everything happening around here. I’m not bothered by it.’

‘You’re not?’ Jack said. ‘But…what about what you need?’

‘I need you, Jack. I need this too, but not every day, or week. Are you upset about it?’

‘Well I kind of thought I wanted to get laid,’ Jack said, laughing weakly. ‘I mean, I guess…I wanted to want…this. And now I just feel like, wow this is a really comfortable leather bench and I don’t want you to hurt me on it right now.’

Pitch pressed his lips to the top of Jack’s head and then wrapped an arm around him. They both stared at the wall ahead of him. There were hooks in it, Jack realised. It was also the wall that Pitch had pushed him against, such a long time ago.

‘I never get enough time with you,’ Jack said. ‘And now it feels like we have more time, and I’m being like, the worst.’

‘Yes. Because the only reason I feel favourably towards you, is your ability to put out whenever I want you to.’

‘Yes?’ Jack said, laughing. He fiddled with the hem of his shirt, flushing a little.

‘You silly boy,’ Pitch said, tugging Jack closer.

‘And like,’ Jack continued, ‘I like…you touching me. And this means I won’t-’

‘Jack,’ Pitch said, the faintest hint of exasperation in his voice, ‘what am I doing right now?’

‘I’m just saying-’

‘Why do you think my arm is around you? As a prelude to fucking you speechless?’

Jack closed his mouth, and then risked looking sidelong at Pitch. He bit his bottom lip and didn’t know what to say. He thought Pitch was just offering a rare bit of comfort or something, because Jack was so pitiful. Or maybe not? Jack didn’t know.

‘I’m not used to it,’ Jack said roughly. ‘Jamie and me used to hug sometimes. And obviously Pippa too. But like…I feel like I’m short-changing you if you’re doing this and like, don’t get anything out of it? Which, I’m thinking, by like how annoyed you sound, maybe you kind of do get something out of it?’

‘I am going to smother you until you’re sick of me,’ Pitch said. ‘And then I’m going to keep doing it. You can use one of your words, if you wish, but otherwise, you’d best just deal with the fact that I’m quite tactile when I’m not being completely insufferable. Now that we’ve gotten past the
whole…’ Pitch’s other hand waved vaguely in the air, ‘blip that was me trying to get you out of my life because oh, no, feelings, I’m going to be insufferable in an entirely new way. Anton will be delighted.’

‘Sounds nice,’ Jack sighed, thinking that he probably should’ve joked along with it, but it actually sounded really nice.

‘It does, doesn’t it?’ Pitch said, and Jack could hear the smile in his voice.

‘It doesn’t seem real.’

‘No, but that’s quite all right, Jack. We have time. It will become real.’

Jack thought that also sounded really good. He closed his eyes to the room itself and pushed his face into Pitch’s shoulder, breathing in the scent of him and his clothing. He was sure it would be hard in the future. There was a lot Jack didn’t trust or believe in yet, and Pitch could be short-tempered and he could lock his feelings away until he hurt everyone around him, but Eva and Anton and Seraphina had learned how to navigate it, and Jack felt a lot more confident about the ability to learn how to deal with all of it; being in a relationship, what that might mean, the comfort it could bring.

He was looking forward to the day it would feel real all the time, but he thought he maybe had a sliver of it now, and that was already enough.

*

The day of the Parade – which came after the formal day of mourning Gavril, and came after the announcement that Agnessa would take over Gavril’s role, and came after people crowding around the Palace to get a glimpse of how the future might look – dawns bright, cold and cloudy.

North came to Pitch’s rooms, dressed in fine regalia, the kind he used to wear when he was a medalled Golden Warrior. There, he presented Jack with a staff that looked so much like his old one, that for a moment he thought they were the same.

‘I am not knowing if this will work for you,’ North said quietly, handing the staff to Jack, ‘since it is not being your old one. But we found good wood, and I carved it, and all of us put magic into it, in hoping that…it would let you conduct your own magic.’

Jack took it up in careful fingers, surprised at how it seemed to be buzzing even as he touched it. As soon as he curled his palms around it, he felt a strange tingling snap through him, and he knew in that moment that it had tuned to him somehow. It was tuned to his ice.

He casually pointed it at the couch, and a star of ice appeared, growing until its tips curled neatly.

‘Wow,’ Jack said.

‘Some types of magic, they are needing an anchor to focus them,’ North said. ‘Some magicians have wands, Bunnymund has his little painted eggs, but for you…this was always being the shape for you, wasn’t it? I still don’t know how the mountain found it and gave it to you, but…do you think this will help?’

‘Yeah,’ Jack said smiling. ‘So much. Hey, thank you so much.’

The truth was, Jack hadn’t had much control over his ice powers since his staff had been broken. He’d been able to use what had been artificially boosted by the orb to defeat and kill Gavril, but
after that he hadn’t been able to fly or hover properly, he hadn’t been able to make snow properly. Pitch knew, and a couple of others knew, but Jack had kept it quiet.

Now, he felt like he had a locus of control again. Somehow, this felt even more fine-tuned than before, and he wondered what magic had gone into it to make it like that. He wondered how much Bunnymund had influenced its shaping, its marvel, and then wondered how to reconcile that with Bunnymund himself.

It felt right to have the staff again and he beamed at it, then shared that expression with North. A moment later, he thought of a conversation he’d had with North a long time ago, and looked away.

‘At the end, I told him I loved him,’ Jack said. ‘Because I still did. Do.’

‘Ah, Jack,’ North said, his voice heavy. ‘You gave him more than he ever deserved.’

North walked up to him, fussed with Jack’s pale blue cloak, making sure the knot was centred. He then touched his fingers to Jack’s jaw and tilted his head up, smiling at him.

‘We are so proud of you,’ North said. ‘But I am so much more proud of you.’

‘It’s not a competition, right?’ Jack said, smirking.

‘It is little bit competition,’ North said, before kissing the top of Jack’s head and clapping him so hard on the shoulder that Jack stumbled, laughing a little. ‘Now. Parade. This one is being much better than your last, yes? Tell me if it isn’t, and I’ll make it better, a promise from me to you.’

‘Yeah, yeah,’ Jack said, using his staff to direct a fringe of frost onto the hem of North’s broad coat. North looked down at it and wagged his finger at Jack, before winking and walking out.

Jack twirled his staff, closed his eyes, and felt like he was a bit more himself.

* 

The crowd was huge. Much larger than Jack expected given he knew a lot of people had been killed when Gavril had used the Darkness to attack them. But apparently folks had travelled in from nearby villages, and it swelled the crowds.

A platform had been erected by the gates of the Palace, draped in red and gold, the old colours of a Lune that didn’t find its wealth through theft and death. A pre-Gavril standard. Jack stood there, faintly impatient, holding his staff in one hand and occasionally icing Jamie’s shoes, because he hated things like this.

‘Stop it,’ Jamie hissed.

‘Jack,’ Pitch said from the other side of him. ‘Please.’

‘I am being my very best self,’ Jack muttered, and then iced Pitch’s shining, new boots to the platform.

Pitch leaned in. ‘You’d best not ever feel like visiting that room again because I am going to murder you in it,’ he whispered.

Jack giggled nervously, and Jamie looked over in alarm, and then saw what Jack had done to Pitch’s boots, and burst out in surprised laughter. He covered his mouth immediately and stared forwards into the crowd, and Jack thought it was probably a good thing that Pitch couldn’t thump
him in the head in front of thousands and thousands of people, like he obviously wanted to do.

The Guardians were all there, as well as Agnessa, dressed in the most regal clothing he’d ever seen her in. Not the huge pincushion of a dress she’d worn months and months ago, not the more casual wear she adopted at the Resistance Headquarters, but instead a suit of deep crimson, embroidered with golden runes, some of which Jack could actually read.

Eva and Anton were there, as well as a few other Golden Warriors. Everyone standing to attention as Toothiana made her speech, and Agnessa made her speech, and Jack tuned everything out because suddenly he didn’t want to hear about how they were moving into a new era and how they were going to put the past behind them and build into an age of healing and growth.

Agnessa was surprisingly able to rouse the crowd, but it was also obvious they loved and adored her. Gavril had spent so long cutting her off, presenting her as something to be protected, cherished and hidden, that now that she was standing here giving her love to the citizens of Lune, they treasured her. Jack realised Toothiana was right to groom her for this position, and wondered how Eva felt, knowing that sometime in the distant future, she would be doing something very like this, after Seraphina had died.

Jack held onto his staff tightly, staring ahead, trying not to think about it. In the crowd ahead of him, he saw people jostling, looking like they were trying to catch his eye, but probably they were trying to look at Pitch or Jamie, or the Guardians, or Agnessa.

But Jack’s attention snapped back on track when he saw Pitch – after a crunching sound of him unsticking his boots from the platform – walk up to the podium and stand there, facing everyone, Jack’s heart thumping hard. He felt almost queasy. The crowd had gone deathly silent.

‘I stand here before you, as your Royal Admiral,’ Pitch said solemnly. ‘Though I may not remain one for long.’

Thousands of people so silent that Jack could actually hear the breathing of the people standing around him. He looked up at Eva, who was staring fixedly at Pitch. Jack hadn’t even known he was going to make a speech. Initially, Toothiana was going to scapegoat him as being loyal to Gavril, or some kind of untrustworthy turncoat, but Toothiana had kept her ear close to the ground and followed the public’s response to Pitch’s role in the Resistance.

And now he was here, giving a speech.

‘I have always tried to serve Lune in the best capacity possible, and for a long time, I thought that meant serving the deceased Tsar in the best capacity possible. I know that I was not alone in doing this, and that all of you, at some point, tried to serve him in the best capacity possible. Some of you still wish to do that, and for those of you today, I am sorry for how you must grieve him, and how this change comes as a shock that ripples through all of us.’

Jack felt like Pitch was speaking to him then, even though he knew he wasn’t.

‘While I remain Royal Admiral, I will be dedicated to removing every inch of Living Darkness from Lune, and every other planet it lives upon. This is more possible than ever before, and is a reasonable goal, though it will be hard to achieve. No longer will we fight the war against the Darkness with a view to being entrenched in it forever. It will not live in our myths eternally, it will become something of the past. This I can promise you.’

Jack heard all the things Pitch wasn’t saying. The people didn’t know about the orb, or what it was, or what it did. They didn’t know that the Light and Darkness as they knew them, as
generations had known them, were manufactured by someone bent on world domination. Even the members of the Resistance didn’t fully understand everything, except that children were taken from their families, people weren’t allowed to have opinions, and entire generations shouldn’t be made to live in the dark because someone dared to speak the truth when it was a truth Gavril hadn’t wanted to hear.

They all knew so little. Jack knew that the truth was being carefully released, bit by bit, every reaction to it gauged before the next was leaked out.

‘I am always indebted to the amazing team of Golden Warriors that have fought on Lune’s behalf all their lives. A special mention to Eva, the Captain of the Fleet, and Anton, who has been promoted to First Captain, for making sure that very few died in the recent onslaught of Darkness upon Lune.’

A cheer then, weak at first, growing stronger, until Jack could feel it through the podium and felt the way it vibrated through the air. A cheer so loud that he could sense it in his body. It rumbled in his ears, and he grinned over at Eva and Anton. Possibly he was meant to be standing at attention or something, but he had the staff now, so he didn’t have to worry about hooking his thumb over his other thumb behind his back anymore.

‘Finally,’ Pitch said, after the cheers died down, ‘a very special mention to Jack Frost, who—’

Anything Pitch said after that was cut off by the roar of sound from the people below. Some folks pounded their shoes upon the cobblestones, creating a solid vibration that made the podium shake up close. Others were jumping. Jack stared, wide eyed, and wanted very much to just fly away and hide. He swallowed, his mouth dry.

‘Who, through his brave actions, saved the City of Lune from—’

Pitch didn’t even bother trying to finish the sentence through the swell of thunderous noise that followed.

‘What the fuck,’ Jack whispered, unable to even hear himself.

Jamie bumped his shoulder into Jack’s shoulder. Jack looked at him, shocked, and Jamie just smiled, shrugging, and then tilted his head towards the crowd like Jack hadn’t noticed.

Jack turned back to them all, swallowing again. He didn’t know what to feel. It seemed like people had been screaming or yelling at him all his life, but not happily, and not thousands of them.

‘By the Light,’ Jack whispered.

It wasn’t dying down at all. Pitch turned back to look at him, his eyebrows raised, faintly exasperated, a tiny smile on his face. Jack could only smile and shake his head back. This wasn’t what was supposed to happen. It wasn’t like Jack had made a speech. Toothiana had basically told him to keep his mouth shut, because Jack had a habit of saying things he wasn’t meant to be saying, before people were meant to be hearing them.

The incoherent roar slowly resolved into a chant that Jack couldn’t make out at first, drowned out as it was by the other cheers.

Then, it became words that made goose bumps crawl over Jack’s arms, made the hairs on the back of his neck stand up.

‘Snow-light! Snow-light! Snow-light!’
‘Oh,’ Jack whispered.

So that’s why you guys are calling it.

Toothiana walked over to him, as the words became more and more distinct. She bent down and cupped a hand over his ear and said:

‘Unexpected, but do you think you can make it?’

‘Now?’ Jack said, turning to her.

She nodded, and he gestured for her to bend down so he could speak into her ear. Even speaking at a louder volume than normal, he knew it would be hard for her to hear him.

‘Should I fly up and do it? It’s hard to do from down here. Snow’s easier to make in the sky.’

‘Honestly, I think they’d like that more,’ Toothiana said back.

Jack nodded, and tapped his staff on the podium several times, ignoring the excited cheers that nervous gesture caused. He looked over to the Guardians. North had his hands on the handles of his sabres, looking very pleased with himself and Jack. Bunnymund had a faint smile on his face, and just nodded quietly to Jack. Sanderson grinned, like this was the best outcome of the day, which was absurd.

Finally, Jack walked over to Pitch, tugging at his coat.

‘I’m gonna fly up, do you think I should?’

‘It will give you a fantastic excuse to leave something you find very boring,’ Pitch said, and then he smiled at him. ‘We’ll probably just have to tell them about your retirement in a press statement later.’

‘Yeah, huh? Later. Suppose I’d better go make some snow-light now.’

‘You’d best.’

Jack stepped away and then bowed slightly to the people in front of him, and then – desperate to be away from the noise and the spectacle of it – he shot up into the air.

The jubilant cheers of the people – which had grown impossibly louder – followed him up into the sky as he seeded the small clouds with snow, and then seeded those with Light.

Just below the clouds he’d puffed up, he could spot Pitch. A dot of black by the podium, face turned up to Jack’s.

From up high, the world down there looked small. The people looked less overwhelming, crowded onto the streets as they were, and their roars were muffled. Up here, Jack could feel the winds and breezes, could see the snow whirling all around him, feel the ice that skittered along his arms and legs, looking for an outlet. He could pretend he was a bird weaving through the air.

Whooping with joy and the sheer fun of it, made of lightness itself, he turned the world into gold and snow.
In our last chapter, 'The Day Always Comes':

Grisaille was a small, humble planet, like Lune.

Unlike Lune, it was bare of forests, at least from what Jack could see. It looked like the pictures of deserts that Jack had seen in books, but never experienced. Strange plants with globe-like leaves reached up into the sky, scrawny and determined. Shrubs and herbs carpeted the ground around small waterways. Large animals covered in scales, running on two legs, thundered about in herds or wandered on their own, sometimes kicking up dust plumes as they went.

It was night when they landed, and even Jack could feel the cold biting.
Epilogue: The Day Always Comes

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

It took a month to reach Grisaille.

Jack didn’t get to know the skeleton crew. He spent a lot of time staring out into the stars and hanging onto the staff that North had made for him. He spent time reading ship’s logs and trying to learn the Lune alphabet – he wanted to be a lot better for Seraphina when he returned – and he spent time with Pitch.

A lot of their time was spent in silence. Jack would stand next to him while he piloted. Or they would sit in the cabin. They slept a lot. Jack had initially imagined they’d be fucking all the time, but everything seemed to be on hold. Even Pitch was introspective.

Sharpwood’s body was wrapped in a white sheet, and the orb was placed in the room with him, also draped in cloth. Jack stood in there sometimes, arms folded, thinking about how important it was for Pitch to fulfil the last wish of a dying Grisaillean.

‘You were friends, basically,’ Jack said one night. ‘And lovers.’

‘Mm,’ Pitch said, not looking up from his book.

‘He would’ve tried to kill all the Golden Warriors though, including you.’

‘I don’t know that he would have,’ Pitch said. ‘Maybe it seemed that way, but in the end, I think he saw something that reminded him of home, and he broke with himself. He was always a very stuck person. Stuck on Lune. Stuck with processing emotions different to every citizen here. Stuck with the Tsar. He was a slave and a prisoner from the moment he gave Gavril the orb, thinking that he might be doing the right thing for his planet. I don’t know how Gavril treated him behind closed doors, but I don’t expect it was kindly. Sometimes he came to me… There were times he came to me, and he was not sound.’

‘Sound?’

Pitch sighed and put the book down, sliding in a bookmark that had been woven by Seraphina. The tassels were ragged from use.

‘Gavril liked to test his loyalty. Sharpwood endured a lot to prove himself, but Gavril never really trusted that Sharpwood was just loyal. I know that Sharpwood lied to protect his private time, and that he was homesick and heartsick for Grisaille, but he was still just essentially loyal to Gavril in spite of that. Those who choose the darkness in Grisaille, they pair bond with those who choose the light. That’s just…what they do. They can’t quite look after themselves properly, and they have a drive to be faithful and loyal. Those who choose the light have a drive to take care of the darkness. They have a drive to be protective and…active. They choose, and people like Sharpwood are chosen for. But Gavril felt that deep down Sharpwood was loyal to Grisaille, in a way that would prevent him from being Gavril’s slave and servant. No. He always needed to pair bond with a person. For a long time, it was Gavril. But…Gavril drove him away.’

‘Did he torture him?’ Jack said.

‘Very likely,’ Pitch said. ‘Sharpwood never really spoke of it. Even in a scene, he didn’t betray
Gavril’s trust like that, and I suspect he was ashamed and embarrassed by it. He was betrayed by his biology, or…more accurately, Gavril betrayed him through his biology. It was tragic, to see him at the end, even before we knew the orb was a bomb. For him to break like that, to act of his own volition… I knew he was close to breaking point, but I think at that point he broke in a way he hadn’t before. He did something that no one told him to do. To be that desperate… It would have been very painful.’

‘Will they be mad at us? That he’s dead?’

‘I don’t know,’ Pitch said.

‘You don’t talk about him much,’ Jack said. ‘You could, you know. I mean I didn’t know him like you did, but…you could talk about it more.’

Jack walked over to Pitch and stood behind the chair, resting his fingers on Pitch’s hair. Pitch tilted his head back, closed his eyes and sighed.

‘Did you love him?’ Jack said.

‘I didn’t think so. But I’m not sure now. I liked him. He was more trapped than I was, and selfish as it is to say, having him under my power and control… It helped.’

Jack vaguely remembered Sharpwood’s last words. About love. About Pitch. His heart panged and he leaned his cheek against the top of Pitch’s head. His hands came down and rested on Pitch’s shoulders.

‘I should have done more for him than I did,’ Pitch said finally. ‘This will have to do.’

‘You did a lot for him,’ Jack said.

‘No. I really didn’t. I was selfish. And I was always angry at his relationship with Gavril, and how he seemed untouched by it. Sometimes I pushed him, just to…have the satisfaction of knowing Gavril had broken him as much as he’d broken me. For a long time – for centuries – I didn’t know why he kept coming back to me. I became kinder to him in time. I was not…initially kind.’

Jack couldn’t think of what to say, and Pitch was silent for a long time.

‘In the end,’ Pitch said, ‘I wonder if he knew he would be the lynchpin for saving all of Lune? Likely not. Jack, you never would have defeated Gavril so soon, if it hadn’t been for his direct intervention. He told us the names and positions of all of Gavril’s staff. He shared everything, in the end. I’m not sure I’ll ever forget the image of him consoling himself with children’s stories.’

Pitch’s hand came up and fingers rested over Jack’s fingers. Jack turned his hand so they could touch, palm to palm. Jack knew that Pitch could seem like he was feeling nothing at all, when the reality was he felt things intensely, in bursts. He’d seen that, witnessed it, and he knew it was there even if Pitch didn’t know it was there, or thought he was hiding it from everyone.

Jack had seen the truth of that now, and he rubbed his cheek over the top of Pitch’s head and wished he could do more.

He still felt strangely numb sometimes. He was starting to understand that it was the consequence of living a lifetime under the rule and governance of someone like Gavril. It left scars in the mind that didn’t vanish after defeating the villain. He carried a deeper knowledge of himself and what he was capable of in his mind, his heart.
But standing here behind Pitch, staff in one hand, and Pitch’s hand in the other, he felt like he’d gained so much more than he ever could have imagined. There was no room in his mind for wanting things like family, or even really knowing what that meant, when he was growing up.

Now it was important to make sure Pitch survived this trip. To make sure they would return together. A snatch of conversation he’d had with Sharpwood returned bright and clear, taking him by surprise:

‘What happens if you put your hand in a shadow? A normal shadow?’

‘Nothing.’ That was easy. Jack was covered in normal shadows all the time. Nothing ever happened. There was just less light.

‘That’s right. And what happens if you sit in the darkness, knowing day will come?’

‘Day…will come.’

‘And what might you do, while waiting for day to come?’

‘You could sleep,’ Jack said.

‘So you trust the darkness when you sleep, don’t you, Jackson?’

‘Yes,’ Jack said.

‘And day always comes, doesn’t it, Jackson?’

‘Yes,’ Jack said, smiling.

‘Are you staying with the darkness? You seem very calm. Is it easier?’

It was easier to stay with the darkness.

‘I’m going to miss him,’ Jack said finally, knowing it was true.

*

Grisaille was a small, humble planet, like Lune.

Unlike Lune, it was bare of forests, at least from what Jack could see. It looked like the pictures of deserts that Jack had seen in books, but never experienced. Strange plants with globe-like leaves reached up into the sky, scrawny and determined. Shrubs and herbs carpeted the ground around small waterways. Large animals covered in scales, running on two legs, thundered about in herds or wandered on their own, sometimes kicking up dust plumes as they went.

It was night when they landed, and even Jack could feel the cold biting.

Jack didn’t know if it was a city or a village, when they landed. Homes were dug deep into a cliff face, and lights could be seen flickering, but Jack had no sense of how many buildings there were or how many people. There was a large, golden tower nearby, that glinted and looked like it was worth a lot.

As people began to walk towards them, Jack realised that the planet might look humble, but there was something in the cut of their clothing, the way they carried themselves… Jack realised that these people had a presence. Did Lune citizens have a presence? Jack didn’t know.
Pitch was standing very still next to him, and then he squared his shoulders and walked down the gangplank – Jack following – to greet the person who stepped forwards.

Her eyes were a translucent gold. It was like Pitch’s irises, but all the way through, so that Jack couldn’t see pupil or iris or sclera. Only a shining gold-cream. Her face was serious, but she wore no weapons. Her robes were thick, she had a shawl over them, and her ears were pierced with gold and diamonds.

Others came to crowd around them. People with golden eyes, those with opaque black eyes. Here, Jack couldn’t sense the Living Darkness at all. The shadows were shadows, the light was light.

‘It has been a long time,’ the woman said. ‘You stole two items from us. One of our hearts, and a valued Professor. Do you return to steal more?’

‘No,’ Pitch said.

She stepped closer and placed her fingers underneath Pitch’s chin. Jack felt the way Pitch jerked then stilled. She turned his face this way and that.

‘It is incomplete,’ she said. ‘Your eyes show you could only accept so much light. So, this was how you controlled whatever monsters you created. Clumsy. We have heard tell of the mad child-King who fancies himself eternal. I see he is not with you. And so?’

‘I killed him,’ Jack said, looking up at her. She didn’t smile as she looked over to Jack, but Jack thought she seemed relieved.

‘Do you return to ask us how to vanquish the monsters you created? Such things are not our responsibility.’

‘They are not,’ Pitch said.

He stepped back and bowed low at the waist. The kind of bow one would only reserve for a monarch. Jack stared in amazement, and then copied him, realising that whoever was greeting them must have been more important than he knew.

‘I humbly apologise for the crimes we have committed, using your generous wisdom to wreak much destruction in our galaxy. I am here to repatriate the orb, and Sharpwood’s body. He died only recently, but it was his dying wish to be returned to this planet, along with the orb.’

A murmuring stretched back into the crowd that had gathered.

‘His name is not Sharpwood,’ was all the woman said. ‘But you do not deserve to know his name, so I think we will continue to use the name he gave you. I sense there is much to share with us, much of a tale to tell, but I would ask that you put this on hold and bring us the orb, and then bring us the body of our lost Grisaillean.’

Jack flew up to the ship, surprised to hear exclamations at his ability to move through the winds. He picked up the orb, cradling it close, feeling how its sharp energy was quieter here. It had never tried to speak to him again.

Pitch had followed, and took up Sharpwood’s body, arm beneath his shoulders and his knees. Jack hadn’t been brave enough to pull the sheet back, to see eyes forced open by death, or a face shrunken and decayed. The wind blew the white sheet that trailed at Pitch’s shins, it carried the scents of salt and something bright green that Jack had never smelled in his life.
Though Pitch had been terrified, and still seemed scared, Jack didn’t think these were the kinds of people to murder anyone. But then, Sharpwood had just seemed like a servant until he’d made that blue arrow out of nothing and shot Jack out of the sky.

Jack swallowed.

He landed on the ground and walked barefoot across the sand. When he was close enough, he held out the orb.

The woman considered it, and then she stepped back and gestured for someone with opaque black eyes to step forth. His hair was plaited, his eyebrows thin, he had the same neutral expression that Sharpwood always used to have. He came forward and held his hands over the orb and frowned at Jack for a long time. Eventually though, he took it up carefully, moving back into the crowd. Just like that – with nothing momentous happening – the orb that had created the Golden Warriors and the Living Darkness was out of sight, and gone.

‘I cannot touch orbs of shadow, especially one like this one, that is our heart,’ the woman said to Jack, smiling a little. ‘I could, nothing bad would happen to me, but when we make our choice to serve one side or the other, we no longer touch the orbs out of respect. I think the orb didn’t mind you touching it though. Perhaps you would have chosen shadow, if you were born to Grisaille.’

Sharpwood had said something like that once, and Jack didn’t know what to say. Should he be offended? Probably not. It seemed like half of the crowd around them had the opaque eyes. None of them seemed…cruel or violent. Many stood very close to someone with golden eyes, sometimes looking at them, as though checking to see what the person next to them was thinking or feeling.

The woman stepped close to Pitch and gestured for Pitch to lower Sharpwood’s body to the ground. Jack wondered what they did for their dead. Did they do anything?

When Sharpwood’s body was on the ground, the woman drew back the sheet, and Jack stared in shock. His body hadn’t decayed at all. His clothing was ripped and torn from the bomb, it was covered in old bloodstains. In contrast, Sharpwood looked fresh, untouched.

The woman knelt beside him and placed a hand on his forehead, another at his neck. She sighed as though pained.

‘Oh, sweet one, your poor heart. It would be a mercy to let him go.’ She looked up at Pitch. ‘Did he have any last words?’

‘He bade me take him back to Grisaille, and let him touch the soil.’

‘Then we will not let him go,’ she said, her smile broadening. She turned to look behind her, and several other people with the golden eyes stepped forwards, their faces sober. They all knelt around Sharpwood’s body, placing their hands over his clothing. Then, once all their hands were laying upon him, the woman took up some of the sand beside his head and sprinkled some on his forehead, across his neck, and then let the rest pour over his chest.

The wind blew coldly as the golden Grisailleans called forth light to their hands and let it sink into him. A minute passed, another, and Jack felt his heart skip a beat when Sharpwood’s eyelashes fluttered, his black eyes opening and staring up. His hands opened slowly and then curled down into the sand beneath him.

His head turned and he looked at the woman, and Jack saw tears come to his eyes. Beside Jack, Pitch was holding his breath.
‘Welcome back,’ the woman said to Sharpwood. ‘For you have come home to us.’

Sharpwood said nothing. He turned to his side, towards her, curling into himself. And she hushed him and said something comforting in a language Jack had never heard, and placed her hands carefully over his head, smiling down at him.

‘He was dead,’ Pitch said, his voice thick.

Sharpwood turned quickly at that, and stared at Pitch in amazement, as though surprised to see him there. Jack wondered how he imagined he came to Grisaille otherwise, but decided that if he’d just been brought back to life after being dead for over a month, maybe he wouldn’t be thinking very well either.

‘Is he dead?’ Sharpwood said hoarsely. ‘Is he?’

‘Yes,’ Pitch said. ‘Long dead.’

Sharpwood blinked up at him, his face frozen in some mix of terror and relief. Then, after an uncomfortable amount of time had passed, his eyes moved to Jack. After another pause, he turned back to the woman and placed his forehead on her kneeling thighs.

‘This man that you call Sharpwood was dead,’ the woman said, stroking her hand down Sharpwood’s shoulder carefully. ‘Yes. But we have true immortality. You have a shade of it, and so does your charge. I imagine others do too. But we bring ours back from that which harms them fatally, and then we bring their minds back from it too. I must say I am relieved to know you could not steal those secrets from the orb, for I think you would have misused them, as you have misused everything else.’

She placed a hand over Sharpwood’s face, fingers resting softly on his cheek. Though it was strange to see Sharpwood in such a vulnerable position – curled up on the sand as he was, resting his head in her lap – it seemed right, too. Jack felt like he was seeing something clearly for the first time, and felt privileged and humbled to see it. He reached out automatically and grabbed Pitch’s hand, and swallowed when Pitch clutched back tightly.

‘We have missed our Professor. Of course we have others, but he was very good. In time, I trust he shall be very good again. Now. We will take this one to the ward, so that he may be looked over. Anchor your ship properly, and come join us. I would like to hear what you have been doing, over the centuries, and maybe I will reconsider our first refusal to assist you. Are you able to stay?’

‘Yes,’ Pitch said. ‘Though…I have a daughter back home, and I would not wish to be away from her for long.’

‘Time does pass differently here,’ the woman said. ‘We could keep you for ten years and think nothing of it.’

‘She is not like me,’ Pitch said. ‘She was not touched by the orb. I didn’t…want that for her.’

‘Then we will not keep you for ten years,’ the woman said, smiling warmly. ‘Nor even ten months. Would ten days be permitted?’

‘Yes,’ Pitch said. ‘We would be grateful for your hospitality.’

‘Yes,’ she said. ‘I think you will be grateful for it. Go fetch whatever you need for the stay, and we shall hear your stories. I especially want to know why this boy next to you can fly, touched by the darkness and the light as he is.’
Jack tentatively returned her smile when she gave it to him, and even though the desert night was cold, he felt warm with relief.

* 

They gave names that were clearly not their real names. She was Greenbriar, though Pitch called her Queen Greenbriar. Jack and Pitch were given an attendant named Sandstorm, who was quiet but had lively golden eyes. Sometimes the attendant had a partner with them named Sweetleaf, who had black eyes and looked frequently to Sandstorm for instruction.

Over the ten days that followed, Jack felt like he was given a window into something so much larger than himself, so much larger than Lune.

He didn’t understand how Gavril could come here and see something to exploit, when Jack thought that there was so much to learn instead. Jack’s fascination with the way they lived was noted, and he was directed to a Professor of politics, who answered all of Jack’s inane, naïve questions with endless patience. Unlike Sharpwood, this Professor had golden eyes, he was quick to intuit what Jack wanted to know.

One evening, laying in a bed covered in furs and woven blankets, Jack leaned against Pitch and thought about how they were leaving soon. They’d not seen Sharpwood once.

‘Is this the kind of stuff that Toothiana thinks about, when she thinks about making Lune different? Things like, ah, democracy and stuff?’

‘Yes,’ Pitch said. ‘Are you enjoying your time with the Professor?’

‘I’m learning a lot. Some of it doesn’t really make any sense to me. But I kind of…like it here? Are there other planets like this? Not touched by the Darkness?’

‘Yes,’ Pitch said. ‘Not as many as before. Would you like to visit some?’

‘I think Toothiana and North should visit some too.’

‘There was a plan, a long time ago…’ Pitch said. ‘There is a planet some distance from Lune, called Earth. The Guardians thought of making an exodus there and starting again, no longer ruling a planet but…being a part of it somehow. Perhaps in the background. Would you want to do something like that?’

‘Leave Lune?’

‘Mmhm,’ Pitch said, stroking Jack’s hair, his cheek.

Jack thought about it. He was surprised to find himself nodding. ‘Not like, straight away. But maybe… Maybe one day? Is it nice there?’

‘From what we’ve observed, yes,’ Pitch said. ‘And they’re untouched by the Darkness. Which isn’t to say they don’t have their own issues, but not having the Living Shadows to deal with… It would have to be some time in the future. We have a lot of work to do until then.’

They did. The Grisailleans wanted an assurance that other planets would be either cleared of the Living Shadows, or have Golden Warriors stationed there until the planets were cleared. They had a long list of demands that Pitch considered seriously, and it was only later that Pitch revealed that for all that Grisaille seemed like a humble planet, it had powerful alliances that could come down on Lune with lethal force if the truth of Gavrill’s manipulations were revealed before reparations
had been made.

Jack realised that Pitch was a kind of ambassador.

Over breakfast another morning, eating something spicy and so fulsome with flavour that Jack wasn’t sure he could go back to porridge again, he said:

‘Have you always been…that?’ Jack said. ‘An ambassador?’

‘Not especially. But I picked up bits and pieces here and there, and often that was how Gavril introduced me to citizens on other nations. In the end, I learned how to play the part. Also, the Grisailleans never met anyone else from Lune except myself and Gavril. They remember me. For good or ill, I thought I should be the one to return. Toothiana is too necessary to the restructuring of Lune, North will be necessary in his role as Engineer, Sandy doesn’t speak conventionally and Bunnymund is too caustic for the role.’

Jack stopped sending ice spirals over the table and looked down at his hands. There was something so certain in his heart.

‘I’m glad I’m here with you,’ Jack said, looking up and smiling at Pitch. ‘I know there’s a lot going on back on Lune that we’re missing, and I miss people there, but I just think it’s nice to get time with you like this. I never got enough time with you back on Lune. You were always doing other things. Here I feel like I’m getting so much of you.’

Pitch smiled, his expression softening. ‘I like it too.’

*

That evening, Pitch played Jack’s body so mercilessly, so relentlessly, that Jack’s throat went hoarse from screaming and he was glad that rugs on the floor and dense stone walls all around them with no windows meant that no one really heard them.

Jack yielded to whatever Pitch wanted, still not really understanding how pain could be so good and so awful, or how he could be greedy for so much pleasure and yet have too much of it at once. Pitch rode him along the edges of himself until Jack begged, and then he kept going until Jack lost his words and could only depend upon Pitch for whatever came next.

Afterwards, Pitch held him tightly and stroked his scarred back, finding the places that didn’t hurt. Jack was too wrung out to find it uncomfortable, and when Pitch rested his hand on the back of his neck, Jack made a long, lost sound of yearning for something he already had.

‘It’s all right,’ Pitch said. ‘I have you.’

*

They both had nightmares. They’d had nightmares on the ship and they had nightmares here. Pitch dreamed of Gavril returning. He dreamed of monstrous events in his past. He dreamed of finding Fyodor’s body, or Jack’s body. The worst ones were when he dreamed he’d been given the numbing serum again – even though he didn’t remember it the first time – and he needed convincing that he hadn’t been given it for hundreds of years.

Jack dreamed of things that had happened rather than things that hadn’t. He dreamed of being in front of a giant fireplace and glowing warm eyes pretending they didn’t see the torture they were inflicting on Jack. He dreamed of being shot out of the sky with an arrow. He dreamed of the desperation that came with trying to break his hand. He dreamed of falling from the sky and
breaking both of his wrists, and the Darkness exploiting that moment of weakness. He dreamed of Gavril holding Jack close to him, and Jack seeing the light fade from his eyes. He dreamed of his own monstrousness, and Pitch found him and coaxed him into wakefulness, and reminded him of his shape and his body until that monstrousness felt small and contained and controlled.

Jack even had nightmares of Crossholt bullying him, which shocked him. Pitch had only said:

‘Sometimes you can only understand how deeply something has cut you, once you move away from the blade.’

‘You mean I wouldn’t be this fucked up if we hadn’t ended tyranny on Lune?’ Jack said, laughing. ‘Great. Why didn’t anyone tell me that?’

‘Because these nightmares…’ Pitch paused. ‘Because these nightmares are a form of healing, Jack. Because you won’t need to have them for the rest of your life. Because you exchanged the nightmare of your life for the nightmare of healing. It doesn’t feel like it, I know. It doesn’t feel like it for me either. But don’t you ever take a breath and feel it? Look at where we are. Look at how much time we’ve had together already.’

Jack didn’t think he felt it yet, whatever Pitch was talking about, but he could see how much lighter Pitch felt about life. It wasn’t easy to spot, but there were times when he caught Pitch just smiling at him, or when Pitch actually made a joke with some of the Grisailleans tentatively, like he was finding a part of himself that he’d lost a long time ago. Jack heard him laugh more.

He heard him laugh. And not sarcastic or mocking or seductive laughter. Just…laughter.

Jack didn’t know if he felt what Pitch was referring to, but he got to feel Pitch, and that led the way for him. That made his chest feel buoyant and something warm wriggle through him. It made him want to grasp and hold Pitch close, or laugh with him, or stand by his side, or slide his fingers into Pitch’s hand.

Sometimes he realised that he could love Pitch more than he already did. That there was further within that feeling to go. It overwhelmed him, but it wasn’t a bad way to be overwhelmed.

*  

They never saw Sharpwood again.

*  

The flight back to Lune seemed longer than the flight to Grisaille. Jack knew it was because he wanted to see his friends there so badly, and he marvelled that there were so many now. He had a family. Eva would hold him if he asked her to. Flitmouse would visit him and they’d have tea together. There was a whole world of the unexplored with Anton, but at the base of it, a caring friendship. He could almost feel Seraphina’s head pressing into his ribs as she hugged him, or see her small hands turning pages as she advised what Jack should work on next with the Lune alphabet. Even Jamie was no longer a distant, maybe-dead once-friend. He was an important member of the Resistance. He was alive and he didn’t have to live in hiding anymore.

Maybe Jack would just casually move into Toothiana’s and North’s lives too. He could fly in and fly away before they even noticed how annoying he was. That’d probably work for Sanderson too.

‘What are you thinking?’ Pitch said, looking at him. Jack had both of his hands on the railing – the staff hooked onto it. He’d had the wind toss him and Gavril overboard on a ship many times the size of this, and Jack still remembered what the railing felt, crashing into his back as they began to
‘There are people back home waiting for us,’ Jack said. ‘It’s nice.’

Pitch smiled, looking at the stars, looking like he could see what Jack was imagining.

‘It is. It’s all going to be different going into the future.’

Pitch turned the wooden wheel a fraction to the left, and the ship’s engine smoothly responded. It was easy to imagine they had the whole ship to themselves like this. Jack thought that Pitch was probably one of the most beautiful people he’d ever met, and he wished he knew how to say that in a way that wouldn’t sound ridiculous. But it would be possible to show him over time.

Jack’s fingers made frost spirals automatically, curlicues gracing the railing and moving out from beneath his feet.

‘Before I met you,’ Pitch said, looking out into the blackness around them, ‘I used to think I had felt everything. I’d been alive for long enough, hadn’t I? Moments that were supposed to feel sharp sometimes felt sharp, those that were meant to be dull, felt dull. There were centuries in there where I felt very little except a vague loyalty to Gavril, which can be explained with a drug, apparently.’

Pitch had taken that really hard, and he still wasn’t okay with it. Jack wondered if he felt hurt that Gavril didn’t trust him to be loyal, but Jack didn’t even think it went that deeply. Probably Gavril just liked the idea of doing it, turning people into his loving, loyal family without ever having to lift a finger beyond administering a drug.

‘Of course I knew love,’ Pitch said. ‘I had Seraphina. There was Fyodor. There were others too. I’ve known many kinds of love. But I had long given up on ever being able to feel raw with it, or unmade by it. There was no part of me that knew I could beg someone to stop throwing their life away so that I would stop suffering. No part of me that knew I could watch that person with my daughter and feel something so full it hurt.’

‘Hey, you’re kind of making me sound like a disease…’

Jack laughed softly, and Pitch looked at him once, his expression so serious that it took Jack’s breath away. It wasn’t fair that he could do that. That he could direct that angular face in a way that had Jack thinking, I don’t get it, what is it about me? When you are…when you are you?

‘I used to think I knew what peace felt like,’ Pitch said, staring out into the stars. ‘And I was so wrong. These past two months, I think I’ve realised that what I have with you is far more than love or adoration or trust or faith. You saved us. My future, if it is whole, it is whole in part because of your direct actions. You saved the City of Lune. You went against your nature and killed Gavril, because you knew he would hurt us. Jack, you’ve talked about hero-worship in the past. Of what it was, to grow up, seeing propaganda posters with my face upon it, all of that…’

Pitch leaned into the wheel and turned to Jack once more, his smile small and bright.

‘Did you ever think that one day people were going to feel the same way about you? That one day I would?’

Jack stared at him, and Pitch laughed, a single burst of it.

‘Going by your expression, evidently not.’
‘You really feel that way?’ Jack said. ‘I’m not gonna be doing anything…else. Like, I hope you realise. I’ve sort of done it. I’m really done with it all. I don’t want to go to war again. I’ll fight the Darkness because we have to, and that’s actually not that hard when all is said and done. But I’m not going to lift a sword again. You know that right?’

‘I really feel that way,’ Pitch said. ‘And I do know that. Though it would be a shame if you never sparred with me again.’

Jack quickly thought about how hot that could probably be now that Pitch wasn’t going to basically mind-fuck him into realising that Gavril was a bad guy or whatever, or mind-fuck him into getting his Light working, and thought…probably pretty hot.

‘I mean, fitness is important,’ Jack said drily. ‘Right?’

‘Very,’ Pitch said, lowering his voice.

‘Super important.’

‘Super.’

‘No, stop.’ Jack started to laugh. ‘You can’t start saying things like that. It’s so weird. You’re like too old, and you just can’t.’

‘I don’t know,’ Pitch said speculatively, turning the wheel slightly again. ‘I think it would be super cool, if I started adopting some of the phrases of my, like, hero.’

‘I hate you so much.’

‘Hey, I just think that would be, like, really… Quick give me another word.’

‘Nope, you fail at this. I’m sorry. You fail at my excellent way of speaking. Probably something about you being all uppity.’

Jack moved sideways until he could lean into Pitch’s side.

‘You really think of me that way?’

‘I do,’ Pitch said, sliding an arm around him. ‘Sometimes I look at you and feel like I might be the luckiest person alive.’

‘But then, you know, you realise that there’s been all the torture and the brainwashing and stuff and you start to feel less like you’re the luckiest person alive?’

The laugh that rumbled in Pitch’s chest was warm.

‘Amazingly enough, Jack, I seem to forget about a lot of that sometimes, when I look at you.’

‘I thought I reminded you of Lune? All the bad things, remember? I remember that conversation, by the Light.’

‘Maybe now you remind me of what it could be, what it’s going to be, and not just what it was.’

That, Jack thought, was kind of really great. He could definitely get behind that. He buried his face, his flushed cheeks, into Pitch’s travelling cloak and felt like his heart was several times too big for his chest. Pitch’s large hand squeezed his arm, as though he knew just how much his words meant, when he couldn’t know at all. Jack wrapped both arms around Pitch’s torso and felt like he
was pretty lucky too.

*  

They landed behind the Palace, where the medium sized ships were set down.

It was pre-dawn, the light was a milky grey. The air was cold and the breezes were fresh and crisp. It looked the same as it always had. It smelled the same. Jack almost could imagine that they were going to be greeted by Gavril’s people, but no, even as they lowered the gangplank, Jack walked over to the railing and saw…friends, chosen family.

Seraphina was there holding two huge bouquets of impossibly bright flowers. Her hair was braided back, she wore a vivid green dress and sensible green shoes and just stared at them.

‘Oh man,’ Jack said, realising that after two months of having been mostly isolated, he didn’t know if he was ready for this.

Dawn poked up into the horizon, sending forth its beams of light, limning the top of Pitch’s head, Jack’s body, the ship, in a weak gold. The sun not yet high enough to illuminate much else except the Palace, the tops of the trees.

Jack turned his head to look at the star lighting their planet, even as Seraphina dropped the bouquets where the stood and sprinted towards them.

‘Papa! Papa! Papa!’

In the background, Eva picked up the bouquets, bumping shoulders with Anton when she straightened. Flitmouse was there, wringing his hands and looking severe. Toothiana was looking at some paperwork, and Jack wondered if she was really *that* busy, or if it was just hard for her to show how much she cared. Maybe both. Jamie and Cupcake were unrolling something and sniping at each other and Jack turned away from the sun to see what looked like a poster with Jack’s profile on it, in blue and white. FROST spelled in huge block letters.

*Oh no. Come on, guys. Seriously?*

Jamie was laughing, Jack could only just hear him.

Seraphina sprinted up the gangplank and vaulted into Pitch’s torso, knocking him a few steps back. She reached out with one hand blindly, grabbing Jack’s cloak and half-choking him as she dragged him close. Pitch hoisted her into the air and the light caught the black strands of her hair, it traced several yellow flower petals that were scattered on one shoulder.

Jack looked back towards the sun, it reminded him of the gold in Pitch’s eyes. He leaned into Pitch’s shoulder and smiled up at Seraphina, who grinned down at him, lowering her warm, small hand to pet his hair and then cup his cheek.

‘I’m so glad you’re home,’ she said, her voice thick. ‘So glad.’

‘So are we,’ Pitch said, holding her close.

‘You should see how hard I’ve been working at the Lune alphabet!’ Jack said. ‘Really hard. Like, you’ll be impressed.’

‘We’ll see,’ Seraphina said, arching one black brow. The severe expression only lasted seconds, and then she beamed at him. ‘Mama has been cooking. There’s going to be a big feast!’
'Oh no,' Pitch muttered. ‘Not your mother’s cooking.’

‘I, for one, am looking forward to it,’ Jack said.

‘It’s probably just an opened bottle of wine,’ Pitch drawled, and then laughed when Seraphina placed a hand over his mouth and said he was being rude.

They walked down to the crowd together. Seraphina letting go of Jack’s cloak so he could fuss with it and it chafed less, and Pitch close enough that Jack felt the warmth of him. He was getting used to it now and felt cold without that proximity, without other people to remind him of what he used to be. It gave him an excuse to stay close to them, not that he needed one anymore.

Jack knew to hold tight to the people he loved. He held his head up high, the warmth of the sun clinging to him as he walked into their arms.

Chapter End Notes

THE END

*

We made it!

Some acknowledgements are in order. This story was started in 2015, after I’d spent a year or so telling people I wasn’t going to write another Rise of the Guardians story, whoops. It then turned into the most epic thing I’ve ever written in the Rise of the Guardians fandom, and it’s now more popular than the Shadows and Light universe. While writing this story I’ve lived a whirlwind, and the biggest part of the whirlwind has been being diagnosed with an incurable and rare genetic neuroendocrine cancer in early 2017 (the tumours are thankfully slow growing so I’m not immediately at risk). I cannot tell you folks how much it’s meant to me to be able to share this story with you while this has been going on, to scream in the comments with you, or to be able to live in this world with Jack and Pitch while difficult things have been going on. That’s been a joy for me.

I’d like to give a special thank you to the folks who were with this story from the beginning and stuck through the 8-ish month hiatus it went on while I struggled with knowing just how huge the story was going to become (my body wasn’t ready). I’d like to thank the lurkers (yes, you folks are great!), the people who left kudos (the majority of you are guests to AO3, if you request to make an account, you can subscribe and get email notifications and bookmark your favourite stories!), the people who left comments – those who delurked to leave a single one (bless your bravery), those who left them semi-regularly, and an extra special ‘OH MY GOD THANK
YOU’ to the people who left comments regularly, on over 50 chapters. You are doing god’s work, like holy crap.

To anyone who comes to this story ‘late,’ please don’t feel it’s ever too late to leave a comment if you’re so inclined. I read them all. I try and reply whenever I can.

Thanks to the folks who told their friends, to the people who bookmarked the story or subscribed to it, to the people who left me asks on Tumblr, to those who took the time to do fanart. You can always check out people’s amazing fanart for this story at this tag on my Tumblr.

I’d like to thank Nina/Besteck, who I’m fairly sure will never read this story. But nevertheless, over half a decade ago, they asked me what it would look like – the Golden Age I had imagined in the Shadows and Light series. And sometimes we talked about it. From those conversations, this world sprang and took shape, and I began to think about how I would tell this story even as I was sure I would never tell it. I will be grateful to those conversations and to that friendship for a long time to come.

A massive thanks to my beta, morbidlizard/Silvia, whose willingness to read my writing is a gift, and whose friendship is even moreso. And also to Glen, for putting up with me vanishing to write for hours on end when other people do things like spend ‘quality time with their loved ones.’ I’d love to thank other individuals, but there’s so many of you, and I know I’d miss people. Just know that I wouldn’t keep writing epic, rambling tales like this, if you folks weren’t here helping to make this happen with your presence.

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!